

The Ugly Girl Party
By Ann Herrick

Chapter One

I don't want you to touch my hair.

In my mind I said it calmly. I mean, I didn't want to hurt Dad's feelings. I silently rehearsed as I sat on the kitchen stool and chewed my lip, watching Dad getting ready to whack at Erin's hair. He sharpened the scissors and snipped away. I knew he meant well, but, um, a hair stylist he was not. For one thing, he cut her bangs super short.

Erin sat perfectly still. She didn't mind getting her hair cut. But then, she was only ten—a babyish ten, at that. Still just a kid, really. What she cared about most was getting a horse. That, and wishing Mom was still alive.

I was fifteen. My hair mattered to me.

I took a deep breath and tried to relax. I had to be calm when I made my announcement.

A few more wisps of Erin's coppery hair fell onto the cracked, speckled linoleum. I knew Dad tried his best, but his best just wasn't very good. He snipped a few strays here and there. "Okay, Erin. We're done."

Without even a glance at Mom's hand mirror sitting on the counter, Erin hopped off the stool and headed upstairs to our room. No doubt she'd bury her nose in one of those horse books she'd checked out of the town library, the first place she wanted to go when we moved to Delwick, New Jersey three weeks ago. Erin was thrilled to discover the library. Delwick was just a small town of about 15,000, but that was almost ten times bigger than the bend in the road called Brownsville, Vermont where we used to live.

I swallowed hard, hoping I'd be able to ward off my fate.

"Faithy," Dad said, meaning it was my turn.

I didn't move.

"Faithy," Dad gently repeated.

"No! I don't want you to cut my hair." It came out sounding meaner than I'd wanted. But I couldn't help it. It was bad enough having to start my sophomore year of high school in a new town. I didn't need to look as if I'd caught my hair in a meat grinder.

"Now, Faithy," Dad said softly. "I won't have you talking to me in that tone of voice." Dad was tall and big-boned, so even when he spoke quietly it was with a tone of authority.

"I don't want my hair cut," I said quietly. "I want to let it grow." I had tried to be the "good girl" after Mom died, and not give Dad a lot of trouble. But he was so clueless about girl stuff, and oblivious to the fact that I was no longer his "little girl."

"You know we can't afford to pay for haircuts," Dad said. "But I want you and your sister to look neat and presentable. Just because your mother—"

"Oh, for—!" I swallowed the swear word I'd been about to utter, jumped off the stool, and stomped around in a tight circle. "Mom had long hair. Mine's just starting to look nice!"

Dad stood there with the scissors still in his hand. "You don't have to shout, Faithy."

"Sor-ee." I crossed my arms in front of my chest and stared down at the floor. I just could not be as sweet and obedient as Erin. I just couldn't.

Dad sighed. "Sometimes I forget you're growing up. I understand you want take care of your hair yourself now. Just keep it looking nice, okay?"

"Of course I will! I do now!" My voice was getting louder and higher.

Dad didn't say anything right away. He just let out a long sigh.

I held my breath.

"Don't worry." Dad gave me a small smile. "I'm retiring as your barber."

"Thanks!" I kissed Dad, then ran upstairs. As the steps creaked and shook under my feet, I promised myself that someday I'd have a gleaming marble stairway instead of splintery wooden steps.

I ducked my head so I wouldn't bang it on the frame of the door to my room. It was more of an attic, really. Eventually, I promised myself, I would live in a luxurious penthouse in New York City. Or maybe a grand house in Beverly Hills.

As I'd suspected, I found Erin sprawled across her bed, devouring a horse book called *Goldenrod*. I slapped my thigh and whinnied.

Erin looked up, a dreamy expression on her face. "We have a big back yard here," she said. "I bet there's plenty of room for a horse. We could put up a fence and—"

"Yeah, that'd be cool," I said quickly. I didn't want to step on her dream by telling her Dad could never afford to *feed* a horse, never mind buy one. And I didn't want to listen to the whole

routine of how she could save up and get a horse herself. I had better things to think about. So I said, "But if you don't get a horse soon, remember—I'll buy you one when I'm rich and famous."

