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## Off to a Bad Start

*"I hate you! I hate you!"* Christy Miller shouted at her reflection in the closet-door mirror. With a wild *grrrr* she wadded up her beach towel and heaved it at the mirror, watching it wobble and distort her lanky proportions.

"Christy darling?" came a shrill voice from the hallway. "Are you back from the beach so soon?"

"Yes, Aunt Marti." Christy grabbed a brush and pretended to be untangling her long, nutmeg-brown hair.

Her aunt, a slim, stylish woman in her forties, opened the guest room door and looked around. "What was all the commotion? Who were you talking to?"

"Nobody. Just myself," Christy answered calmly, trying to suppress the volcano of fiery emotions boiling within her.

"Why aren't you out on the beach, dear? It's a gorgeous day, and here you sit in your room, talking to yourself." Aunt Marti dramatically pointed her acrylic fingernail toward the door. "You should be out there enjoying yourself!"

Christy bit her quivering lip and didn't answer.

"This is California. Live a little! We didn't fly you all the way from Wisconsin so you could spend the summer hiding in your room. Get out there and make some friends."

Suddenly the internal volcano erupted with great force, spewing words with the hot tears. "I tried, all right?" Christy choked. "I tried to get in with some of the beach kids, but they're all a bunch of snobs! I can't stand them! They're rude and mean, and they laughed at me." Christy covered her face with her hands; the tears oozed through her fingers.

"I had no idea!" Her aunt switched tones and ushered Christy to the edge of the bed. "There, there. Tell me what's bothering you, dear."

It took Christy a few minutes to compose herself before she said calmly, "I don't fit in with the people here. They think I'm a nerd."

"Well, are you?" her aunt challenged.

"Am I what?"

"A nerd."

Christy didn't answer. She stared across the room at her reflection in the mirror.

"Well?" her aunt prodded.

"Look at me, Aunt Martha!" Christy jumped up from the bed and stood in front of her. "I'm as white as a frosty cone—sort of shaped like one too! If that doesn't make me a nerd in Newport Beach, I don't know what does!"

"Really, Christy. A frosty cone?"

"Well, look at me." Christy stretched out her arms to provide a full view of her 5-foot-5-inch, 110-pound frame. Her one-piece bathing suit covered her Olive Oyl torso like a bright green Ace bandage.

“Tell me I don’t look like a frosty cone.”

“You don’t look like a frosty cone.”

“You’re just saying that.” Christy plopped on the floor and folded her arms across her stomach.

“Oh, come now, Christy. You might be a bit of a late bloomer, but really, you’re a very sweet girl, and you’ve got a lot of potential.”

“Yeah, right. Tell that to the surfers out there. The one who said, ‘Hey! It’s a walking green bean.’”

Her aunt looked confused. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Christy let the tears drip and sniffed loudly. “Don’t you see?”

“I see that you got upset over a little remark about a green bean. That doesn’t make sense at all.”

“They meant *me*, Aunt Marti! No other girl on the beach had on a bathing suit like this ugly one! *I’m* the walking green bean!”

Christy covered her face with her hands and cried until the tears ran down her arms. It was the kind of crying that comes from the pit of the stomach and brings a headache with it. The kind that makes a person snort and gasp, and no matter how idiotic you feel or how hard you try, you can’t stop.

“Do calm yourself, will you, dear? It’s not as bad as all that. We can certainly buy you a new bathing suit easily enough. And just think. They called you a bean, not a frosty cone. See? They’re saying you’re thin. That’s almost a compliment.”

Christy gasped in short spasms, trying to relax.

Her aunt took the opportunity to make her point.

“This is exactly the reason I told your mother I wanted you to spend the summer with us. You deserve more than your parents can give you right now, and goodness knows your mother and I didn’t have much when we were growing up.”

Christy wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

“Here. Use this, will you please?” Marti handed her a tissue. “As I was saying, my goal this summer is to treat you to some of the finer things in life and to teach you, Christina Juliet Miller, how to become your own person.”

Christy blinked and tried to suppress a wild belch that bubbled up as a result of so much sobbing. Too late. The muffled *urp* leaked out.

“You’re certainly not going to make this easy for me, are you, dear?”

