

Chapter 1

DJ still felt like Cinderella the next morning—Cinderella after the magic was gone. Not that she wasn't still pumped about last night. Who would've thought that she, of all people, would be crowned Homecoming Queen? But now it was Saturday morning and her grandmother was droning on and on about today's fashion show, like she thought they were in Paris instead of Crescent Cove, Connecticut.

"And I expect my girls to behave themselves as ladies," Grandmother said as the six girls poked at their breakfast of granola, fresh fruit, and plain yogurt. DJ craved bacon and eggs and pancakes. Like that was going to happen.

"You represent Carter House ... and me," continued Grandmother. "And this fashion show is your debut in the community. I expect all of you to put your best foot forward."

"That would be my right foot." DJ held up her cane and frowned down at her walking cast. "Do I still have to do this, Grandmother? My leg is really aching today."

"That's because you were such a show off last night." Eliza's tone was teasing, but DJ sensed a hard glint in her pretty blue eyes.

"You're just jealous," said Taylor as she refilled her coffee cup.

"I most certainly am not," said Eliza, her chin held high. "I couldn't have been happier for DJ. I thought it was just the sweetest thing ever seeing her

limping forward with her cute little cane to receive the crown. Even my parents were happy for her.”

Casey made a snorting laugh of disbelief and Grandmother gave her a stern look. “Sorry,” said Casey sarcastically. “But I happened to have been sitting behind Eliza’s parents last night, and I heard her mother gasp when they announced DJ’s name.”

Eliza blinked. “Well, that’s only because she was surprised.”

Grandmother cleared her throat. “We were all rather surprised to see Desiree crowned last night.” Then she actually smiled at DJ. “But I’m sure you will all put the Homecoming competition behind you now, girls. We need to focus on the fashion show.” She pointed a finger at DJ. “And I do expect you to participate today. Take some pain medication if you need to. You only have one outfit to wear and I don’t think it’s too much to expect you to do your part. After all, this is for a good cause.”

“What good cause?” asked DJ.

Grandmother frowned. “Well, I don’t recall off hand, but I do know it’s something worthwhile.” She glanced up at the clock on the sideboard. “And we need to be the Keller Tavern by eleven.”

“Keller Tavern?” questioned Casey. “Will they be serving beer?”

Grandmother gave Casey a warning look. “No, for you information, the Keller Tavern is a historic inn that dates back more than two hundred years and it is only the finest restaurant in this part of Connecticut.”

“So, no beer then ...” Taylor exchanged a smirk with Casey and DJ wondered if those two were starting to get along again.

“Anyway,” said Grandmother loudly, “I’m sure you girls will want to spend plenty of time in preparation. Makeup, nails, hair ... all must be perfection.”

“Why nails?” asked DJ as she peered at her hands. “I mean who’s going to see our nails?”

“I’m sure that I’ve already mentioned that I expect some very important fashion people to be attendance of this event,” said Grandmother stiffly. She was clearly impatient now. “And I want you girls to be at your very best.” She smiled directly at Taylor and Eliza now. “You just never know. Some of you girls may be scouted for some other important fashion projects. You always want to be ready for the unexpected.” Grandmother stood now.

“And if you’ll excuse me, I want to be sure that I am looking my best as well.” She peered at all of them now. “So, do not be late, girls. I expect to see you at Keller Tavern at eleven sharp. Until then.”

“*Until then,*” said DJ in an affected voice, after Grandmother was out of earshot.

“So, you guys aren’t actually taking this seriously?” Casey was staring at Eliza and Taylor now. “I mean modeling professionally.”

“Why not?” asked Taylor. “I hear the money is pretty good.”

“It’s not about the money,” said Eliza in a superior tone. Easy for her to say since her family was one of the wealthiest in the country. “I simply think it would be fun.”

“What do your parents think?” asked DJ.

Eliza shrugged. “They think that it’s nice that I’m learning to be a *lady*.”

She sort of laughed. “But I doubt they’d be too excited to see me taking modeling as seriously as your grandmother does. Still, I think it would be exciting.”

“I’d take it seriously,” said Kriti. Then she frowned. “If I wasn’t so short.”