"I know, Faith." Erin sighed. "But *you* remember—he has to be black and shiny, because I want to name him Black Lightning." Erin rested her head on her hand. "I'll be the only one he'll ever let ride him."

That was one thing I appreciated about Erin. She believed in me.

"Hey, your hair!" Erin said. "It ... you didn't get it cut, did you?"

"Nope." I ran my fingers through my hair, picturing it as long and shiny as Mom's ever was. "Dad said I could let it grow."

"Oh. That's nice. I guess." Erin shrugged. "I like my hair short. It's easier to take care of."

"Well, I can take care of my own hair," I said. "If I could take over the cooking and cleaning, I can sure decide what to do with my own hair."

"Fine with me." Erin went back to reading her horse story.

I stretched out on my bed and grabbed my book about the greatest Broadway singers. For now a rickety old orange crate served as my bookshelf. Someday, I thought, my books will be in a beautiful gilt-edged room where all four walls would have custom-made bookshelves.

My Broadway-singers book was an old one from the nineties that Mom bought for ten cents at a church rummage sale back in Vermont, where I'd lived all my life until we moved to Delwick. The book's binding was broken and someone had torn out all the pictures of Patti Lupone, but otherwise it was in pretty good shape.

I skipped past the pictures of Liza Minelli, Barbra Streisand, and Bernadette Peters. I stopped when I got to my idol—Julie Andrews. She was so talented. Of course, I was too young to have ever seen her on Broadway (not that I could have afforded it, anyway). But I'd seen almost all of her movies on television. She looked so lovely in the pictures of her on Broadway, especially in *Camelot*.

No one would call me lovely, I guess. But I decided I was kind of attractive, if you looked at me just right. My face and nose were a bit too broad, but with my high, arched eyebrows and blue eyes, sometimes, in the right light, if I held my head a certain way, I looked as pretty as a young Julie Andrews. Sort of.

In her various movies I thought she sometimes had an image of mystery, sometimes glamour, and often just the right touch of feistiness—and even vulnerability. To me it was as if she didn't care what the world thought. She played whatever kind of part she wanted at the time.

There was a movie theater in Delwick, though it looked tiny and, from what I could tell, showed all older movies. But if they showed some of Julie's movies, that would be perfect. Dad had said there'd be more advantages in Delwick, when he decided to move us here. I guess he figured bigger schools, more stores (Brownsville had only a gas station that also sold soda and candy for a "store," so it wasn't difficult to improve on that), the library, the movie theater, and even a couple of restaurants that weren't fast food were more of an advantage. But I was taking a wait-and-see attitude.

I'd had friends in Brownsville. And though I hadn't really gone out with anyone (there was nowhere really to go, for one thing), I'd had a couple of sit next to him at lunch, walk home from school together relationships. I'd be completely starting over in Delwick.

But the main reason Dad had wanted to move was because he was having trouble finding enough house-painting jobs in Brownsville. Sometimes he had to travel forty miles to work, and he didn't like being away from Erin and me without Mom around. I didn't see the big deal. Sure, Erin and I both missed Mom. But it was Erin who missed having a mother. I could take care of myself—and Erin and Dad too.

Besides, Delwick, I'd discovered, was mostly a commuter town. People took the train thirty miles east into New York City every day to work. So other kids' parents worked just about as far away from home as Dad used to.

Someday, however, I did plan to move to New York, where eventually I'd be a Broadway star, as famous as Bernadette Peters, Liza Minnelli, Barbra Streisand, and even Julie Andrews. And then maybe move on to Hollywood. Anyway, some friend of a friend of Dad's told him he'd find plenty of work in and around Delwick. He had his pick of painting jobs the first day we moved here, three weeks ago.

I put my book down on my bed, leaving it open to a picture of Julie, and got up and went to the closet. Erin's side was all neat and tidy. That was partly because she was so well-organized and partly because she wasn't that interested in clothes and didn't have that many. She'd always been content with plain T-shirts and jeans or whatever dresses Mom made for her for when she had to wear a dress.

