

Life at **KINGSTON HIGH**

the  
**jerk**  
magnet

Melody  
Carlson

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Summary: When sixteen-year-old Chelsea Martin's future stepmother gives her a total makeover, she attracts all of the wrong boys and drives away many girls, but her friend Janelle keeps telling Chelsea to be true to herself, while helping her find a way to catch the eye of Nicholas, the one "non-jerk" at school.

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## one

Sometimes the best way to handle rejection is to simply expect it. Just accept that antagonism is coming your way and get beyond it as quickly and quietly as possible. At least that was what Chelsea Martin had been telling herself since hitting adolescence. But with two more years of high school lurking ahead, her resolve, not to mention her patience, had worn thin. And she wondered . . . just how old did her peers have to become before they eventually grew up? Forty-eight, perhaps? Maybe by their thirtieth class reunion they would treat people humanely and with an iota of respect.

Consequently, no one at her school was happier to see June arrive and the school year end than Chelsea. With almost three blessed months before she'd be forced to reenter that adolescent torture chamber, she planned to spend the summer underground, geeking out on her phony Facebook page, reading sci-fi and fantasy, and catching up on her favorite reality shows. Not exactly high aspirations, but after

an academically packed year as well as keeping her GPA high enough to remain in the top ten of her class, she concurred with the old McDonald's slogan—she *did* deserve a break today. But then, after just one week of sleeping in and vegging out, her “vacation” was cut short.

The madness began on Saturday morning. Awakened from a deep sleep and a delicious dream (Rob Pattinson was vying for her affection), Chelsea was in no mood to “rise and shine!” But there was Dad, standing over her wearing a silly apron that said “Kiss the Cook” and a grin that spelled nothing but trouble. Plus he had a pancake turner in his hand.

“Go away,” she said, longing to escape back into her dream. Although it was probably too late since Rob (aka Edward Cullen) had already vanished into the misty twilit forest.

“Up and at 'em,” Dad hailed in a painfully cheery tone.

“Is the house on fire or what?” Chelsea demanded.

“No, I just want you to get up. Come on, Chels. I'm fixing your favorite—blueberry pancakes!”

“I don't want any pancakes.” She groaned and rolled over. It wasn't even nine o'clock. And since when were blueberry pancakes her favorite? Did he think she was still seven? All she wanted at the moment was to return to her dream and that dreamy Edward.

“Come on, Chels.” Dad changed his tone from cheerful to pitiful. “We haven't really talked all week. I miss you, sweetie.”

She sat up and sighed. That was actually true—they hadn't talked much lately, maybe not even for two weeks. But that was Dad's fault, not hers. All Dad did was work, work, work.

“Come on,” he urged her. “I already heated the griddle. And the coffee's brewing and—”

“Okay, okay.” She reluctantly crawled out of bed, shoved her feet into her pink bunny slippers, and shuffled her way toward the kitchen. Sure enough, Dad really was making pancakes, complete with fresh blueberries.

“What’s the special occasion?” she asked as she filled a mug with coffee and sat down at the breakfast bar, gazing blurrily at him.

“Just us.” He grinned broadly, and she was surprised to see his dimples make an appearance. She’d almost forgotten he had them. The dimples combined with his messy bed-head hair, plaid flannel pajama pants, and faded blue T-shirt were surprisingly endearing—almost enough to wipe out her suspicions that something was seriously wrong. But not quite.

“Uh-huh . . . just us. Right.” She tried to suppress her skepticism as she spooned sugar into her coffee.

“You know, father and daughter hanging out and eating blueberry pancakes together.” Another spoonful of batter sizzled onto the hot griddle, releasing a delicious crispy smell and almost making her hungry.

She still wasn’t awake enough to put her finger on it, but something was definitely not jiving here. Why was Dad acting so weird? Did he think he was running for Father of the Year, or something worse? She glanced around the kitchen, wondering if there might be a hidden camera somewhere. Maybe he was auditioning for a father-daughter reality show.

“Okay,” she said carefully, “what’s *really* up with you, Dad?”

Both his boyish grin and his dimples faded. “We need to talk.”

She took in a quick breath. “If I was your girlfriend, those four little words would have me seriously freaking.” She was trying to be funny, but the truth was she did feel worried.

What had she done to warrant a “talk”? She couldn’t remember any particular offense. It was pretty hard to break the rules when you didn’t even have a life to start with.

She dipped her spoon in the sugar bowl again. It wasn’t that she didn’t like coffee, she just liked it sweetened up—a lot.

Dad dumped another circle of batter, using the bottom of the ladle to enlarge it. “Well, as a matter of fact, this is about my girlfriend.”

“Huh?” Chelsea’s hand stopped in midair. With her third spoonful of sugar halfway between the sugar bowl and her coffee mug, she gaped at her dad. She could tell by his creased brow that he was feeling very uncomfortable about something, like he was about to disclose some bad news, something he knew Chelsea would not want to hear. It reminded her of that time more than five years ago when he’d told her the worst news imaginable. But nothing could possibly be that terrible.

“Your girlfriend?” she asked. “What girlfriend would that be?”

“Kate, of course.”

