



Chapter 1

Fungus

Grunt, groan. “It’s coming.” Mum’s face is radish red. Her blonde hair is exploding into a fuzz ball. “Stuck, stuck,” she yelps, then Mum starts rocking from side to side. Mum’s daisy skirt swirls around her. Finally she sputters. “It’s nearly here.”

My sister Samantha crouches in front of Mum. “Do you need help?”

“No, thank you Darling,” Mum shakes her head. She hasn’t done this for a long time.

Mum puffs and huffs, then puts her hands under her skirt. “Wow .. one ... no ...”

laughing, “I think there are two.”

Samantha inspects excitedly. “Oh, they are perfect.” Mum smiles as Samantha dances around the coffee table bumping into the side of it. She knocks down some of the photo frames on it.

I shout at her. “Hey, don’t wreck the table.” I made that coffee table for Mum. Even though it has one wobbly leg, it is an excellent table. Everyone says that, even Nanna. Samantha, is really irritating. She is jumping up and down like a milkshake shaker. I can see the froth coming out of her head. No, no, it’s only sherbet. Dizzy and fizzy. Ha, ha.

I stand up the photographs. “They are ONLY eggs, Samantha. Perfect. As if?” My sister is a an exaggerator.

“They are too AND no one else’s Mum can lay eggs.”

I think about that one. It is true. I don’t know of one other mother who can do that. For a long time, I didn’t know that it was just a game. I am twelve now and too old to believe that Mum can lay eggs. Still, I pretend to believe. It makes Mum and Samantha happy.

Mum is giggling. “I haven’t done that for a while.” She flounces into the kitchen with Samantha running behind her. “How do you want them? Scrambled or sunny side up?”

Samantha hates the drippy, gooey yolk, so she always asks for scrambled. Mum knows that. “Sunny side up for me,” I call out.

It's the best breakfast today. This Saturday Rob, our sort-of-step-dad, is working at the spare car parts warehouse. So it is Mum, Samantha and me. Just the three of us. I think that is why Mum laid eggs this morning. She hasn't done it for ages. Mum is usually too busy with her new job as a library assistant. This morning Mum actually slept in. She hardly ever does that.

"So how is your school assignment going, Samantha?"

Oh no, that is so boring. I give Mum a doggy woof. She laughs, then I start to explain all about my A plus assignment on mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The first aid course was the only good thing we did at school this year.

"You can tell me all about your first aid course after Samantha."

After? What's wrong with Mum? Samantha sticks her tongue out at me. I just know she will go on and on about her dog project. She is insane about dogs. Samantha even sleeps with Floppy who is a huge, brown and white, stuffed FLAT dog. How many FLAT dogs do you know? NONE. I've told her that lots of times. "Floppy is a stupid FLAT dog. Flat tail, flat body, flat head. Dumb, dumb, dumb." When I called Floppy "dumb" last week, Samantha threw her lunch box at me. Since her lunch box had a left over rotten banana in it, it was a disgusting thing to do. But I kept the banana. I am using it in my new fungus experiment. It has white mould growing up one side and green slime at the top. I think that's where Samantha took a bite.

Samantha has posters of dogs all over her wall. She really wants a puppy, but no one is allowed to have dogs in our block of units. She loves Dalmatians and has made her own spotty dog drawing. Actually Samantha is a very good drawer. She has a specially signed Selby the Talking Dog poster, signed by Selby with an original paw print. She emails Selby the Talking Dog on a regular basis. Selby is her best friend. Can you believe that? Now my best friend is Anna who is twelve like me. She lives next door, above her parents' fruitology market. I know Mum likes Anna, because Mum laid an egg for her. She has never done that in front of any of my other friends or even Rob or Nanna. Mum says laying an egg is very private.

Samantha's brown eyes flash as she describes every minute detail of her dog project to Mum. Paw prints, bones, dog tails. She has actually stuck dogs' tails (not real ones) along the border. There is a spotty tail for a Dalmatian, a stubby pencil for a fox terrier, a black wool tail for the killer guard dog. Then I see it. Fuzz tail. Ha, ha. Fuzz tail. It is soft and blonde and fluffy. My brain gets into gear. This is a tactical opportunity to divert Mum's attention away from Samantha's project.

“Hey Mum, your hair is stuck next to the fox terrier.”

“What?” Mum rubs her fuzzy blonde hair checking for snags. Parts of her hair are always fluffed into curly knots.

I pretend to be serious and stare at Samantha's dog project. "Sorry. Mistake. I thought that was your head, Mum." Swallowing a laugh, I point to the poodle's tail glued into the corner of Samantha's project.

Mum is laughing. "At least my hair isn't spiky like yours, Jack." Mum pushes Samantha's project to the side of the table. "I'll look at the rest of your work later." Samantha starts to complain, but stops when Mum says. "Nanna will be here after lunch. She loves looking at it with all of us."

