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Mixed Bags

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Summary: DJ's grandmother is a former fashion model who has restored an old mansion and turned it into a boarding house for rich teenaged girls who are interested in fashion, presenting DJ with a conflict between retaining her tomboy identity or changing her style, as she decides whether or not to try to fit in.

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“**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 your grandmother 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’s 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’m 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 last spring, late into the school year, but long enough to know that it was nearly unbearable. Boarding school would be better than this. At least she’d have a little privacy there and no one constantly riding her—telling her how to act, walk, look, and think. She wished there were some way, short of running away (which would be totally stupid), out of this uncomfortable arrangement.

“There you are,” said Grandmother 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 Latina woman was sitting next to a fashionably dressed girl who seemed to be about DJ’s age, but could probably pass for older. The girl was beautiful. Even with the scowl creasing her forehead, it was obvious that this girl was stunning. Her skin was darker than her mother’s, latte-colored and creamy. Her long black hair curled softly around her face. She had high cheekbones and dramatic eyes.

DJ noticed her grandmother smiling her approval on this unhappy-looking girl. But the girl looked oblivious as she fiddled with the gold chain of what looked like an expensive designer bag. Not that DJ was an expert when it came to fashion. The woman stood politely, extending her hand to DJ.

“I’d like to present my granddaughter, Desiree Lane.” Grandmother turned back to DJ now, the approval evaporating from

her expression. “Desiree, this is Ms. Perez and her daughter Taylor.”

DJ shook the woman’s hand and mumbled, “Nice to meet you.” But the unfriendly daughter just sat in the leather chair, one long leg elegantly crossed over the other, as she totally ignored everyone in the room.

Grandmother continued speaking to DJ, although DJ suspected this little speech was for Taylor’s mother. “Ms. Perez and I first met when my magazine featured her for her illustrious music career. Her face graced our cover numerous times over the years. Perhaps you’ve heard of Eva Perez.”

The woman smiled. “Or perhaps not,” she said in a voice that was as smooth as honey. “According to my daughter, kids in your age group don’t comprise even a minuscule part of my fan base.”

DJ smiled at the woman now. “Actually, I have heard of you, Ms. Perez. My mom used to play your CDs. She was a serious Latin jazz fan.”

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

Grandmother cleared her throat. “Desiree’s mother—my daughter—was killed in a car accident about a year ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

DJ sort of nodded. She never knew how to react when people said they were sorry about the loss of her mother. It wasn’t as if it were their fault.

“Desiree,” said Grandmother, “Would you mind giving Taylor a tour of the house while I go over some business details with her mother?”

“No problem.”

Grandmother’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 right when it came to her grandmother. “And after the tour, perhaps you could show Taylor to her room.”

“Which room?” asked DJ, feeling concerned. Sure, Taylor might be a perfectly nice person, even if a little snobbish, 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 as well as disapproved of, DJ led their reluctant new resident 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 motioned toward the ornate oak staircase. “And that’s where the bedrooms are, but we can see that later.” She walked through to the dining room. “This is where we chow down.” She pointed to the swinging doors. “The kitchen’s back there, but the cook, Clara, can be a little witchy about trespassers.” DJ snickered. “Besides, my grandmother 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?” asked Taylor as she examined a perfectly manicured thumbnail.

DJ frowned. “Well, my grandmother 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 absolutely no style.” She sort of laughed, but not with genuine humor. “But then you’ve got your grandmother to straighten that out for you.”

DJ just shook her head. “I think my grandmother will give up on me pretty soon. Especially when the others get here. She’ll have girls with more promise to set her sights on.” At least that was what DJ was hoping.

“Has anyone else arrived?”

“Not yet.” DJ continued the tour. “This is the library.” She paused to allow Taylor to look inside the room and then moved on. “And that’s the sunroom, or observatory, as Grandmother calls it.” She laughed. “Hearing her talk about this house sometimes reminds me of playing Clue.”

“What?”

“You know, the murder game, like where Colonel Mustard kills Mrs. Peacock with a wrench in the observatory.”

“Oh, I never played that.”

“Right . . .” Then DJ showed Taylor the large living room, the most modern space in the house. Grandmother had put this room together shortly after deciding to take on her crazy venture. Above the fireplace hung a large flat-screen TV, which was connected to a state-of-the-art DVD and sound system. This was encircled by some comfortable pieces of leather furniture, pillows, and throws.