“Oh, you could still do print,” said Eliza. She used her forefingers and thumbs to frame her face. “You would be great for cosmetic ads. They go for the exotic looking girls.”

Kriti smiled.

“Well, the only part of the fashion industry that interests me is design,” said Rhiannon as she stood and pushed her chair in. “And I consider myself fortunate to have Mrs. Carter’s influence to help me get where I’m going.”

“And don’t underestimate that influence,” said Eliza. “My mother told me last night that Mrs. Carter still had some pretty impressive connections in both New York and Paris.”

DJ groaned as she stood. Her leg really was aching. This fashion show might be a big deal to some of them, but to DJ it was simply a great big pain. The girls were going their separate ways now. But, as usual, DJ moved more slowly, clomping along like an old woman with her cane and big boot. But when she finally reached the stairs, Eliza seemed to be waiting for her.

Eliza smiled stiffly at DJ. “Despite what Casey or the others say, I was happy for you last night.”

DJ blinked at her. “Really?”

"I really did think it was sweet."

"You actually seemed kind of shocked at the time."

"Well, it was surprising." Eliza flipped a silky blond strand of hair over her shoulder. "I mean only days ago, you weren't even in the race. And then to actually win ... well, you obviously got the sympathy vote."

DJ nodded. "Obviously."

"So, no hard feelings, okay?" Eliza smiled again. Such a perfect smile. Perfect teeth. Perfect hair and skin. And yet behind it ... DJ could never be too sure.

"No hard feelings from me," said DJ lightly as she grabbed the stair railing with one hand and maneuvered her cane with the other. "And you're parents are really okay with it too?"

"Other than being surprised, they are fine. Like I already told everyone, they only came to show their support for me. And, naturally, my mother is thrilled about the fashion show."

"Naturally."

"Do you need any help?" asked Eliza as DJ continued clumping up the stairs.

"No, I'm fine." DJ grimaced against the pain. "Just slow."

"Well, I'm sure you'll be the hit of the fashion show today. Not everyone gets to see a crippled girl going down the runway. *Very sweet.*"

DJ clenched her teeth together, determined not to respond to this obvious slam. Really, what was the point? Still, it was funny how some girls, like Eliza,

could really put you down with just a few “harmless” words and a fake smile. And yet it hurt more than being cussed at or perhaps even hit. Weird.

“Ready to make yourself beautiful?” asked Taylor as DJ limped into their bedroom.

“Yeah, right.” DJ made her way to the bed and dropped her cane and flopped down. “Do you really think anyone would miss me if I skipped it?”

“Your grandmother for starters.”

“Maybe not ...” DJ actually considered this. “I mean she’s really got her eye on you and Eliza.”

“Yes, but eventually she would notice your absence, DJ. And then she would make you miserable for a day or two. Just get it over with.”

“First I’ll take a pain pill and a nap.”

“But I thought those pills wiped you out?”

DJ grinned at her. “Will it be my fault if I sleep too late?”

Taylor rolled her eyes as she headed for the bathroom. “It’s your funeral.”

“Come on, Sleepyhead,” said Taylor as she tugged on DJ’s arm. “It’s ten thirty and we need to get you ready for the big show. I’ve already called in the forces.”

And so, as DJ groggily sat on the edge of her bed, Rhiannon, Taylor, and Casey worked her over. Rhiannon did her hair. Taylor did her makeup. And Casey did her nails. Who knew Casey could do nails?

“Thanks, you guys,” she said after they were done. “Am I presentable now?”

“You’ll pass,” said Taylor. “Just don’t let your grandmother get too close. You’re really in need of some exfoliating.”

Casey rolled her eyes and Rhiannon handed DJ her cane. “We’re off to see the Wizard,” sang Taylor as they trekked down the stairs with DJ at the end, “the wonderful Wizard of Odds.”

Grandmother and the other girls had already left and since they were running late, DJ opted to let Taylor drive.

“That’s probably just as well,” said Rhiannon as she and Casey got into the backseat. “Since you’re impaired.”

“I’m fine,” said DJ. But the truth was she felt groggy. But at least her leg didn’t hurt. “The sooner we get this over with, the happier I’ll be.”