Mom had been a good seamstress. I mean, the clothes she sewed were well-made. But she was into sashes and ruffles and things like that, which were fine when Erin and I were four years old. But later? Yuck. I mean, Erin put up with it, but she was still just a kid—or had a kid-like attitude, anyway. I was way more grown up.

By the time *I* was ten I refused to wear babyish stuff anymore. Even though my folks made me put half of my money in the bank, I spent almost everything else I earned dog sitting, plant watering, and, eventually, babysitting, on clothes. When Mom died almost two years ago, I was pretty much in charge of my own wardrobe. I went to rummage sales in Brownsville and occasionally at second-hand stores in Bennington where I got old-but-quality stuff dirt cheap. The less something was in fashion the less expensive it was, so that's what I looked for, especially things from the nineties. I looked for stuff similar to what I saw in movies from that era. I just sort of pretended that most of my "finds" were costumes for a play. Everyone back in Brownsville was cool with that. Of course, the whole town was probably at least two years behind the latest styles anyway, so few people cared all that much about who wore what. I wasn't too sure how it would be in Delwick, but I hoped for the best.

From my jammed side of the closet I pulled out a pair of pedal pushers with a flame motif, a peach-colored top with an asymmetric zipper, and orange jellie shoes that I planned to wear to the first day of school tomorrow. I held the pants and top in front of me and went over to the mirror to see how I looked. The mirror was cracked and kind of dingy, but at least it was big.

I place one foot forward. "Hey, Erin, how do I look?"

Erin had gone back to reading her horse story, so it took her a few seconds to lift her head and look at me. "Okay, I guess."

Then she went back to reading her book.

Pfft. What did she know? She didn't even care about clothes. Just horses.

I thought I looked retro in a sophisticated way, even if Erin didn't. I wished we had the money to spring for a smartphone or tablet or something for me, so I could talk to or text or email my friends back in Brownsville whenever I wanted. I could compare notes on what they'd be wearing. Dad didn't really even let me or Erin use our ancient desk-top computer for anything but homework, let alone his phone.

I grabbed the blue vinyl circle-purse that I found at a second-hand store and sighed as I set aside it and the clothes for tomorrow on a ladderback chair in the corner, and wondered briefly what it would be like at Delwick High School. What were the kids like? How did they dress?

I flopped down on my bed. Who really cared how those kids dressed? My retro looks would be so unique that everyone would be impressed. That's what I told myself, anyway.

The next morning I struggled to get my wavy blonde hair just right. I combed and prodded until I got the half-up fishtail hairdo, held by plastic rainbow barrettes, and long feathered bangs that I was aiming for. Finally, after nearly ten minutes, I was satisfied.

"Hurry, Faithy," Dad called upstairs. "You don't want to miss your bus."

I dashed downstairs and grabbed an umbrella and Mom's old raincoat. I thought it was kind of boring, no flair at all. But it was pouring out and I didn't want to get soaked. I wondered how many kids would be taking the bus. Maybe they had a mother or father or step-parent or one of the assorted other adults that might make up household these days to drive them to school. Of course, from what little I knew so far, people in the Delwick area had demanding jobs and/or demanding social lives, so who knew whether they had time.

I tossed Erin an envious look as she took her time getting ready for school. She had a whole half hour before her school started, and she could easily walk the half-mile to her school. Plus, since she was in fifth grade she'd be at the top of the grade-school heap there. I noticed she was wearing her favorite piece of jewelry, a "gold" horse pin Mom had given her.

"You sure you're all set, Faithy?" Dad asked as he adjusted the strap on his paint-covered overalls.

"Yes, yes," I said as I buttoned the raincoat, though my churning stomach said otherwise.

"Remember, I'm painting a church over on Elm Street, so I'll be home in plenty of time for dinner." He paused and gave me a quick hug. "Have a good day at school."

"Okay, okay." I gave Dad a quick kiss and dashed out the front door. His nervous questions and reminders made *me* nervous. I wanted to look calm on the first day of school, even if that wasn't how I felt.