“Kate?” Chelsea tried to wrap her head around this. She barely knew Kate. In some ways she seemed almost like an imaginary person to Chelsea. Like someone she’d seen on a TV show or passed on the street. Kate was beautiful, stylish, perfect . . . and a perfect stranger to Chelsea. Dad was calling this Kate his girlfriend now?

“Yes . . . Kate.” He flipped his pancakes, acting preoccupied and focused, like he hadn’t just said something totally out of left field. Like he didn’t get that Chelsea still considered her mom the only woman in his life. Like he didn’t know how creepy it sounded to hear him use the word *girlfriend* when

he was referring to himself. What was wrong with the man? Didn't he know that dads don't have girlfriends? Not her dad anyway.

Chelsea had been eleven when her mom suffered an aneurism and died almost instantly. Mom's death had blindsided and devastated Chelsea and her dad. Even five years later, it was still hard for her to think about it. And up until recently, Chelsea's dad had shown absolutely no interest in dating anyone. That was okay with Chelsea. So far the two of them had managed just fine on their own. Housekeeping was a bit random and haphazard, but there'd been no real complaints. Chelsea was used to doing her part.

Then Kate Bradley came along . . . and Dad had cautiously reentered the dating world. He'd reassured Chelsea it was "nothing serious," and she had believed him. In fact, it had been somewhat amusing seeing her dad worried about how to act and what to say on a date. In some ways Chelsea thought the experience was probably good for him. She'd even been a little envious, wishing she had someone to date too—like that would ever happen. But during this relatively short amount of time, Chelsea had never once heard Dad call Kate his girlfriend. That word alone was totally unnerving. Still, she planned to play it cool. Perhaps like other aggravations in life, this too would pass.

"So . . . tell me, Dad, what's up with Kate?" She took a sip of her sweetened coffee, trying to act perfectly normal.

"Well, honey, I've been meaning to tell you that it's been getting more serious."

Chelsea frowned. She didn't even know it was serious, and now it was *more* serious? "You guys only go out once a week at the most. You've probably had a total of six dates and—"

“Oh, it’s been a lot more than six dates, Chels. We meet for lunch occasionally, and we go for—”

“But how is a couple months long enough to get *serious*, Dad?” It was bizarre, but for some reason she felt like the parent now. Like she needed to advise him about the dangers of dating and getting serious.

“Sometimes you just know about these things.” He neatly flipped a pancake.

“Know what about what things?” She knew her tone was too sharp. She could tell by his expression that she sounded rude and angry. Okay, maybe she was angry.

“You know when it’s right . . . when you’ve met the right one.”

“The right *what*?”

“The right, uh . . . soul mate.”

She blinked. “Kate is your soul mate?”

He set the pancakes on a plate and handed it to her. “She is, Chelsea.” He nodded in an assured way. “I know it.”

“But how can you possibly *know* that?”

“Because I just do.” He poured new circles of batter onto the hot griddle. “To be honest, I think I’ve known it almost from the start.”

“Are you saying that you’ve been in love with Kate since you met her?” She glared at him. “And you never even told me about this? You didn’t give me any kind of warning whatsoever?”

“I guess I was in denial.” He slid the bottle of maple syrup toward her, followed by the butter dish. “I honestly didn’t think it would be possible to love someone else again.”

“Maybe it’s not possible.” Even as she said this, she knew she sounded ridiculous. Lots of people fell in and out of love

every single day. She saw it at school all the time. Of course, they were just kids and most of them were dumber than dirt anyway. Dad was in his late forties.

“I know it’s going to take some time for you to process this.” He set an empty plate next to the sizzling pancakes. “I’m sure it’s kind of a shock. But I need you to try to understand. Okay?”

With her lips tightly together, she nodded. Spearheading a large section of pancake with her fork, she crammed it into her mouth, but the pancake tasted like sawdust, like it was turning into a large, hard lump that would probably stick in her throat. Perhaps it would lodge there and choke her to death. Just the same, she swallowed it. Maybe she didn’t care if she choked. So what if she died on her dad’s blueberry pancakes. But worried she really couldn’t breathe, she took a big gulp of coffee, and even though it washed the glob down, the liquid was so hot it made her eyes water. Now Dad would assume she was crying.

“Anyway, Chelsea . . .” His eyes were on his pancakes, like they needed his full attention. “I proposed to Kate last night. I asked her to marry me.”

Chelsea wanted to scream or to throw something. What was wrong with her dad? Why was he doing this? But he was so focused on turning the second string of pancakes that it looked like he was in some kind of cooking competition. Perhaps a blueberry pancake trophy was at stake.

“And Kate said yes.” Dad peered at Chelsea like he thought she’d be delighted by this news. Did he expect her to say congratulations?

“Oh.” She pushed her plate away. What little appetite she’d had was completely gone. “So . . . you and Kate will

be getting married then. Wow, that's just great, Dad." Her words dripped with sarcasm. "I hope the two of you will be very happy together."

He looked hurt. "I know you'll need to get used to this, but I want you to understand that—"

"Yeah, I know. I'll get used to it." She nodded, blinking back real tears. "I'm not hungry, Dad."

"Oh, Chelsea." He turned off the stove and hurried around the island. Before she could escape, he wrapped his arms around her. "The last thing I want to do is hurt you. You're my best buddy, Chels."

