

In Hot Water . . .

Emily pulled off her sneakers and headed upstairs to take her shower. That was really nice of Jessie, she thought. She really is making an effort to make up for last week. It's like she's a changed person. I like this Jessie much better.

The hot water felt so good. Emily let it run through her hair for a long time. I could stay in here forever, she thought. It's so warm and steamy.

But she remembered that Jessie was waiting for her to come downstairs and help, so she finished shampooing her hair, washed quickly, and stepped out of the shower. Humming to herself, feeling very refreshed, she walked over to the mirror. It was steamed up, rivulets of water trickling down.

Emily picked up a towel and rubbed it across the mirror to wipe away the steam. She peered into the mirror.

Then she screamed.

And screamed again.

She had the feeling she might never stop screaming.

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THE STEPSISTER

Simon Pulse

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chapter

1

Teddy Dies

“I hate my hair!”

Emily Casey made an exasperated face at herself in the mirror and tossed her hairbrush across the room.

“You’re just freaked out because Jessie and Rich are coming,” Nancy said, lying on her stomach on the bed, an old copy of *Sassy* magazine in front of her.

“No. I hate my hair!” Emily insisted. Scowling, she walked over to the bed and picked the hairbrush up from the carpet. “It looks like shredded wheat,” she said, returning to the full-length mirror on the closet door and beginning to brush again.

“How do you know what shredded wheat looks like?” Nancy asked, not looking up from the magazine. “You don’t eat shredded wheat. You don’t eat anything.”

“Then why am I so fat?” Emily wailed, pushing at the sides of her hair with her hand.

“You’re not fat,” Nancy said, flipping the pages.

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"You're just not petite like Mom and me. You're big-boned. You're tall. You're—"

"Fat," Emily said glumly. She knew she wasn't really fat. She just felt like complaining. Maybe Nancy was right. Maybe she *was* just freaked out because her new stepsister and stepbrother were coming to stay. She hated it when Nancy was right.

"I hate it when you're right," she said aloud. "Why do you have to sound like such a big sister?"

"Next you'll complain about your hands," Nancy said, closing the magazine and tossing it to the floor.

"My hands?"

"How they're too big. That's what always comes next. First your hair, then your size, then your big, ugly hands."

Emily sighed. "My hair is just too fine. It won't fall. It won't bounce. It won't do anything. Stop making fun of me."

"What's a big sister for?"

"I don't know," Emily said dryly. She laughed.

"You look okay," Nancy said. "Where'd you get that short skirt? From my closet?"

"No. It's mine. I think." Emily adjusted it nervously, then pulled up the black tights she wore underneath it.

"Since when do you wear skirts?" Nancy asked, pulling herself up to a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

"I wanted to dress up. You know. Make a good impression."

"You really *are* nervous," Nancy said with a smug smile. She stood up and walked over to the mirror.

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She was wearing designer jeans that emphasized her slight, boyish figure, and a pale green turtleneck sweater that looked sensational against her copper-red hair. Unlike Emily's, Nancy's hair was straight and smooth and always fell right into place at the touch of a comb.

"Mom baked a cake," Emily said. "Guess she's nervous too."

"It'll probably taste like cement."

Standing side by side, the girls didn't look at all like sisters. "How come you're so cool?" Emily asked, picking the magazine up from the floor and placing it on the shelf with the others. "Don't you think it's exciting that we're going to have a new sister and brother?"

"We've met them before," Nancy said, walking over to the bedroom window and staring down at the front lawn that sloped gently down to Fear Street. It was a sunny day, warm for December. Spindly shadows of the barren trees played against the patterned yellow wallpaper.

"So what?" Emily cried heatedly. "They're coming to *live* with us. I mean, *forever*."

"I'm going away to college next year," Nancy said. "Besides, Jessie is going to be in your room. You're the one who has to make the sacrifices."

Emily stared at her sister, a little startled by Nancy's words. Emily had been so excited that she was getting a new sister her own age, she had never thought of it as a sacrifice.

Maybe it *was* a sacrifice. Maybe giving up her privacy, giving up half her space, was a big sacrifice.

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She had met Jessie several times, and they'd always gotten along fine. But that wasn't the same as having Jessie actually living with her. What if she turned out to be a real dweeb?

No. That's stupid, she quickly decided. Nancy was so negative. She wasn't going to let Nancy make her more nervous than she already was.

"Getting a stepfather, that was the *big* change," Nancy said, staring hard out the window, as if trying to avoid looking at Emily.

Nancy never wanted to talk about Hugh Wallner, the man their mother had married three months before. Emily knew that Nancy didn't really like him. Emily didn't like him that much either. He was so different from their father. Both girls had to decide whether to keep their old last name or change to his, and both had decided to keep their old name. That must have hurt their new stepfather, just a little. But he was a stern, private man for the most part, and he didn't let on.

As long as Mom is happy, it's okay, Emily thought. And her mother seemed blissfully happy being Mrs. Hugh Wallner.

