

Chapter 1

“*Desiree*,” called Inez as she knocked on the other side of the closed bedroom door. “Mrs. Carter wants to see you downstairs.”

“The name is DJ.”

“I’m sorry, but Mrs. Carter has instructed me to call you *Desiree*.”

DJ opened the door and looked down on the short and slightly overweight middle-aged housekeeper. “And *I* have instructed you to call me *DJ*.”

Inez’s dark eyes twinkled as she gave her a sly grin. “Yes, but it is your grandmother who pays my salary, *Desiree*. I take orders from Mrs. Carter. And she wants to see you downstairs in her office, *pronto*.”

DJ grabbed her favorite Yankees ball cap and shoved it onto her head, pulling her scraggly looking blonde ponytail through the hole in the back of it.

“You’re wearing that?” asked Inez with a frown. “You know what your grandmother says about—”

“Look,” said DJ, “My grandmother might pay you to take orders from her, but I am a free agent. Got that?”

Inez chuckled. “I got that. But you’re the one who’ll be getting it before too long, *Desiree*.”

“*DJ*,” she growled as she tromped loudly down the curving staircase. Why had she let Dad talk her into living with her grandmother for her last two years of high school? She’d only been here since late July, less than a month now, and already it was totally unbearable. Boarding school had been way better than this. At least she’d had a little privacy there, and no one constantly riding her—telling her how to act, walk, look, and think. She wished there was some way out of this arrangement.

“There you are, *Desiree*,” said Mrs. Carter when DJ walked into the office. Her grandmother frowned at her ball cap and then pasted what appeared to be a very forced smile onto her collagen injected lips. “I want you to meet a new resident.” She made a graceful hand movement, motioning to where an attractive and somewhat familiar looking African-American man was sitting next to a fashionably dressed girl who seemed to be about DJ’s age. The girl was wearing a frown and fiddling with what looked like an expensive purse. “This is Taylor Mitchell, *Desiree*. And perhaps you’ve heard of her father, Jake Mitchell.”

The man chuckled. “Or perhaps not. According to Taylor, your generation doesn’t comprise even a small part of my fan base.”

DJ smiled at him. “Actually, I have heard of you. My mom used to play your CDs. She was a serious jazz fan.”

“*Was*?” He frowned. “I hope her taste in music hasn’t changed. I need all the fans I can get these days.”

Mrs. Carter cleared her throat. “*Desiree*’s mother, my daughter, was killed in a car accident about a year ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“*Desiree*,” said Mrs. Carter, “Would you mind giving Taylor a tour of the house while I go over some business details with her father?”

“No problem.”

Mrs. Carter's recently botoxed forehead creased ever so slightly and DJ knew that, once again, she had either said the wrong thing, used bad grammar, or was slumping like a "bag of potatoes." Nothing she did ever seemed to be right when it came to her grandmother. "And after the tour, perhaps you could show Taylor to her room."

"Which room?" asked DJ with concern. Taylor might be perfectly nice, but DJ was not ready for a roommate just yet.

"The blue room, please. Inez has already taken some of Taylor's bags up for her. Thank you, Desiree."

Feeling dismissed and disapproved of, DJ led a glum Taylor out to the foyer. "Well, you've probably already seen this." DJ waved her arm toward the elegant front entrance with its carved double doors and shining marble floor and Persian rug. She pointed up the ornate oak staircase. "And that's where the bedrooms are, but we can see that later." She walked through to the dining hall. "This is where we chow down." She pointed to the swinging doors. "The kitchen's back there, but the cook, Audra, can be a little witchy about trespassers." DJ snickered. "Besides, Grandma—I mean Mrs. Carter does not want her girls to spend much time in the kitchen anyway."

"Like that's going to be a problem," said Taylor, the first words she'd spoken since meeting DJ.

"Huh?" said DJ.

"I don't imagine anyone is going to be exactly pigging out around here. I mean aren't we all supposed to become famous models or something to that effect?" asked Taylor as she examined a perfectly manicured thumbnail.

DJ frowned. "Well, Mrs. Carter did edit one of the biggest fashion magazines in the world, but I don't think that means we're all going to become famous models. I know I'm not."

Taylor peered curiously at her. "Why not? You've got the height, the build, and you're not half bad looking ... well, other than the fact that you obviously have no style." She sort of laughed. "But then you've got your grandmother to straighten that out for you."

DJ just shook her head. "I think Grandma—I mean Mrs. Carter will give up on me pretty soon. Especially when the other girls get here ... she'll have someone else to set her sites on." At least that was what DJ was hoping.

"This is the library," said DJ as she continued the tour. "And that's the sunroom, or *observatory* as Mrs. Carter calls it." She laughs. "Hearing her talk about this house sometimes reminds me of playing Clue."

"What?"

"You know the murder game ... like where Colonel Mustard killed Mrs. Peacock with a wrench in the observatory."

"Oh, I never played that."

"Right ..."

"This house has been in our family for a long time," said DJ as she led Taylor up the stairs. "But no one has lived here for the past twenty years. Mrs. Carter had it restored after she retired a couple of years ago." DJ didn't add that her grandmother had been forced to retire, due to her age (a carefully guarded and mysterious number), or that this new business venture, boarding teen "debutantes," was to help compensate her retirement income. Those were strict family secrets and, despite DJ's angst in living here, she did have a sense of

family loyalty. At least for the time being. She wasn't sure if she could control herself indefinitely.

