



Age before Beauty

By Virginia Smith

Chapter One

The mirror had to be warped. That was the only explanation for the image staring back at Allie from its treacherous surface. Her thighs couldn't be *that* wide, her belly *that* flabby. Could glass warp? Of course not. But the weather so far this fall had been wetter than normal, following a horribly humid Kentucky summer. All that dampness wreaked havoc on the wooden front door at Gram's house. And this mirror had a wood frame. That had to be it.

But the warping seemed only to be in the middle, like one of those fun-house mirrors. She squinted down at her pink toenails. Her feet looked normal. Her face looked okay. Pretty good, even. This was the first time she'd put on makeup in weeks, and a little color worked wonders. She could use a haircut, though the dark blonde layers falling in waves to rest on her shoulders managed to hold the extra length well.

She blew her bangs out of her eyes. Actually, the long hair made her face look fuller, and that offset some of the width of her hips. Which needed the help, especially now that she got a good look at them wearing only a nursing bra and panties. If she cut some of the volume out of her hair, she'd look like one of those toys she and Joan and Tori played with as kids. What were they called? Weebles. She'd look like Mother Weeble.

She swayed from side to side, eyeing her oversized bottom half as she sang the toy's jingle. "Weebles wobble but they don't fall down."

"Did you say something?"

Allie whirled to find Eric standing in the bedroom doorway, a grin twitching at his mouth. She felt a blush creep up her neck. Though he was the world's most awesome husband and devoted new daddy, she still felt awkward parading her postmaternity body around in front of him. A flabby belly covered in stretch marks was *soooo* sexy.

"How long have you been standing there?"

His voice dropped an octave as his smile deepened. "Long enough to admire my beautiful wife."

No mistaking that husky tone. She snatched her jeans off the bed. "Don't get frisky, lover boy. My sister will be here any minute."

Eric's lips twisted. "Story of my life lately."

Allie crossed the room and placed a tender kiss on his cheek. "I'm sorry my family is here so often. They just don't want to miss a day with the baby. She's growing so fast."

"I know, I know." He grinned. "But tonight I get Joanie all to myself. Our first father-daughter date."

Allie sat on the edge of the bed and slipped her feet into the jeans, avoiding Eric's eyes. He had been looking forward to this evening for a full week, ever since Joan invited her to go to a stupid party where some fanatical woman would try to force her to buy something she didn't want and for which she had no use. If only Joan hadn't asked in front of Eric, she would have turned the invitation down without a second thought. But he had insisted it was time she took her first outing without the baby.

Pulling the waistband up around her knees, she gave Eric a worried look. "Are you sure you'll be okay? She's only taken a bottle a few times, you know. She might cry."

"I'll deal with it."

"But—"

He held up a finger. "No buts. She's five weeks old. In three weeks she'll be taking a bottle at the daycare center when you go back to work. She needs to get used to it."

Tears stung Allie's eyes, and she looked away so Eric wouldn't see. "I guess you're right."

"Of course I am. Now finish getting dressed while I go wind the baby swing again."

He left, and Allie sat staring at the handwoven rug in front of their bed. Three weeks. Then she'd have to leave her precious little Joanie in the hands of a total stranger.

If only . . .

She jerked the shirt over her head. No. One of the things she and Eric had talked about before they got married was how they'd handle life after they started having children. She'd insisted on laying it all out, because Eric's mother had been a stay-at-home mom, and Allie wanted to make absolutely sure he didn't have the same expectations. Her toenail caught the edge of her sock as she tugged it up, and she hissed with pain. No way would she become one of those women relegated to a dull life of child rearing. She was a career woman—the second sock followed the first—with a college degree and plans for her professional future. She *liked* her job, liked the independence it gave her. Besides, they agreed on having two incomes so they could afford things like nice clothes and good cars and vacations at the beach.

But that was before she'd had a baby.

If only there was some way she could pursue her career and keep her daughter at home. She had quietly investigated every work-from-home scheme she could find lately, but all of them sounded more like scams than jobs.

Banishing the tears, she stood. No sense crying about it. She had no option. In three weeks she'd return to her job as a team leader at the social services office. She might even be able to recapture some of the excitement and ambition she'd felt before she got pregnant. At the moment, though, it sounded like a life sentence with no chance of parole.

She pulled her jeans up over her knees. This was the first pair of zippered pants she'd tried to wear since Joanie's birth, having lived in sweats and oversized T-shirts once she put away the maternity clothes. Wiggling her hips back and forth, she inched them upward. Come on, come on, they had to fit. They were her biggest jeans, stretchy and so loose that she'd worn them all the way up to her fifth month of pregnancy. Just a little farther . . .

Ugh. She panted from the effort. But at least she'd managed to get them pulled all the way up.

Now the zipper. Suck that gut in. Pull hard. Harder. She hopped up and down, tugging at the waistband. Okay, if the zipper wouldn't go all the way to the top, it didn't matter. She'd just wear her shirttail out. Everybody did these days. As long as she could get the button fastened.

There! They fit! She was wearing pre-baby Levis! Well, sort of.

She stepped up to the mirror and bit back a gasp.

The stupid thing had to be warped.

"Hey, look at you all dressed up." Joan stood on the doorstep, car keys clutched in one hand. "You look great."

Allie scowled and tried not to think of the jeans she could *almost* wear shoved in the back of her bottom drawer. "These are maternity pants. Nothing else fits."

"Oh." Joan's smile drooped a fraction, then brightened again. "But that's not a maternity shirt. And turquoise is totally your color."