I put up the umbrella and stepped off the front porch into the pouring rain. Our place was at the end of a dead-end street in a woodsy area set back from the other houses. The woman who rented it to us said it was over a hundred years old and used to be the Magley farmhouse (whoever the Magleys were). The owner had sold most of the land to a housing developer when he'd moved to a retirement home in Florida, but he couldn't bear to sell the farmhouse.

Dad liked it because it was really low rent, plus it had a shed out back where he could paint. Pictures, that is. Art was his hobby.

I tried to pretend that the old farmhouse was my country home that I used to get away from the pressures of a Broadway career. But the place was pretty dilapidated, so even for me it was kind of hard to imagine. Dad was doing a lot of repairs, though, so maybe there was hope.

I'd been too busy settling in to get out and explore the neighborhood. But I had noticed that newly-built houses on the street were big and fairly expensive looking. Not mansions, but upscale enough.

As I followed the winding road, I tried to avoid the puddles. I wasn't sure what rain would do to my jellies, but I did want to keep my feet as dry as possible.

My stomach tightened when I neared the intersection where I could see two guys waiting at the bus stop. One was medium height and a bit stocky, had brown hair and wore thick glasses. His face looked vaguely like a nerdy Justin Bieber. The other guy was tall, with dark curly hair, and there was something about the expression on his face that made me think he was conceited about his extremely good looks.

I trembled just a little as I approached the two of them cautiously with what I hoped was a look of mystery on my face. As water dripped off my umbrella, I noticed the tall, curly-haired guy scanning me from head to toe. His mouth curved into a slow smile. "Well, hi there."

"Hello," I said, offering only a small smile in return. I wanted to look friendly, but not desperate.

"Hi," said the shorter guy. Actually, he was approximately three inches taller than I was, which made him about five-foot, eight. He pushed his glasses up with his thumb. "I'm Riley Olmstead." He cocked his head to one side and smiled. "You new here?"

"Yes." I tried not to sound nervous. "I moved to Delwick three weeks ago. I'm Faith Ticknor."

"I'm Hunter Hutchinson," the tall guy said. The way he said it, I got the feeling was supposed to be impressed.

But instead of swooning I just gave him a small nod of acknowledgment.

Hunter looked as if he were about to say something else, but then the bus came. Riley and Hunter stood aside so I could get on first. I guess they were just being polite, but I almost wished they hadn't. Then I wouldn't have to face half a busload of strangers head on.

I closed my umbrella, took a deep breath, and climbed the steps. I glanced at the driver. All I got from him was a bored, impatient look. "Barney" was embroidered on the pocket of his plaid shirt, so I assumed that was his name. I avoided looking at anyone else and scooted into the first empty seat I saw.

Riley paused by me, blushed, then took a seat one row in back of me and across the aisle, next to a guy with spiky blonde hair whose face was buried in his cell phone. Hunter stopped right next to my seat and for a moment I wondered if he was going to sit with me. But then a girl directly across from me slid closer to the window and made room for Hunter next to her. She wore an expensive-looking blue rain jacket and the latest overpriced skin-tight jeans.

The bus lurched forward. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Riley lean forward. "Faith, what class—" he started to ask.

But suddenly Hunter interrupted. "Faith, meet Taylor Duran. Taylor, this is a neighbor of mine ... I'm sorry, what was your last name again?"

Since I didn't know Hunter, I had no idea if he regularly gave formal introductions, or if he was up to something. I wasn't the most trusting when it came to strangers. I offered my safe half-smile. "Ticknor," I said. "Faith Ticknor."

"Hi." Taylor leaned across Hunter to greet me. She had long, shiny, chestnut-colored hair with the crown pulled back in a twisted braid. Under her unbuttoned rain jacket I could now see a lush knit salmon-colored Tee with a deep-cut V-neck. She gave me a millionth-of-a-second look-over, smiled, and said, "So. You're Hunter's neighbor. Where exactly do you live?"

"I'm at the end of the street," I said, figuring she was at least polite, if not truly interested. "In the old Magley farmhouse."

Taylor sat back and exchanged glances with Hunter. Her smile turned into a smirk. "Oh." She didn't say another word. Just that smug, disapproving *Oh*.

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