“While you were snoozing, your grandmother gave us a copy of the lineup,” said Rhiannon. “Eliza leads off and you follow.”

DJ brightened. “And then I’ll be done. That’s nice.”

“Yeah,” complained Casey. “The rest of us have to do the runway at least twice.”

“I’m doing three,” said Taylor, a trace of pride creeping into her voice.

“You really do like this, don’t you?” said DJ.

“Sure. You know me. I like to be looked at.”

Casey groaned. “You make me sick.”

“Whatever.”

Soon they were there and, thanks to Rhiannon, whose run wasn’t until tenth, DJ managed to get into her dress. It was a sophisticated cashmere in a

shade about the color of warm sand. To this someone had added some large tortoise shell bead earrings, a long necklace and a mix of bangle bracelets that actually looked pretty good together.

“The color of that dress is so great with your hair,” said Rhiannon as she adjusted the wide leather belt on DJ’s hips. “You look fantastic.”

DJ nodded grimly. “But does it go with my cane?”

Rhiannon laughed. “Don’t worry, no one will be looking at your cane.”

“No,” said DJ, “They’ll be looking at my boots.”

“That’s right,” said Eliza. She snickered as she glanced down at DJ’s mismatched boots. One, a sleek brown leather knee high, and the other, her clumsy-looking walking cast. Naturally, Eliza looked fabulous in a pair of fitted black pants, and short boots with very high heels. This was topped by a black and white checked jacket with oversized buttons. Very sixties and very chic. Not that DJ planned to tell her. Eliza was obviously aware that she looked good.

“Thanks a lot,” said DJ.

Eliza patted her on the back. “Don’t worry, dear, you’re sure to get the sympathy applause.”

The music was beginning to play now. Very upbeat and energetic. The girls had practiced to it already, although DJ had never been able to move and walk like the others. This was so humiliating. DJ hadn’t even remembered to put on deodorant. Great, now she was going to pit out a thousand dollar dress. She wondered if she had time to shove some tissues in her armpits.

Grandmother was the emcee for the fashion show. And after a formal welcome and some introductions to some of the local supporters, she cleared her throat and the runway music began to play and lights, which were being operated by volunteers from the high school drama department, began to fan around. Grandmother's intention had been to make this feel like a real New York event.

"Our first lovely model is Eliza Wilton. Eliza is one of our Carter House girls, but originally from Louisville. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Wilton, are joining us today." As Grandmother spoke, describing Eliza's outfit and the designer responsible, Eliza perfectly executed the pattern that the girls had been taught to walk—all the way to the end of the runway, turn, walk halfway back, turn again, back to the end, one last turn, and then back to the staging area. But the plan was that, when the previous model did her last turn, the next model would emerge. She would begin her walk so that the two would cross near the middle. "So the runway is never empty," Grandmother had instructed them. "That keeps the energy and excitement escalated."

So as Eliza made her last turn, accompanied by a hearty applause, DJ began her walk down the runway. But because she was so slow, she was only a quarter of the way up the runway before she and Eliza met. Eliza's eyes met hers and her panted on smile never even twitched as they passed, but as DJ took her next step, she realized that somehow her cane had missed the floor and she was about to plunge forward on her bad leg. Trying to balance herself, and trying to avoid pain, DJ did something like a tuck and roll, the way they were trained to fall

for volleyball. Naturally, this carried her straight off the runway and into the laps of a couple of very startled looking older women.

“I’m—I’m sorry!” Feeling like a complete fool, DJ struggled to get up and several people were trying to help her. Then the music quieted down and from the staging area, DJ heard Taylor say, “You witch!” DJ looked up in alarm in time to see Taylor holding onto Eliza by her checked jacket. “You tripped her on purpose.” And then Taylor slapped Eliza and Eliza lunged back at Taylor. The two of them were actually fighting. Okay, it was pathetic fighting, slapping and attempts to kick each other. But it was definitely a fight. DJ couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Ladies!” cried Grandmother from the podium. “Ladies! Ladies!”

“Are you okay?” asked one of the women that DJ had fallen into.

DJ nodded silently, her eyes still locked on Taylor and Eliza who were now being pulled apart by several of the other models and some of the fashion show helpers. How was Grandmother going to get out of this little mess?