That is true. Nanna loves anything we do. Mum flattens her exploding hair. Samantha squeezes Mum's hand.

"I have a few things to talk to you about." Mum gives a crooked smile, so it can't be too serious. "Firstly, it's about Nanna."

I flip the poodle tail into a twist. Samantha tries to hit my hand. Ha, ha. "Missed."

"Don't Jack." Mum's voice is serious. "Nanna needs more help." She looks at Samantha, then me.

"I'll help her," Samantha pipes in. Honestly, she is such a crawler. I'll help Nanna too but I don't say it. Mum just knows that I will. Mum hugs Samantha.

“It’s school vacation next week.” Yes, yes, excellent. “I’ve been thinking about a trip away. It’ll give us all time to work things out with Nanna and our family.” Nanna? Family? What is Mum talking about? Holidays. We always go to Port Macquarie and stay at Mum’s friend’s holiday house. Surf and ice cream. I love it there. “It’s going to be our first family holiday with everyone.” Mum hesitates, “Rob is coming. And there’s ...”

Samantha doesn’t let Mum finish. “I love Rob.”

That is so sappy. Nearly vomit producing. I stick my finger in my mouth and pretend to throw up. Rob, Rob, Rob. He moved in a few months ago FULL TIME. Mum asked us if it was okay. There was no choice. I had to say “yes” even though there is NO room in our unit. Rob hardly fits into Mum’s bedroom, so he had to put a lot of his stuff in the garage. Luckily we have a garage. Straight away Rob put a photo of his son Leo on my wobbly coffee table.

“Mum, can I take Floppy on holidays?”

What is Samantha going on about? Floppy? She doesn’t understand anything. This is about Rob, not a dumb flat stuffed dog. No one has ever slept in Mum’s bed before, except Mum. Samantha doesn’t realize the BIG problem of Rob in Mum’s bed. She thinks she doesn’t mind, but some day she will. One night she’ll get scared and there will be no room in Mum’s bed for her. Mum used to leave her door open, so that Samantha and I could come in anytime, especially when we needed something important. Now

Samantha has to knock on Mum's door and Mum says come in, but I've never heard Rob say that.

I don't knock on Mum's door anymore. Well, I never really did before. I'd just run into her room. Sometimes I would hit the door as I crashed past it. Mum never minded, even when she was asleep. Now, I have to make a loud stamping sound and when Mum hears me coming, she calls out. "Is that you Jack?"

Mum says Rob is our step-dad, but they don't wear wedding rings. Rob was married once before. That's where Leo comes from. Leo doesn't live in Sydney. Hey I just remembered. Leo lives in Port Macquarie.

Samantha is STILL hugging Floppy. "Wish I had a puppy." She looks at Mum with big doggy eyes.

I think Samantha loves Rob because he pretends to be a dog. Before she goes to bed, he woofs at her door and scrambles around Samantha's room on his hands and knees. He does look like a dog when he's wagging his bum and hanging out his tongue. Rob nuzzles Samantha's arms and she rubs his short spiky hair. (Rob and I have the same haircut.) "Woof, woof," he tickles her. Mum laughs in the doorway. I pretend to be a dog too, but he is not interested. Rob doesn't want me there. He is the dog and Samantha ignores me.

“You’ll love where, we’re going.”

I look suspiciously at Mum. “Is it Port Macquarie?”

“We’re staying there overnight, on the way up. Rob wants to see Leo.” Mum crinkles her daisy skirt in her hands. “We all do.”

A funny feeling flushes through me. I am not sure about this Leo. I don’t even know him.

“We’re going somewhere else these holidays.”

“Where, where, where?” Samantha squeaks. She always squeaks when she is excited.

Mum makes us guess. Samantha guesses everywhere from the Snowy Mountains to the desert to the Barrier Reef. “No. No. No.” Mum smiles, shaking her head.

Samantha isn’t chubby, but her cheeks are. They are going red which means she is thinking, really thinking.

I can’t take it. “Tell us Mum. Just tell us.”

“I’ll give you hints.” Mum enjoys torturing us with long drawn-out clues. “A marine biologist would like staying there.” “It’s warm.” “You’ll need swimming costumes.”

“There is fishing there.” “Surfing.”

“A beach,” Samantha and I call out together.

Mum laughs. “You’re right, but not just any beach.” She pauses for dramatic tension.

“We’re going to the Gold Coast in Queensland.”

Samantha jumps around like a cocker spaniel, all drippy and waggy. Wow, theme parks, water slides, surfing. This is the best, best, best. Mum’s face glows like a sunflower.

What a great breakfast. We ask Mum lots and lots of questions until she is laughing. Then I have a great thought. My fungus will grow really well in hot weather.

“Mum, can I take my fungus?”

“No,” Samantha and Mum shout together.