Emily sat down on the new bed near the window, the bed that would be Jessie's. She smoothed out the red and blue patterned bedspread. The mattress felt so hard and new. "Jessie's great," she said. "She and I had a great time at Mom's wedding."

"She's very pretty, in a way," Nancy said. She never liked to give completely positive compliments.

Suddenly there was a rapid thumping sound out in the hall. Tiger, Emily's small white terrier, came

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bounding into the room, full speed as always, yipping and breathing noisily. “Stay down, Tiger!” Emily yelled.

But she wasn’t fast enough. The little dog leapt up into her lap, stood on his hind legs, and reached up to lick her face.

“No—my hair! Don’t mess up my hair!”

But those were words the dog didn’t understand. By the time Emily managed to pull Tiger off her, her hair on the left side was standing straight out. “Oh, Tiger, I love you!” Emily held him up to her face and rubbed noses with him. “Even if you do destroy my hair!” She let him down. Tiger, his stub of a tail flicking furiously back and forth, toddled rapidly from the room and down the stairs.

“Hey—they’re here!” Nancy cried, turning away from the window. “What happened to your hair?”

“Tell them I’ll be down in a minute,” Emily said with a sigh, rummaging on her dresser top for the hairbrush.

“It *does* look like shredded wheat,” Nancy said, heading to the stairs. “Maybe you should wear a hat.”

“Thanks for the support, Nance.”

“Just trying to be helpful.” Nancy disappeared.

“Now, do come in. Do come in.” Emily could hear her mother at the front door, welcoming Jessie and Rich in an excited voice. “You both look wonderful. We’re all so excited. Where’s Emily?”

“The plane was late, as usual,” Mr. Wallner grumbled.

“Well, they’re here now. And that’s all that counts,” Emily’s mother said. Emily stood at the top of the

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stairs, her heart pounding, listening to the excited voices. This is going to work out fine, she thought. In fact, it's really going to be *fun*.

She took a deep breath and hurried down the stairs, taking them two at a time. "Hi!" She rushed forward to hug Jessie, who was in the middle of taking off her plum-colored down coat. Emily, somewhat flustered, hugged the coat instead.

Both girls laughed.

"Well, hi, anyway," Emily said. "You look great!"

Jessie was a very pretty girl. Everything about her was tiny and petite, except for her eyes, which were startlingly large and pale blue. She had long, shiny straw-blond hair, a beautiful, high forehead, and creamy white skin. She reminded Emily of old paintings of angels she had seen in a museum. Jessie was wearing a pale blue sweater, obviously chosen because it matched her eyes and her faded jeans.

"Thanks," she said to Emily, handing her coat to her father. "You look great too." She had a soft, whispery voice that perfectly matched her looks. Her eyes went to Emily's hair and lingered there awhile. Then she turned to Mrs. Wallner. "It feels so great to be here," she gushed. "I just love this house!" She rushed forward and gave Mrs. Wallner a long hug. Emily saw that her mother was genuinely moved by this.

"Hey—let's not forget Rich," Nancy chimed in, interrupting Jessie's hug.

"Well, of course we won't forget Rich," Mrs. Wallner said, beaming at him. "How could I forget such a handsome young man? Even if he is the strong

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silent type.” Mrs. Wallner winked, obviously pleased with her little joke.

Rich, normally as pale as his sister, turned tomato red.

“Well, *someone’s* got to be quiet around here,” Nancy cracked.

Everyone laughed except Rich, who still looked very embarrassed by all the attention. He was thin and wiry. He seemed too tall for his body. He was blond like his sister, with short, spiky hair. He had a few pimples sprinkled on his chin. And he had enormous feet. With the white sneakers he wore, he looked just like a cartoon rabbit!

Thirteen-year-olds are so weird, Emily thought. She couldn’t remember being thirteen even though it was only three years ago. She had forced all memories of it from her mind.

“What’s that you’re reading?” Emily asked him.

He had a hardcover book in his hand. He started to raise it to show her.

“That boy always has a book with him,” Mr. Wallner said, shaking his head, as if disapproving.

“It—it’s Stephen King,” Rich muttered, so low Emily could barely hear him.

“*Pet Sematary*. You read that one, didn’t you, Nancy?” Emily asked.

Nancy turned up her nose. “I don’t read Stephen King anymore.”

“Now that she’s a senior, she doesn’t read anything!” Emily cracked to Jessie.

Jessie laughed appreciatively, even though it wasn’t much of a joke.

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“It’s just so good to be here. I know we’re going to be very happy,” Jessie said to Mrs. Wallner in her breathy voice.

“I’m sure we all will,” Mrs. Wallner replied.

“It’ll be so neat having a sister my age,” Jessie said, turning to Emily. “We can study together and go everywhere together. You’ll have to show me Shadyside. We can cook together. Do you like to cook? And we can share each other’s clothes and—”

“I don’t think we can do that,” Emily said, suddenly embarrassed. Jessie was so much smaller than she.