She wanted to point out that she *used* to be his best buddy. Obviously he'd found someone else now. But she knew if she tried to speak, she'd start blubbering like a baby. This whole thing was bad enough without adding stupid tears.

"This doesn't change anything between us, Chels. You probably don't feel like that's true right now, but you'll see in time that having Kate as part of our family will make everything better—for both of us."

"Right." Her voice sounded gruff. Pulling away from him, she stepped back. "I just need some space right now."

"You don't want your pancakes?"

"No. Thank. You." She stepped back farther, preparing to dash back to her room, slam the door, and try to make sense of why Dad was doing this to her.

"There's more," he said in an even more serious tone. "Please don't run off yet, Chelsea."

"There's more?" she said. "What do you mean, *more*? Don't tell me that Kate has a bunch of kids and that I'm going to have to share my room and babysit and—"

"No, no, Kate doesn't have any kids."

“Is she *pregnant*?”

“No, of course not.” He frowned at Chelsea like she’d just made some sort of nasty insinuation. Maybe she had. Maybe she didn’t care.

“Well, what is it then?” She planted her hands on her hips, glaring and waiting.

“My job is getting transferred to San Jose.”

“Huh?”

“San Jose, California. We have to move in six weeks, honey.”

“We have to *move*?” She shouted this back at him like it was the worst news ever, when in truth she didn’t even care that much. Still, he didn’t need to know her true feelings. Especially since he seemed to enjoy being generally clueless about her. Why not throw a hissy fit over moving—didn’t he deserve some friction?

“I know it’s a lot to take in—”

“So let me get this clear.” She shook a fist in the air. “Not only are you turning my life totally upside down by getting married to someone you hardly know, someone I’ve barely even met, but now you’re forcing me to move away from the only home I’ve ever known. You’re making me change schools right before my junior year?” She glared at him. “What’s next, Dad? Am I going to find out that you plan to sell me into the international slave market and use my college savings to buy you and Kate a new love nest in Bermuda?”

“Chelsea!” He frowned in a disappointed way.

“I’m just saying.”

“Look, I don’t have a choice in the job change. The company is downsizing, and several other executives are being laid off right now. I’m actually fortunate to still have a job—in a way, it’s a promotion.”

“Well, that’s just peachy, Dad. You’re getting married and you’re moving me out of my home and halfway across the country. I just couldn’t be happier.” She turned and ran from the room. And she did slam her door. Juvenile, yes, but necessary all the same.

She flopped onto her bed, wishing she had a good friend to call and vent to, but the truth was her closest friend, Sharee from drama, was just not that good a friend. In fact, Chelsea hadn’t had a real best friend since middle school—back when she and Virginia had been inseparable. In fourth grade they went to youth group together, and together they professed to follow Jesus and promised to be best friends forever. As it turned out, both commitments turned out to be short-lived.

Chelsea went over to her dresser and picked up a framed photo. It had been taken on her twelfth birthday, right after Chelsea had gotten braces and zits. Virginia had fared better on her twelfth birthday—she’d gotten a pink cell phone and breasts. Although both girls were smiling in the photo, with their other friends gathered in the background, she could see the truth in Virginia’s face. Chelsea had been oblivious on her big night—she’d begged her still grief-stricken dad for that slumber party. She later saw (with twenty-twenty hindsight) what had really been going on at the time.

Virginia had coaxed Chelsea’s other so-called friends (other youth group girls) to come that night, for what was probably a true pity party. Feeling sorry for Chelsea because it had been only three months since her mom’s death, the girls had shown up to celebrate Chelsea’s birthday. Pathetic, considering those girls were finished with Chelsea by then. As soon as seventh grade started, they left her in the dust. Chelsea never went back to church or youth group again.

Even now, it still bewildered Chelsea the way Virginia and her circle of picture-perfect friends had made that amazing transition—it seemed like overnight—abandoning bikes and Barbies for boys and fashion. But Chelsea hadn't been invited to cross that bridge with them. Probably because she was incapable, handicapped, broken—or maybe she'd been too distracted by her own grief. At least that's what she'd consoled herself with back then.

She studied the photo, seeing that kinky, mud-colored hair, those ugly braces—which she got shortly before everyone else got theirs off—and those horrible zits that seemed to have popped out of nowhere and just never went away. Though not everything showed in that photo—like her complete lack of breasts and deep-rooted insecurities—thanks to her many shortcomings, Chelsea became an overnight misfit, and she'd spent the next four years trying to disappear or blend into the walls at school . . . hoping to survive.

And now her dad was not only asking her to start over at a new school—where she'd have to learn all over again how to slip beneath the radar—but he was bringing his own picture-perfect “soul mate” into their previously comfortable little world. Really, could life get any worse?

## two

After nearly a week of serious sulking, in which she'd gotten fairly sick of herself, Chelsea decided it was time to be a good sport. Really, it was pointless to protest since, like so many other things in her life, she had no control over the outcome anyway. Why not just go along with it—or at least pretend to. She consoled herself in thinking that someday she would be an adult and she'd move out on her own, and then she would live life according to her own rules.