“I’m sorry.” Christy felt an uncontrollable urge to laugh. “Are you sure you’re ready to transform a belching green bean frosty cone into ‘her own person’? Could be kind of dangerous!” Christy broke into laughter.

Aunt Marti shook her head and didn’t join in. “We’ll start tomorrow, Christina. I’ll call and make an appointment for you to have your colors done at nine, and then we’ll start shopping for your new wardrobe.”

Christy instantly sobered. “I didn’t bring much money with me.”

“Don’t be silly! This is my treat. A few outfits are certainly not going to break me. And one other thing: We really should have your hair cut. Something short and stylish. My hairdresser, Maurice, does marvelous work. By the time we’re done with you you’ll look and feel like a new person.”

She said it with such finesse, Christy almost believed her. A new wardrobe? A new hairstyle? And what did her

aunt mean by “having her colors done”?

“Why don’t you shower and dress, dear? Your uncle doesn’t know it yet, but he’s going to take you to an early dinner and a movie tonight.” Aunt Marti swished out the door.

Christy approached the mirror with a new perspective. Twisting her long, nutmeg-brown hair on top of her head, she posed this way and that way, trying to imagine how she would look with short hair. She couldn’t quite picture the change.

She wished Paula were there. Paula, her best friend back home, always gave her advice when it came to major decisions like this. But then, what did Paula know? She was the one who helped her pick out the dumb green bean bathing suit!

Christy scrunched up her nose and stuck her face close to the mirror, examining her skin for new blemishes. No new and ugly bumps today. But her cheeks were flushed, and her nose was bright red from crying. Even her eyes showed the effects of her crying spree; they were puffy and bloodshot.

“I have such stupid eyes,” she muttered. “They’re not blue, and they’re not green. They’re just sort of nothing—like the rest of me.”

“Knock, knock,” Uncle Bob called out from Christy’s open door.

She immediately released her hair and turned away from the mirror, embarrassed that he had caught her in the midst of such scrutiny.

“Looks like we’ve got a date tonight for the movies.” His merry eyes looked at her from beneath his baseball

cap. He must have just come back from golfing, judging by the perspiration stains on his polo shirt. "Anything special you want to see?"

"No."

"Okay. I'll take a look in the paper to see what's playing. Your aunt's not much of a movie fan, so I hope you don't mind that it's just you and me."

"No. That's fine."

"We'll leave in about an hour, okay?"

"Okay."

"By the way," he lifted his baseball cap and wiped his forehead, "I haven't told you yet, but I'm glad you came to stay with us this summer." Then he added, "You are my favorite niece, you know."

"I also happen to be your only niece!"

"Minor detail, my child, minor detail," he quipped, politely closing the door.

With a sigh, Christy flopped onto the bed. She didn't feel like showering, and it wouldn't take her that long to change. With an hour to kill, she decided to write to Paula.

Christy liked to write—especially when she had a lot on her mind. She would get everything out on paper, and then when she reread it, it would be like looking at her own thoughts in a mirror. Usually things came out clearer on paper than when she tried to say them.

Finding the pad of stationery Paula had given her when she left Wisconsin, Christy set to work. Paula insisted that she write the first letter to her on this stationery.

*Dear Paula,*

*Hi! How's everything back on the farm? The plane trip out*

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*here was fun for the first hour, but then it got boring. I didn't see any movie stars at the airport, but I still have your notepad, so I can get some autographs in case I see anybody famous.*

*Remember when you called last Thursday and I told you I couldn't talk? It was because my parents were giving me a big lecture about my trip out here. They made me promise I wouldn't do anything this summer I would regret later. Can you believe that?*

*The funny part is, the only thing I regret is that I ever came here. I hate this place! There's nothing to do, and everybody is so stuck up. It's so boring. At night, all I do is sit around and watch TV.*

*At least one good thing is going to happen. Tomorrow my aunt is going to take me shopping, and guess what? I'm probably going to get my hair cut! Can you believe it? I'm kind of scared, but I think she's trying to give me a new image or something.*

*Well, I've got to go. I'll tell you how the big makeover turns out. Just think, you might not recognize me when I step off the plane next September. You'd better write to me.*

*Love,  
Christy*