“It’s just going to be the *best*,” Jessie gushed, and rushed forward to give Emily a hug.

“I baked a cake,” Mrs. Wallner said, “and I’ve got sandwiches all ready. I knew you’d be hungry after your flight.”

“I’m starving,” Mr. Wallner said, holding his hands on top of his stomach. “Waiting around in airports gives me indigestion.”

He was tall and muscular, balding with a fringe of dark hair around his head. To Emily, he always seemed disgruntled, unhappy about something, about to get indigestion.

“But before we eat, I’ll bet Jessie and Rich would like to go upstairs and unpack and see their rooms,” Mrs. Wallner said, ignoring her husband.

“That’s a great idea,” Jessie said, picking up her enormous suitcase.

“No, let me carry that for you,” Emily said. She immediately regretted making the offer. She could barely lift the case off the ground.

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“I’ll bring the suitcases up later,” Mr. Wallner said, heading toward the kitchen.

Nancy led Rich up to his room, the very narrow room that up until a few days before had been a storage closet at the end of the hall. “Come on, Jessie,” Emily said brightly. “I’ll show you our room.”

“Great,” Jessie said, smiling at Mrs. Wallner. “We’ll be down in a few minutes. I’m starting to feel really hungry too.”

“I’ll get everything ready,” Mrs. Wallner said happily, following her husband to the kitchen. “Hey, Hugh—don’t eat up everything before the kids get a bite!”

Jessie followed Emily up the carpeted stairs, which creaked and shifted under their feet. “Ta-daa! Here it is,” Emily said, ushering Jessie in.

Jessie frowned as her eyes quickly surveyed the room. “Kind of small,” she muttered.

“Huh?” Emily wasn’t sure she heard right. Jessie had such a whispery voice.

Still frowning, Jessie walked over to the open window and, leaning against the sill, looked out. “Fear Street. What a name.”

“It’s a very interesting neighborhood,” Emily said.

“How long have you lived in this old dump?” Jessie asked, turning to Emily. It seemed more like an accusation than a question.

“Uh . . . about six years, I guess,” Emily said, trying to think how old she was when they moved here. “My parents like old houses. I mean *liked*. My dad, he was really handy. He loved to fix things up.”

“Is your mother always so cheerful and enthusiastic

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like that?" Jessie asked, quickly changing the subject. She rolled her eyes. "I mean, wow." She stepped back from the window and sat down on Emily's bed, then lay back, supporting her head in her hands.

Uh-oh, Emily thought. Jessie is so different as soon as the adults are out of sight. She was so sweet downstairs. But now she has a whole new personality. Is this what she's *really* like?

"Mom was just excited," Emily said uncomfortably.

Jessie sat up and picked up Maxie, Emily's treasured old teddy bear. "You don't look like your mom," she said, looking Emily up and down.

She's staring at my big hands, Emily thought. She clasped her hands behind her back and walked over to the desk. "No. But my sister looks exactly like her. Exactly."

"I never liked red hair," Jessie said, making a face. She examined the old teddy bear, then looked back up at Emily. "There isn't much closet space in here, is there? What am I supposed to do with all my stuff?"

She must have caught the wary look on Emily's face, because she immediately started to apologize. "I'm really sorry. Please. Forget everything I've said up here. I—I'm just so nervous."

"I'm nervous too," Emily admitted. "You really don't have to apologize."

"Yes, I do. I was just being stupid. This—it's all been so hard. I mean, it's been terrible."

Emily turned the desk chair around to face Jessie and sat down in it. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, as soon as Mom found out that Daddy was

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getting remarried, she couldn't wait to shove Rich and me off on him. It's not too cool to find out your own mother doesn't want you around."

"I'm sorry," Emily said softly.

"Rich and I have been like yo-yos," Jessie said bitterly, staring down at the carpet. "It's like we've been shuttled back and forth between the two of them our whole lives." She tossed the teddy bear from hand to hand. "Also, I had to leave everyone. All my friends. My best friend, Debra. Debra and I—we were really close. I miss her already."

"I'm really sorry," Emily repeated. "I didn't really understand how hard this is for you."

"Well, it's tough," Jessie said, still unable to look at Emily.

"I'll try my best to—" Emily started. But she was interrupted by the familiar tiny thunder of dog paws. Tiger burst into the room, leapt up onto the bed, and tried to lick Jessie's face.

"Ugh! Get away!" Jessie screamed, shoving Tiger away. "Get off me!" She shoved him hard. The confused terrier let out a confused yelp as he hit the floor. "That awful dog will get hair all over my new sweater!" Jessie wailed. "Get him out of here!"

"Tiger—out," Emily said firmly.

The dog didn't have to be told twice. His stub of a tail straight up in the air, he turned and trotted out.

"He's really very sweet," Emily said, annoyed at Jessie's violent reaction to Tiger.

"He's disgusting," Jessie said, searching her sweater for dog hairs.

"He doesn't shed much at all," Emily told her.