DJ stopped at the second floor landing. "The bedrooms are on this floor and the third floor has a ballroom that would be perfect for volleyball, although Mrs. Carter has made it clear that it's not *that* kind of ballroom." She led Taylor down the hall. "My bedroom is here," she pointed to the closed door. "And yours is right next door." She opened the door. "The blue room."

Taylor looked in the pale blue room and shook her head in a dismal way. "And I have to share this room with a perfect stranger?"

"Well, I don't know how perfect she'll be."

"Funny." Taylor rolled her eyes as she opened a door to one of the walk-in closets opposite the beds.

"I try."

"It's not as big as I expected."

"It's bigger than it looks," said DJ as she walked into the room then pointed to a small alcove that led to the bathroom.

"Do I get any say in who becomes my roommate?"

"I guess you can take that up with Mrs. Carter."

Taylor tossed her purse onto the bed closest to the bathroom and then kicked off her metallic sandals. "They might be Marc Jacobs, but they're killing me."

"So, you're really into this?" asked DJ. "The whole fashion thing?"

Taylor shrugged and sat down on the bed, rubbing a foot. "There's nothing wrong with wanting to look good."

DJ felt the need to bite her tongue. Taylor was her grandmother's first official paying customer to arrive and participate in this crazy scheme. Far be it from DJ to rock Mrs. Carter's boat. At least not just yet.

"Well, thanks for the tour, Desiree," said Taylor as she went over to where a set of expensive looking luggage was neatly stacked in a corner. "I think I'll get settled in."

"Don't you want to go down and tell your dad good-bye?"

Taylor laughed in a mean way. "And make him think he's doing me a favor by leaving me here? Not on your life."

DJ was about to return to her own room when Inez came up the stairs, lugging two suitcases. "Mrs. Carter wants to see you again, Desiree."

"Why?" demanded DJ.

"Another girl just arrived. Mrs. Carter wants you to give her a tour too."

"What am I now?" asked DJ. "The official tour guide?"

"That sounds about right," said Inez with a smirk.

DJ wasn't sure if she could take another fashion diva with an attitude problem, but on the other hand, she didn't want to risk another etiquette lecture from her grandmother either. Once again, she clomped down the stairs and made her appearance in the office.

"Eliza," gushed Mrs. Carter, "This is my granddaughter, Desiree Jane. And Desiree, I'd like you to meet Eliza Wilton."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Desiree."

DJ nodded. She could tell by how formal her grandmother was acting that Eliza Wilton, rather her parents, must be someone important—meaning extraordinarily wealthy. And then she remembered her grandmother going on about "the Wilton fortune" this

morning at breakfast. Of course, that must be Eliza's family. "Nice to meet ya, Eliza," DJ said in a purposely casual tone.

Mrs. Carter's brow creased for the second time today, and DJ wondered if the botox was starting to wear off. "Eliza is from Louisville," Mrs. Carter continued. "Her parents are presently living in France. But Eliza's grandmother and I went to college together and when she heard about what I was doing up here in Connecticut, she insisted on sending dear Eliza our way."

"Lucky Eliza," said DJ in a droll tone.

Eliza giggled and Mrs. Carter cleared her throat. "Desiree will give you a tour of the house," she said. "And she'll show you to your room."

"Which is?"

"The rose room."

Of course, thought DJ as she led Eliza from the office. Next to Mrs. Carter's suite, the rose room was the best room in the house. Naturally, someone as important as Eliza would be entitled to that. Not that DJ had wanted it. And perhaps her grandmother had actually offered it to her last month. But then DJ had never been a flowery sort of girl and she knew the rose wallpaper in there would've been giving her a serious migraine by now. Besides she liked her sunny yellow bedroom. In her opinion it had the best view in the house. On a clear day, you could actually get a glimpse of the Atlantic Ocean from her bathroom window.

DJ started to do a repeat on her earlier tour, even using the same lines, until she realized that Eliza was actually interested.

"How old is this house?"

"Just over a hundred years," DJ told her. "It was built in 1891."

"It has a nice feel to it."

DJ considered this. "Yeah, I kinda thought that too after I got used to it. To be honest, it seemed pretty big to me at first. But then you're probably used to big houses."

"I suppose. Not that I'm particularly fond of mansions."

"Why aren't you with your parents?" asked DJ. "In France?"

"They're concerned about things like politics and security," said Eliza as they exited the library. "They almost refused to let me come here."

"Why?"

"Oh, I think they felt I was safer in boarding school. If our grandmothers hadn't been such good friends, I'm sure they never would've agreed."

"So, you're happy to be here?" DJ studied Eliza's expression.

"Sure, aren't you?"

DJ frowned. "I don't know ... I guess"

"I think it'll be fun to go to a real high school ... to just live like a normal girl ... with other normal girls."

DJ tried not to look too shocked. "You think this is normal?"

Eliza laughed. "I guess I don't really know what normal is ... but it's more normal than what I've been used to."

"But what about the whole fashion thing?" asked DJ. "I mean you must know about my grand—Mrs. Carter's plans to turn us all into little ladies. Are you into all that?"

"That's nothing new. I'm from the south. My family has always been trying to turn

me into a little lady. That was one of the other reasons my parents agreed. I think they see the Carter House as some sort of finishing school.”

Or some sort of reformatory school, thought DJ. Although she didn’t say as much. Not yet, anyway.

Copyrighted Material. For Sales Presentations Only.