“Not bad,” admitted Taylor.

“Welcome back to the twenty-first century.”

“Do you have wireless here?”

“Yeah. I told Grandmother it was a necessity for school.”

“Good.”

“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. My grandmother 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 supplement 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 Grandmother 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 into the pale blue room and shook her head in a dismal way. “And is it true that 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 and 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 my grandmother.”

Taylor tossed her purse onto the bed closest to the bath-

room and then kicked off her metallic-toned sandals. “These shoes might be Marc Jacobs, but they’re killing me.”

“So, you’re really into this?” asked DJ. “The whole fashion thing?”

Taylor 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 Grandmother’s boat. At least not just yet.

“Well, thanks for the tour,” said Taylor in a bored voice. Then she went over to where a set of expensive-looking luggage was stacked in a corner. “Don’t the servants around here know how to put things away properly?”

“Properly?” DJ shrugged.

Taylor picked up the top bag and laid it down on the bench at the foot of one of the beds and opened it.

“Don’t you want to go down and tell your mom good-bye?” asked DJ as she moved toward the door.

Taylor laughed in a mean way. “And make her think she’s doing me a favor by dumping me here? Not on your life.”

“Here are some more bags for Miss Mitchell,” said Inez as she lugged two large suitcases into the room, setting them by the door.

“Put them over there,” commanded Taylor, pointing to the bench at the foot of the other bed. “And don’t pile them on top of each other. This happens to be Louis Vuitton, you know.”

DJ saw Inez make a face behind Taylor’s back. But the truth was DJ didn’t blame her. Inez might be a housekeeper, but she didn’t deserve to be treated like a slave. Suddenly, DJ felt guilty for snapping at Inez earlier today. She smiled now, and Inez looked surprised and a little suspicious. Then DJ grabbed the

largest bag, hoisted it onto the bench with a loud grunt, and Taylor turned around and gave her a dark scowl.

“Thank you,” she snapped.

“Later,” said DJ as she exited the room with Inez on her heels.

“Mrs. Carter wants to see you downstairs, Desiree,” announced Inez when they were out on the landing.

“Again?” complained DJ. “What for?”

“Another girl just arrived. Your grandmother wants you to give her a tour too.”

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

“That sounds about right.” Inez gave her a smirk.

DJ wasn't sure if she could stomach 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, suppressing the urge to bow and say, “At your service, Madam.”

“Eliza,” gushed Grandmother, “This is my granddaughter, Desiree Lane. 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 must be someone really important—meaning extraordinarily wealthy—even more so than the Mitchells. And that's when 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. This girl was pretty too, but not like Taylor's dark and dramatic beauty. Eliza was a tall, slender, impeccably dressed, blue-eyed blonde. She wasn't exactly a Paris Hilton clone—and she

didn't have a little dog as far as DJ could see—but there was a similarity, except that Eliza's face was a little softer looking, a little sweeter, but then looks could be deceiving.

DJ wondered if the Botox was starting to wear off, as her grandmother studied her with a furrowed brow, probably comparing her to Miss Perfect Eliza. Naturally, DJ would not measure up.

"Eliza is from Louisville," said Grandmother. "Her parents are presently residing in France, where her father just purchased a vineyard. But Eliza's grandmother and I are old friends. We went to college together. When she heard about what I was doing up here in Connecticut, she encouraged her daughter to send dear Eliza our way."

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

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

"Which is . . . ?" asked DJ.

"The *rose* room."

Of course, thought DJ as she led Eliza from the office. Next to her grandmother's suite, the rose room was probably 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. DJ couldn't remember. But she 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 and, in her opinion, it had the best view in the house. On a clear day, you could actually glimpse a sliver of the Atlantic Ocean from her small bathroom window.

DJ started to do a repeat of 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. “In fact, 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 that what I’m used to.”

“But what about the whole fashion thing?” asked DJ. “I mean

you must know about my grandmother's plans to turn us all into little debutantes. Are you into all that?"

"That's nothing new. Remember, I'm from the south. My family is obsessed with turning me into a lady. That was one of the other reasons my parents agreed to this. 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 it out loud. Not yet, anyway.