“I really want you in my wedding,” Kate was saying to Chelsea as they ate dinner together. This was Dad's recovery plan for Chelsea—take her to dinner with her stepmother-to-be and see if he couldn't get the two females to bond over a chocolate dessert.

However, they'd been over this I-want-you-in-my-wedding topic several times already tonight, and Chelsea felt certain that she'd made her position completely clear. “Thanks anyway,” she told Kate, “but like I said, I'm just not into that sort of thing. I don't like standing up in front of a bunch of people.”

“But it’s going to be a very small wedding,” Kate said.

Chelsea looked at Dad—like, *help!*

He turned to Kate. “You know, I’d love for Chelsea to be in the wedding just as much as you would, sweetie. But only if Chels *wants* to do it.” He held up his hands. “And it seems that she doesn’t.”

Kate’s pretty pink lips twisted into a disappointed pout.

“Sorry, Kate.” Chelsea lowered her eyes as she took a small sip of water. If only this torturous evening could come to a swift and painless end. Suddenly she felt tempted to slip off to the bathroom . . . where she would pull the fire alarm and act completely surprised as the patrons were evacuated from the restaurant—and she could go home.

Unless Chelsea was imagining things, Kate’s pout suddenly transformed itself into a rather catty smile. She pushed a thick strand of silky blonde hair over a tanned shoulder, then pointed a perfectly manicured shell-pink nail at her soon-to-be stepdaughter. “I think I know what’s troubling you,” she said. She leaned forward, peering intently at Chelsea, studying her closely as if she were taking some kind of inventory. Similar to the way some girls, particularly mean girls, would look at Chelsea at school.

A prickly heat climbed up Chelsea’s neck and flushed her cheeks. This was her normal reaction to embarrassing situations. She loathed being the center of attention under any circumstances, but feeling like a biology specimen in a public place, especially a restaurant, was way beyond freaky.

Kate nodded with a knowing expression. “Chelsea, I understand you better than you realize,” she continued. “In fact, I know exactly what your problem is.”

Well, of course Kate knew what Chelsea’s problem was.

Everyone at Chelsea's school knew what her problem was. Even the guy waiting their table knew what her problem was. She was just plain unattractive, bordering on ugly. To make matters worse, she was painfully shy, along with a bunch of other unfortunate things she'd rather not think about. Seriously, did they really have to discuss this right here and now?

Chelsea shot her dad another pleading look, but he wasn't looking at her. No, his eyes were locked onto his gorgeous fiancée's face, staring at Kate as if totally mesmerized by her loveliness. The phrase "the sun and the moon rises and sets on her" passed through Chelsea's head. It was obvious Dad was in deep.

"You simply lack confidence, Chelsea," Kate stated with absolute certainty.

Chelsea stopped herself from saying "duh" and rolling her eyes.

"And I know exactly what you need to get you past this." Kate gave Chelsea a smug little smile, like she thought she'd just discovered plutonium or the cure for colon cancer.

It took all of Chelsea's self-control not to bolt out of the restaurant, or go for the fire alarm. Instead, she took a deep breath and silently counted to ten. Sometimes that worked.

Kate pointed at Chelsea again. Didn't she know it was rude to point? "You and I are going shopping tomorrow." Kate turned to Dad. "That's okay with you, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "If Chelsea wants to."

"Because I know how to help her," Kate told Dad. "If Chelsea will let me, I can help her to change her life."

Dad's brows drew together. "By shopping?"

Kate laughed. "Well, that and some other things. But

she has to trust me *implicitly*.” She pointed at Dad. “And so do you.”

He leaned forward, looking intently into Kate’s big blue eyes. “You know I trust you, Kate.” He touched the solitaire ring on her left hand. “How much more could I trust anyone?”

“Good.” Kate patted his cheek. “And that’s why we’ll be using your employee discount to do some serious shopping tomorrow.”

He looked interested. “You’re going to shop at our store?”

“Why not go where ‘designers’ best costs you less?” She quoted one of the lame advertisement lines of the discount clothing chain that Dad worked for. “How do you beat Best 4 Less?” she chirped. “Combine their already low prices along with your discount—and we’re talking bargains with a capital B.”

Chelsea couldn’t help but groan. Dad tossed her a warning look. But Kate continued in oblivion. “I couldn’t help but notice the new shipment in the back room when I met you for lunch on Thursday. It should all be on the floor by now. In fact, I’d like to do some shopping myself—with an employee discount.” She winked at Chelsea like they were sharing some special sort of secret.

Chelsea knew that Kate had managed one of the discount outlet stores until she and Dad began dating, and due to the company’s no-dating policy, Kate had been forced to find a different job. Of course, Chelsea had learned of this—and so much more—only recently.

“We are going to give you a total makeover this summer,” Kate told Chelsea. “And then we’ll start working on your confidence and self-esteem, which is the real key to beauty.”

Chelsea shot Dad another look, but she realized she was on her own in this. Clearly in over his head, Dad was too smitten to be of any help.

“Trust me, Chelsea,” Kate assured her, “by the time you start school in San Jose, you will be a completely new woman.”

