



chapter one
down the plughole

jess watched as her hair went down the plughole. damn. it was really happening.

Her life flashed past. Jess was sixteen and had never had a serious boyfriend. She'd kissed two boys in her whole life—one on the beach at Lorne who didn't really count. She hadn't spoken to him afterwards. The other boy sort of counted a bit. She really liked Dylan. After months of liking him but being shy, they had finally kissed. About a week ago, at the bus stop (not in front of anyone though).

She'd never wagged school. She had smoked half a packet of Marlboro cigarettes one night in the car park of the shopping centre. Waste of money. She had almost spewed and she coughed for four days. Chunky bits

keep your hair on! 1

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and all. She played piano and was on a mixed netball team. Her position was centre and occasionally wing attack.

Her best friends at school were Sara and Charlotte. Charlotte had a boyfriend, Joffa, who drove a hot-tempered V8 Commodore. Too fast, mostly. Jess liked hanging around with Charlotte. There was something cool about the way her jumper always smelled of stale cigarette smoke. Most other kids were scared of her. Charlotte was hip and she was smart.

Sara didn't smoke but she DID eat three cigarettes once for a dare. And she was funny. You'd nearly wet your pants from laughing when Sara was on a roll. Damn. The water was getting clogged in the shower base.

Jess bent down to retrieve the hair – it was matted and there was enough to fill her clenched fist. Even more had made it down the drain.

“Jess, are you alright in there?”

Funny how mothers were always around, even when you didn't want them to be. Friends were more inconsistent. They couldn't be there all the time and often they didn't know what to say.

“Yep.” Jess put on her best ‘I'm alright’ voice which was halfway between a sob and a groan but actually sounded a bit like a strangled cat. “I'll be out soon.”

“Okay – don't use all the hot water.”

Jess absentmindedly ran her fingers under the lukewarm shower spray which was getting colder by the second. She turned the taps off. Everyone had been great so far. Family. Friends. Teachers. It was hard getting over the shock – it's not every day that you're told you have cancer – but life seemed to be slowly getting back to normal. They told Jess she had lymphatic cancer, with a good chance of cure using chemotherapy, once a month, over six months.

She had just been through her first treatment. Which was why she felt like crap. And why her hair was falling out. Jess wiped the steam off the mirror and looked at her face. She tried not to let her gaze wander to the top of her head but kept her focus on her eyes. Greeny brown. More green in the centre. Pupils big and black. White bits red. Now she noticed that she was crying. Silent tears – collecting in the corners of her eyes. Inside she felt nothing. Her anger had gone and there was a numb, almost cold feeling.

She leaned over and threw up into the toilet. One of the few advantages of having the loo in the bathroom. There was a lump in her throat and a knot in the pit of her stomach. Carefully and slowly she rinsed her mouth out and cleaned her teeth. The chemo made her spew and left huge ulcers in her mouth – ‘immunosuppression’ the doctors called it.

She bent over to wrap a towel around her hair and

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a cold draught ran up the nape of her neck, over the back of her skull. She lifted her head slowly. Damn. Already she'd forgotten.

She reached into the bottom of the bathroom bin and fished out the matted clumps of hair that she'd just thrown away. She felt kind of embarrassed and didn't want anyone else to see them. They wouldn't flush – just floated in the top of the toilet bowl. So she hooked them out with her hairbrush, dumped the lot back in the bin and tied a knot in the top of the plastic liner. Then she covered her head with her towel – turban style – and looked in the mirror again.

This was the hardest thing Jess had ever been through. A momentary grin crossed her face as she imagined Charlotte and Sara shaving their heads in sympathy with her. It was all the rage at the moment. Loads of famous people were going bald on national television to raise money for kids with cancer. Everyone was doing it. Charlotte would want to stand out though. She'd shave her head, then get a mohawk wig straight away – she was always threatening her dad that she'd run away and become a punk – and Sara would stain her head black and pretend to be a bowling ball or something. Jess snorted. A laugh and a cry at the same time. Her legs went weak so she sat on the edge of the bath.

Jess had never felt more alone in her life. It wasn't

so much that her hair had fallen out – although that was certainly part of it – but that even if her friends DID shave their heads there would still be a huge gap between them.

A canyon.

An abyss.

The worst bit was the whispering. The glances across the courtyard, the stares that she could feel from other students and teachers. One year seven kid had even asked her if she was contagious. Jess couldn't believe it. Charlotte straightaway offered to mash his face into the drinking taps but Jess just said, "No, I'm not cont-t-t-agious," and rolled her eyes and frothed at the mouth. The kid ran away.

Charlotte laughed so much that Pepsi came out her nose. Just quietly, Jess admired the boy's courage. It was much better than the silent stares others gave her. She felt a bit guilty about scaring him – she'd apologise when she saw him again.

"Jess – get out. I'll be late."

Spud was her twelve-year-old brother. He never had a shower in the morning but always had to stick his tufty hair down. He was an alright kid. Some of the others at school were giving him a hard time about Jess. Unbelievable.

"One more minute."

Jess splashed cold water onto her face and carefully

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applied black mascara. She pulled a beanie out of the bottom drawer. She had bought it last week, the day before she kissed Dylan. Secretly she had hoped – in her heart – that she wouldn't have to use it. The towel fell to the floor as Jess pulled the beanie over her scalp. A shiver ran the length of her back. She shuddered. Lucky it was cold today.

Slowly and deliberately Jess hung her towel on the rail. She took a deep breath and opened the bathroom door. The air in the passage was cold but Jess's heart and eyes were blazing as she prepared to face the day.