Her eyes shifted to a point inside the room, then she practically bowled Allie over as she rushed toward the swing to snatch up the baby. Sighing, Allie closed the door. So much for Joanie's nap.

Allie tried to ignore a wave of insecurity as she admired her sister's slim frame, the way her jeans fit without a single bulge. Straight dark hair fell forward to tickle the baby's face as Joan cooed at her slumbering namesake while she unfastened the safety strap. Soft baby noises answered as little Joanie's eyelids fluttered open. Allie clasped her hands together to keep from taking the infant from her middle sister's arms. She was so sweet when she first woke. Tiny fists rose above her head and she kicked her legs out to their full length and arched her back to stretch.

"Look at her! I swear she's grown an inch since the last time I saw her."

Allie answered dryly. "I doubt that, since you came over yesterday." She held her hands out. "Here, let me change her."

Joan clutched the baby closer. "I'll do it."

With a sigh, Allie followed her sister into the nursery. Bright pink daisies on fields of green bordered the white walls and also decorated lacy curtains and crib bedding. Joan laid Joanie on a daisy-covered pad atop the changing table. While she unsnapped the pink onesie,

Allie took a diaper from the stacker and popped open the plastic cap on the wipes. The sweet smell of baby powder was quickly replaced with a less pleasant odor when Joan peeled the tape off the dirty diaper.

Eric stuck his head through the doorway as Allie pulled out a wipe and handed it to Joan. “Whew, I’m glad you girls got that out of the way before you left. Of course, the way this little piggie eats, I probably have at least one unpleasant surprise in store tonight.”

“Don’t worry.” Allie dropped the soiled bundle into the Diaper Genie and twisted the knob. “We won’t be gone very long. I’m sure we’ll be back for the next dirty diaper.”

“I’m kidding, Allie. You know I don’t mind taking care of my girl.” He leaned over and buried a kiss in Joanie’s chubby neck, eliciting a gurgle and an excited waving of arms and legs.

Joan snapped the onesie back in place over the fresh diaper and picked up the squirming infant. Allie stepped forward to take her, but instead Joan thrust her into Eric’s arms.

“It’s time to go. I don’t want to be late.” With a meaningful glance in Allie’s direction, she marched out of the room, Eric right behind her with Joanie hugged tightly to his chest.

Left alone in the nursery, Allie fought a wave of panic that caused her throat to tighten with unshed tears. Cheerful daisies mocked her. She knew this feeling, had sensed the edges of it creeping toward her all day. The moment had come. After five weeks of constantly being in Joanie’s presence, she was about to leave her in someone else’s care.

Don’t be ridiculous. She scrubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand. Joanie wasn’t staying with a stranger. She was staying with her daddy! He’d watched her many times while Allie enjoyed a long bath or a nap.

But what if she cries? What if she misses me?

She started toward the living room, and then stopped short as an even more distressing thought struck her. *What if she doesn’t even notice I’m gone?*

“Allie, are you coming?”

Joan’s voice propelled her feet into motion. She would not think about that.

“I’m ready.”

One step took her from the hallway into their tiny living room, where Eric had deposited Joanie on the mat beneath her baby gym. Allie fought to suppress a wave of regret when chubby infant hands waved with erratic enthusiasm at the dangling toys, and happy coos filled the room. It had only been in the past few days that she’d started noticing the toys. She was growing so fast, changing every day. What if she did something really cool for the first time tonight, while Allie wasn’t here to see it? She dropped to her knees and showered Joanie’s face with goodbye kisses.

“There are a couple of bottles all ready to go in the fridge,” she told Eric. “Run hot water over them to warm them. Don’t use the microwave.”

Eric stood and pulled her up with him. “I won’t.” He planted a kiss on her cheek.

“She ate two hours ago, so she’ll probably be hungry around eight. If she gets fussy before—”

Joan grabbed her arm and steered her forcefully toward the front door. “Come along, Mother. It’s time to go.”

Thoughts of all the terrible things that could happen pummeled her mind like giant hailstones. She pulled away and whirled toward Eric. “Don’t give her a bath until I get home. You know how slippery she is when she’s soapy.”

He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face the door. “Stop worrying. We’ll be fine. Now go have a good time.” A gentle shove pushed her forward.

From the porch, Joan seized her and jerked her through the doorway. Allie shook her off and spun around to remind Eric to put the baby’s sweater on because the house would cool when the sun went down, but the front door slammed shut in her face. Tears welled in her eyes.

“You’re pathetic.” Joan folded her arms across her chest and leveled an unsympathetic look on her.

Allie sniffled. “It’s the first time we’ve been apart in five weeks.”

“Then it’s about time you gave the poor kid some breathing room.” She shook her head. “You’re becoming one of those hovering mothers. I can totally see you stalking her on the kindergarten playground during recess.”

Actually, Allie didn’t see a problem with dropping by to check on your kids during the day, but in the face of Joan’s sardonic expression, she didn’t dare mention it. Instead she lifted a chin. “I will not be a hovering mother.”

A snort blasted from her sister’s nose. “I know my big sister. You’ll hover like a helicopter.”

Her head held high, Allie marched past Joan toward the driveway. “I thought you didn’t want to be late.”

She rubbed her hands on her arms. It was a chilly fifty degrees, and the orange October sun was rapidly dropping toward the horizon. They’d shoved her out the door without a jacket, but she didn’t dare go back inside now or she’d never hear the end of it. Serve them both right if she caught pneumonia and died.

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