Chelsea experienced a schizophrenic conglomeration of emotions—primarily an enormous pile of extreme humiliation topped with a thin layer of unreasonable hope. Mostly she wanted to come up with a good excuse, any excuse, to escape Kate’s big makeover plan. To her relief, Kate turned her attention back to Dad. As they discussed the boring details of their wedding plans—how they needed to sell their homes, how Kate needed the summer to finish her job, how they needed a time frame for relocating to San Jose, and other miscellaneous plans for the future—Chelsea mentally checked out. She wished she’d brought a book along.

After dinner, Dad drove Kate to her condo, where he walked her to her door and remained there for exactly seventeen minutes. As Chelsea waited, watching the clock on the console, she wondered what could actually transpire in seventeen minutes . . . or perhaps she didn’t really want to know.

“Kate said she’ll pick you up at ten tomorrow morning,” Dad said as he pulled out of the parking lot.

“Oh, I can hardly wait.” She folded her arms tightly across her front, glowering at the street ahead.

“She just wants to help, Chels.”

“She wants to make me over, Dad. What does that mean? That I’m not good enough as is?”

“Of course you’re good enough as is. You’re perfect, honey. You’re smart and kind and generous and thoughtful and—”

“Just not pretty.”

“I never said that!” He glanced at her. “I think you’re very pretty. Your eyes, your bone structure, your mouth. Really, you’ve got a lot going on that you don’t even know about. You’re just not one of those shallow foo-foo girls—”

“You mean like Kate?”

“Kate’s not like that.”

“Yeah, right.” She turned away so he couldn’t see her eyes rolling.

“She’s not like that, Chelsea.”

“If you say so, Dad.”

“She’s really not. You just don’t know her well enough yet.”

“Right.”

“I’ll admit that Kate likes fashion and all that sort of thing, but she’s not shallow or superficial.”

Chelsea knew enough to keep quiet by now.

“And Kate’s offer to help you is simply her way of reaching out to you. Naturally, she assumes you’d appreciate some, uh, help. But if you don’t want to go with her tomorrow, I’m sure she’ll understand. Just call her when we get home. Be honest and tell her that it’s not your thing. No one wants to push you into something that’s not you. In fact, I think it’s rather admirable that you’re not into your appearance like that, Chelsea. It shows substance of character.”

Chelsea wondered if her dad was simply trying to use reverse psychology. It might’ve worked when she was thirteen . . . not so much now.

“You have to be yourself, Chels.” He continued with his platitudes. “Don’t conform to others. And never ever let anyone force you into their cookie-cutter mold.”

“You mean like Kate is trying to do?”

“I honestly don’t think Kate’s trying to do that, honey.

I think she simply sees you as a bit, well, insecure in your appearance. She just wants to help you get over it. But it's obvious that she's stepped over some sort of line." He glanced at her. "In fact, if you like, I'll call Kate myself and tell her that you've changed your mind."

"*Changed* my mind?" she asked. "That would infer that I had something to do with the decision in the first place. As I recall, I was kind of railroaded into the whole make-over plan."

"Exactly." He nodded. "And that's why I'll call Kate and explain that it's not such a good idea." He reached over and patted her knee in a patronizing way. "It's too much too soon. Besides, I almost forgot, I planned to get a head start on packing. I wanted to go over and pick up some moving boxes tomorrow, and then I want us to get started on the garage. It's such a disaster area, I'm sure it'll take us two weeks to get it all sifted down and packed—"

"I know what you're doing, Dad." She let out a loud, exasperated sigh. "Fine, I'll go shopping with Kate."

"Huh?" He looked at her with a surprised expression. "I thought you didn't want to—"

"I *don't* want to. It's just the lesser of two evils."

Neither of them said anything for a while. Chelsea was feeling a little guilty for acting like such a spoiled brat, so finally she broke the silence. "I'm curious about something, Dad."

"Yeah?"

"What made you fall in love with Kate? Was it because she's so beautiful?"

He didn't say anything.

"It was, wasn't it? Kate caught your eye and you just couldn't help yourself, right?"

“Wrong.” He shook his head. “That’s not how it happened at all.”

“Right. I’m sure you didn’t even notice that Kate is gorgeous.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. Of course I noticed her. How could I not? I’m sure she caught my eye when she started working for the corporation last fall.”

“You’ve known her since last fall?”

“Only professionally. And the truth is I assumed Kate was an airhead at first.”

“An airhead?”

He nodded. “Yep. She just seemed too doggone pretty to be able to manage a store. In fact, I even questioned Brad in personnel about hiring her. But he showed me her résumé, and it was impressive. Then I saw Kate in action. I saw the way she worked and interacted with people, and I realized I’d completely misjudged her. She’s smart and thoughtful and kind.” He glanced at Chelsea. “It really is unfair to judge people based on appearances, don’t you think?”

She let out a loud, nasal sigh, her new substitute for “duh.”

“Anyway, despite knowing there was more to Kate than I originally assumed, I was still uncomfortable with her looks.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean she was just too beautiful. I’d see other guys gaping at her or fawning over her . . . and it was too weird. I knew I couldn’t handle it. So I stayed away.”

“You’re telling me you stayed away from her because you didn’t want to be involved with someone that beautiful?” Chelsea was trying to grasp this. Didn’t all guys secretly long for a gorgeous woman on their arm? Wrist candy?

