Let Down Your Hair

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Orion

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Chapter 1

When Barb found the thing that would change her life forever, she felt strangely calm.

Blissed out even.

Like everything suddenly made perfect sense.

And nothing had ever made perfect sense to Barb. It hadn't even made *imperfect* sense.

When her fingers came across it, she felt a jolt of electricity run through her body, a jolt that was familiar to her from all the times at school Serena and Jess had honed in on her, their vicious snarls trained on her. It was the kind of jolt your body normally gives you to warn you that something bad is about to happen – it made Barb feel as though her stomach was crammed in her throat, her head felt light and her knees wanted to buckle.

But that day in her room, when the jolt came, Barb was alone. She was safe. She had not seen Jess or Serena for

months – or rather, they hadn't seen her. Which was just the way she liked it. She had watched them out of her bedroom window, strutting through the estate to school or huddled conspiratorially on the swings in the largely vandalised playground, imagining bitchy comments spewing out of their mouths like speech bubbles above their heads. But they had not seen her. It wasn't just that she was too high up for them to see – it was also that they wouldn't have bothered to look.

Today, like every other day, she was no longer at school; she was alone in her tower with only her phone and her two-hundred thousand ShowReal followers for company.

The day had started like any other: drab, dreary, dull, the universe providing no special clues to the curve ball it was about to throw her. Barb woke up in her room to the sounds on the street below of children brawling. Even twelve flights up, their noise carried – she had stopped having to set the alarm on her phone. Not that she needed an alarm any more; not since she had walked out of school six months earlier for the last time, a clutch of crappy GCSEs in her pocket and her head held low.

She had read books about grief where people would have a few precious seconds when they woke up, precious seconds where they thought everything was normal, before reality

caught up with them and their worlds came crashing down again. But Barb didn't know normal. Barb didn't know anything other than waking up to the low-level loss that had squatted there on her chest since she was old enough to remember. When she opened her eyes, she sometimes let out a bleak cackle at what greeted her.

Her days were all the same. She would wander into the living room to find Sorcha had gone to work, a note on the coffee table reminding her what she had to do that day in terms of content and posts and *creation*. Then she would stare out of the window at the laundry fluttering on the balcony – it was more a death trap than an area from which to enjoy some sunshine – and wonder what life was like beyond it.

Barb lived in a tower block in south London, but sometimes she felt like she woke up in some budget version of a Kardashian's home. The plastic peonies in a tall vase from TK Maxx might look real with a good angle on them, but on closer inspection appeared to have fallen straight off a factory line, faulty. On the walls were prints that her aunt Sorcha had framed and hung, featuring the kind of inspirational quotes that went down a storm on social media but made her cringe in real life. 'If opportunity doesn't knock, build the door' or 'Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass, but learning to dance in the rain', and her least favourite of all: 'Shoot for the moon – if you miss you will still land among the stars.'

The thing was, with only a direct view of another tower block from her bedroom window, Barb couldn't actually see the sky, let alone the moon or the stars, just the balconies full of laundry, rusting bikes, and the odd pot of dying or dead plants.

Her bed had been 'gifted' by a home furnishing brand in exchange for a video on 'easy at home bedroom style'. On camera, with a good filter, it looked like it had a velvet headboard. In the cold light of day, it had the texture of a cheap knock-off velour tracksuit. It took up most of her tiny room so she had to be clever with camera angles – which was lucky, because camera angles were almost the only thing she was clever at.

The room screamed influencer. Barb hated it. She felt sure it wasn't her, even if she hadn't a clue who *her* was. Her favourite corner was the one hidden by the bedroom door, where a pile of dirty laundry grew out of sight of any cameras.

The rest of the flat was definitely not like this. Barb's bedroom was the only room that Sorcha had made any effort with – not out of familial love, but because it was where Barb produced all the content for her platforms, and she couldn't beam to her 200k followers from the breeze block surrounds of the living room, where from almost every angle you could see the unironic sixties architecture of the Warriner Estate.

She stared out at the slate-grey sky while spooning mushy cereal into her mouth. Out of the corner of her eye, a stray strand of her hair sparkled in the harsh overhead lights of the living room, a reminder of her potential. In front of Barb lay the whole of the world – or the whole of her world, at least – in the form of the estate.

There were more than six hundred flats spread over six buildings that sometimes felt more like cell blocks. These cell blocks had been plonked in an apparently haphazard way around an area of concrete and weeds that she supposed, at one point, someone in the council had thought would create an air of community. There was a token nod at a playground, which all the local toddlers turned their noses up at on account of the fact it was shit – and full of that self-same substance too, thanks to all the lazy dog owners on the estate. Besides which, there was a much better, not to mention bigger, adventure playground a ten-minute walk away in the local park. In London, as on social media, there was *always* something much better around the corner.

The estate jostled for space with some luxury new builds across the road that had panoramic views of the river, as opposed to the odd murky view of it through other buildings enjoyed on the Warriner Estate. Sorcha loved those flats. She had once even tried to get Barb to come with her to a viewing and pretend to be buyers, but Barb couldn't bear the thought of being spotted and giving any more

ammunition to Serena and Jess, who already thought she was a stuck-up cow who fancied herself as above them.