“Like I said, it made me uncomfortable. Anyway, for a long time I kept a safe distance from her, if you know what

I mean. I'd actually see her coming from one way and I'd go the other way just to avoid her."

"Why?"

"Several reasons, probably." He pulled into their driveway. "For starters, I figured she'd never give someone like me a second glance. Plus she was younger. You know she's nearly ten years younger than me, but I thought the difference was even greater. So in my thinking, she was out of my league. Too pretty, too young."

"Oh, Dad." Chelsea just shook her head as they got out of the car. "You're pretty cool for an old dude."

"Thanks, sweetie." He put his arm around her as they walked to the front door. "But besides my personal insecurities, I just didn't like the idea of getting involved with someone that . . . that beautiful. It just felt wrong." He unlocked the door, waiting for Chelsea to go inside.

"Why did it feel wrong?" she asked.

"It doesn't make sense now, but I guess I felt like it would make me shallow or superficial." He tossed his car keys into the wooden bowl by the door. "Besides that, Kate was still working for the company back then. That alone should've been enough to scare me off."

"So how did you two ever get together then?"

"Kate would be her usual friendly, outgoing self, and she just started talking to me. I'd be doing a walk-through in the store or checking on something, and she'd come up and just start talking to me like we were old friends. After a while, I began to wish that we were."

"Were what?"

"Old friends." He sat down in his favorite chair. "So I asked her out for coffee one day, and we just seemed to hit

it off.” He picked up the TV remote. “I suppose the rest is history.”

“One more question.” Chelsea hesitated.

“Go for it.”

“What if Kate *hadn’t* been beautiful?”

“What do you mean?”

“Would you have fallen in love with her if she’d been ugly . . . or plain . . . or just plain ugly?”

Dad’s brow creased as if he were seriously considering his answer. “It’s hard to say, Chelsea. I mean, that’s like saying, ‘What if Kate was someone else?’ How do you answer that? To be honest, I like that Kate’s beautiful. I do now anyway. But for the sake of conversation, let’s say something happened to her and she lost her looks.”

“Okay.” Chelsea watched him closely.

Dad leaned his head back, looking up at the ceiling as though thinking hard. He smiled in a slightly dreamy way. “The truth is I would still love her just as much . . . maybe even more.”

“Oh.”

“Any more questions?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Want to watch something?” He held up the remote.

“Not tonight.” It wasn’t even ten yet, but she feigned a yawn. “I’m kind of sleepy.”

“Okay.” He turned back to the TV, and she went to her room, closing the door quietly behind her. Then she stood in front of the full-length mirror on the back of her door. Her mom had hung that mirror when Chelsea was going into first grade. The plan had been to help Chelsea in coordinating her outfits better. Apparently Chelsea had been just as

fashion-challenged then as she was now. Eventually, Mom had taken to arranging Chelsea's outfits for her. Chelsea never minded. She knew some of her friends argued with their moms about clothes, but Chelsea had instinctively known that her mom's sense of style was superior to her own. After Mom died, Chelsea's appearance had gone steadily downhill.

"Don't worry," she told her pathetic-looking image, "*you* will never be loved for your looks." No, Chelsea was certain she'd never have to second-guess whether a guy was interested in her for the wrong thing. Like a guy would ever be interested in her for anything. Well, except for help with his chemistry or calculus. But she was even pretty good at getting out of that.

Chelsea tried to see herself as Kate saw her tonight. What made Kate think that there was any hope of changing anything? Chelsea stared at her muddy-brown hair. She'd been trying to grow it out, thinking that if it was long enough to pull back in a ponytail, that would help somehow. But once it got long enough, all she could do was comb the mousy, frizzy curls as straight as possible and tie them back into a tail that looked more like a frazzled mop than anything. But at least it was out of her face. Not that she particularly enjoyed having her face in full view. Although her braces had been gone for more than a year now, her skin still broke out with unsettling regularity.

In disgust, she turned away from her reflection. It wasn't something she would ever confess to anyone, but Chelsea could relate to Dracula—she hated mirrors!

## three

It didn't take long for Chelsea to see that Kate approached shopping like a sport—make that a marathon. Chelsea should've suspected something when Kate handed her a water bottle on their way to the outlet store. “What's this for?”

“Hydration,” Kate told her.

“Yes, I understand that concept. But why?”

“Water is good for you, Chelsea. And you're going to need to be hydrated today.” Kate studied Chelsea's outfit, which was simply cargo pants, a T-shirt, and flip-flops. “Good choice of clothes,” Kate said as she started her car.

“Really?” Chelsea experienced a tinge of hope. “You like it?”

“Not especially.” Kate laughed. “No offense. I mean, it's not a very flattering look. But I do like that it'll be easy to get in and out of. You'll be doing a lot of trying on today.”

As it turned out, that was putting it mildly. Chelsea's best estimate was that by the end of the day, she had tried on about two hundred items of clothing. She didn't even think that was much of an exaggeration. “That seems like an awful lot

of work for just a couple of bags of clothes,” she told Kate as they loaded the bags into the car.

“Oh, this was just the beginning.”

Chelsea groaned. “I don’t want to seem unappreciative, but what else do you think I really need? I mean, I do have more clothes at home, you know.”

“I know.” Kate’s tone suggested that she was unimpressed. “We’re going to work on that too.”

“I don’t really see the point.” Chelsea sighed loudly. “I mean, you can dress me differently, but I’m still the same girl underneath.”

“Of course you’ll be the same girl on the inside,” Kate said. “That’s the best part of you anyway.”

“Really?” Chelsea brightened.

“Absolutely.” Kate smiled at her. “But I think your exterior is hurting your interior.”

Chelsea didn’t say anything.

“The reason I know this is true is because I used to be a lot like you.”

“Huh?” Chelsea turned and stared at Kate. “What do you mean exactly?”

“I mean I was an ugly duckling.”

“No way.”

Kate chuckled. “Way.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Well, I don’t have many photos—because I used to hide every time a camera came out. But I have a few. And if I can dig them out, you’ll see that I wore glasses, had braces—”

“I had braces too!”

“I know.”

“Dad told you?”

“No, I can tell by your teeth. Like me, you need to use a tooth whitener now.”

“Really?” Her hand flew up to her mouth. Now there was something she hadn’t even noticed. And that made her wonder—just how bad was she?

“Don’t worry, Chelsea.” Kate’s voice was reassuring. “The good news is that everything that’s wrong with you—the outside of you—can be easily fixed.”

“Easily fixed?” Chelsea felt seriously skeptical.

“You bet. And I have to say, you’ve even got more going for you right now than I had when I was your age.”

“I need to see those photos.”

Kate laughed. “I’ll see if I can find them.”

“But seriously, how could you possibly have been any, uh, worse-looking than me?” Chelsea felt her face. Just this morning several new zits had appeared.

“I had a bad complexion too,” Kate said. “But I found this really great product that’s still on the market. I swear that alone changed my life. And I’ve already ordered you some.”

“Really?” Chelsea felt a wave of hope. “And it works?”

“It did for me.” She glanced at Chelsea. “I’m sure it’ll work for you too. And the other thing you have going for you is your figure.”

“My figure?” Chelsea looked down at herself. She’d finally gotten breasts just last year, but now she didn’t even know what to do with them. Compared to other girls, it seemed like too little too late.

“Your figure is perfect, Chelsea. But you do need some new underwear—specifically some good bras. Seriously, where did you get the stuff you’re wearing?”

Chelsea felt her cheeks grow warm. “I don’t know . . . Penney’s, I think.”

“Well, we’re going to address that too.” Kate started talking about Brazilian hair-straightening procedures and spray-on tans and French manicures and pedicures and exfoliating facials . . . and Chelsea felt like she was in way over her head.

She held up her hands as Kate pulled up to Chelsea’s house. “I’m not sure what all you’re talking about, Kate. But I’ve made a decision.”

Kate looked concerned. “You’re not chickening out, are you?”

Chelsea shook her head. “No, I’m taking a leap of faith.”

“A leap of faith?”

“I’m putting myself in your hands.”

Kate broke into a huge grin. “Oh, Chelsea, you won’t be sorry. I promise.”

Chelsea nodded. “Well, it occurred to me that you can’t do any worse than I’ve done. Any improvement is probably worthwhile. And don’t worry, I don’t expect miracles.”

Kate threw back her head and laughed. “Well, you should. Trust me, you’re going to see miracles.”

Chelsea knew better than to get her hopes up, but Kate’s enthusiasm was contagious. When Kate grabbed one of the clothing bags and followed Chelsea into the house, casually informing her that she was fixing dinner for the three of them tonight, Chelsea was surprised to realize that she was actually sort of glad about this. Was it possible that she was beginning to like Kate?

“I think you should give your dad a fashion show,” Kate told Chelsea as they were finishing up dinner.

Dad nodded. “I’d love to see what you girls got.”

Chelsea frowned at him. “I don’t think so.”

Kate looked disappointed as she began to clear the table.

“The clothes are all nice and everything.” Chelsea stood too, picking up her plate and the salad bowl. “It’s just that I’m not ready to put them all on again. Okay?” She forced a smile. “How about if I clean this up and you guys can go relax?”

Dad grinned. “You talked me into it.”

“How about an after-dinner walk?” Kate suggested.

With Dad and Kate gone, Chelsea cranked up the music and put kitchen cleaning into high gear. She’d been surprised to see that Kate was a fairly good cook. Of course, anyone could make spaghetti. But it was somewhat reassuring to know that Kate knew her way around a kitchen. It helped to erase the wicked stepmother image.

Chelsea was just heading to her room when Dad and Kate returned from their walk. “Hey, Chels,” Kate called out. “How about if we take that inventory of your closet now?”

Chelsea wanted to say, “Thanks, but no thanks,” but Kate looked so hopeful as she hurried to catch up with her.

“If you clean stuff out now, it’ll make it that much easier to pack it up when moving time comes.”

“I guess.” Chelsea cautiously opened the door to her room. “It’s just that it’s kind of messy in here and—”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I used to be a total slob. I doubt you can surprise me much.” Kate headed directly for Chelsea’s closet.