In fact the only way Barb was above them was physically, living as she did on a higher floor of the estate than they did. In all other ways, she knew she was well below them.

While the possibilities for Barb seemed limitless online, elsewhere they had been stunted for some time. Her life existed almost entirely within the flat, and more specifically within the screen of her iPhone. If she climbed to the top of the block and looked out the window on a clear day, she could see in the distance all sorts of things on the skyline – the looming towers of Battersea Power Station, the bubbles of the London Eye, and the huge jagged glass rock that was the Shard – the place she and Jess had dreamed of celebrating their sixteenth birthdays.

Though she had lived in this city her whole life, she had barely been to any of these places. Her childhood had been spent playing with Jess on the estate and in the local park. But when Jess had cut her dead and the social media thing had taken off, her world had narrowed even more, until now the most exciting place Barb ever found herself in was the cupboard-sized kitchen, eating her Weetabix.

One thing Barb was grateful for was that the day was not a hair-washing day – a seemingly simple process, but one that

could take aeons given the length and thickness of her strawberry-blonde hair. It trailed down to her waist, so substantial and heavy that it sometimes felt like she was taking another entity entirely into the shower with her.

As she got dressed in clothes that anybody else would wear to a bar for drinks – spray-on jeans, silver platforms, a brightly coloured shirt – Barb tried not to consider that she was not, in fact, anybody else, and that on the balance of probabilities, she would never wear this outfit – or any other outfit – to a bar for drinks. She would probably not wear it anywhere outside the flat.

Like everything else in her life, it was all for show.

In her bedroom, she placed the camera tripod on her dressing table, and carefully positioned her iPhone in it so that it would capture the most flattering angles and avoid the dirty laundry. As she switched the ring light on – used to give her a flattering glow so that she was not reliant on filters – she squinted to adjust her eyes to the brightness. Then she brushed out her hair meticulously to ensure it didn't look like she had just got out of bed.

Today she was doing a twisted updo, a variation on a simple style that her followers could not get enough of. She could brush her hair all day and her followers could not get enough of it. She tried not to think about the troll accounts that had begun to show a real interest in her recently – the troll accounts she would have been sure belonged to Serena

if another voice in her head didn't chastise her for being arrogant enough to think that Serena would waste her time and energy doing such a thing.

Sometimes the voices in her head were the only other ones Barb would hear for days and days.

She took a deep breath, pressed record on her phone, and began. Barb could do these complicated hairstyles with her eyes closed. Sometimes she did actually close her eyes as she separated and braided her hair, or made silly faces that the camera couldn't see. It gave her pleasure to know that while thousands of viewers watched the back of her head, at the front of it, she was screwing up her face to do her best impression of a gargoyle. People weren't interested in her face, or her expressions, or the thoughts contained inside her – they just wanted to see the back of her head, and sometimes the front, but only to note how she put a curling tong through her hair, or the angle at which she coated herself in hairspray.

She was dexterous as hell, and there was no part of her scalp that she hadn't got mapped out in her head. She knew exactly how to position a braid, where to place a bobby pin. She could blow-dry and style her hair as well as any of the most experienced and talented staff members at a high-end salon. She couldn't form a lasting friendship, and the teachers at school had never even thought of mentioning university to her. But with her hair, she could

turn even a blue rinse or a perm into a piece of magic.

The twisted updo was, despite its name, pretty straightforward, and Barb was thinking more about the editing she would do later when the jolt came.

When the red alert sounded.

She was creating a hidden bit of volume at the crown of her head when she felt it.

One moment there was hair, hair, hair – a little bit greasy given that wash day was approaching – and the next moment nothing but skin, skin, skin.

A small patch of it, almost perfectly naked, right below the centre of her crown.

Her breath caught as she felt the jolt. She inhaled and exhaled deeply as she began to rub her fingers along the smooth, soft skin. And then the familiar rush of adrenaline gave way to something far more alien to her: a sort of calm that dropped over her body as she continued to stroke the back of her head. She felt strangely comforted. It was almost *relaxing*.

Only her iPhone was able to tell her how long she had sat there transfixed by this new sensation at the back of her head. She had been in a four-minute-long daydream, switching from the naked scalp to the hair over and over again, as if she had found her own private world within the familiar walls of the flat.

A sudden wail of sirens outside brought Barb back to

reality. She shook her head, abandoned the twisted updo and the filming, and took her iPhone to her bed where she sat, cross-legged, gripped by the footage she had captured.

It was there, as bold as brass: a bald patch, like a tiny white island in the seemingly never-ending sea of her hair. She paused the video and wondered what it could possibly be, what it could possibly mean, and where it could possibly have come from. She checked the back of her head again just to make sure the patch hadn't disappeared in the intervening moments: that it hadn't all been a dream.

It was still there: smooth and warm and *secret*.

Barb decided then and there that she would keep this to herself, nurture it like a precious secret. At last, here was something that she knew about herself that nobody else did.