As if today hadn’t been hard enough—trying on outfit after outfit and being scrutinized again and again—letting anyone (especially perfect Kate) look in her closet was way beyond Chelsea’s comfort zone. Still, she was determined to

cooperate. She understood that Kate was simply trying to help, and on some levels Chelsea did appreciate it. Pressing her lips together, she sat on the edge of her bed, watching as Kate removed an armful of clothes and flopped them down on the bed next to Chelsea.

“Okay, this has got to go.” Kate held up a ratty-looking sweatshirt.

Chelsea felt a small wave of regret. That sweatshirt had always felt so nice and loose and comfortable.

“Come on,” Kate urged. “You might as well wear a potato sack as this.”

“Okay.”

Kate tossed the shirt to the floor. “This will be the cast-off pile.” She held up a pair of flared jeans. “These are so last year, Chelsea.” She threw them on top of the sweatshirt, and Chelsea controlled herself from snatching them back.

“Now this has potential.” Kate held up a plain white shirt. “Nice lines.”

Chelsea frowned at the top. “I had to get that when I was a freshman, because I was in choir and we had to wear white blouses with navy skirts.”

“Does it still fit?”

Chelsea shrugged.

“Come on.” Kate handed her the shirt. “Try it.”

While Chelsea was trying on the shirt, Kate continued thinning Chelsea’s closet. The white shirt as well as some sweaters and a few other basic pieces wound up being keepers, but the cast-off pile looked enormous.

“Are you sure about that?” Chelsea pointed to the mountain of old clothes. “I mean, what am I supposed to wear?”

“Don’t forget about these.” Kate went over to the door,

where Chelsea had dropped her bags of clothing. “Let’s hang them up and then we’ll make a list.”

“A list?” Chelsea picked up a bag and emptied the contents onto her bed.

“Sure. We’ll see what you have and I can figure out what you’ll need.”

After they hung up the clothes and Kate had arranged everything in the closet, Chelsea had to admit that it did look better. As Kate combined pieces, showing Chelsea what went with what, Chelsea could almost imagine becoming somewhat stylish. At least more stylish than she’d ever been before.

“You make it look easy,” Chelsea told Kate. “But when I try to put stuff together, it doesn’t work. I just end up looking lame.”

“I have a plan for that too.” Kate smiled knowingly. “Trust me, okay?”

Chelsea just nodded.

“You still need a lot of things, including shoes and a couple of perfect pairs of jeans, and that will take some time,” Kate said, making a list. “And you need some good accessories—belts and bags and those touches that take clothes from being garments to being fashions.”

“How did you learn all this?”

Kate laughed. “I’ve been working in retail clothing stores for years, Chelsea. After a while, it just comes naturally.”

Chelsea felt pretty sure it would never come naturally to her.

“We’ll do some more shopping next weekend,” Kate said, “and next week I’ll make you a hair appointment. And, well, some other things too.” She smiled. “By the time you and your dad move to San Jose, you will look like a whole new person.”

“I’m curious . . .” Chelsea began.

“About what?”

Chelsea questioned the sensibility of asking her question. Except that she wanted to know. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what specifically?”

“Being so helpful with this whole makeover business.”

Chelsea watched Kate’s expression carefully.

Kate looked slightly confused. “Do you feel like I’m interfering? Or being too pushy? I know I can be kind of bossy. I hope I haven’t offended you by taking over and—”

“No, that’s not it.” Chelsea stood, forcing herself to look at her reflection in the mirror again. Two days in a row was a record for her. “I mean, why are you so obsessed with this makeover? Is it because you’re embarrassed that I’ll be your stepdaughter?”

“No, of course not.” Kate stood next to Chelsea, putting an arm around her. “It’s simply because I care about you. And like I said, I can relate to you. Wait until I find those photos, Chelsea. Then you’ll get it.”

Chelsea felt tears in her eyes, and she wasn’t even sure why. “I’ll never be as beautiful as you, Kate. It’s not even possible.”

Kate laughed. “Don’t be so sure.” She started doing an inventory on Chelsea. “You and your dad both have the most gorgeous brown eyes. And once we get those brows plucked—professionally—your eyes will be even prettier. And your nose is absolutely perfect.”

“You mean besides that zit?”

Kate laughed again. “You’re just seeing it all wrong. Your lips are nice and full.” She pointed to her own mouth. “I have to do all kinds of lip-liner tricks to make my lips look like that. All you’ll need is some lip gloss.” She went on talking about

how Chelsea's figure was so good. "If you worked out a little, it would probably be flawless. And once we get you wearing the right clothes, people will actually see how great it is."

Chelsea frowned. She wasn't sure she wanted anyone to see her figure. She'd gotten so used to covering herself up . . . the idea of being visible and exposed was pretty scary.

"Anyway, don't worry about it, okay?" Kate patted Chelsea's cheek. "You're on the cusp of becoming as beautiful on the outside as you are on the inside. Just think of it, you'll be going to a new school this fall, and who knows how great your last two years of high school might be."

Chelsea smiled weakly. As much as she wanted to believe that what Kate was saying could be possible, she remembered that old saying—if something seemed too good to be true, it probably was. Also, she knew from experience that she was foolish to get her hopes up. Mostly she just wanted to humor Kate. It was sweet that Kate cared this much. Hopefully she wouldn't be too disappointed either.