



Chapter One

The perfect headshot

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For a flawless look in photographs, make sure your foundation doesn't contain SPF. The chemicals in the sunscreen reflect the flash, making your face look washed-out and not at all pretty.

Ding.

The receptionist's name bounced into the top position of my inbox.

To: Hannah@gloss.com

From: Kate@gloss.com

Subject: Your headshot

Hannah, they're ready for you upstairs.

Have fun! ☺

I took a deep breath. It was go time.

I grabbed my phone and pondered taking some lip gloss. Noooo, what would I need that for? There would be people to do my hair and make-up there. Wonderful, talented

people who had mastered the exact smoky-eyed, illuminated-cheekbone look I wanted.

As I bounded up the stairs to our in-house photo studio, I was giddy with excitement. What would they *do*? How would they morph me from slovenly desk girl to glorious beauty minx? I smiled, thinking of all the possibilities. Most likely I would be presented with several different ‘looks’ – fresh pink lips and rosy cheeks, or sultry night vixen; hair up, hair down; seated or delicately perched on a stool – and then I would sit with the art director and select the most flattering and beautiful photos. *Everyone* knows that a beauty editor’s headshot has to be a masterpiece of shiny, bouncy hair, lacquered lips, twinkling eyes, and well-blended eyeshadow so that the readers believe that the woman instructing them on bronzer application actually knows how to apply bronzer, because just *look* how delicately tanned and pretty she is up there in the top right-hand corner.

I knocked lightly on the door and, getting no response, pushed it open. It took less than thirty seconds for me to surmise that there would be no time for friendly banter.

As my shots had been tacked onto the end of a huge fashion shoot, it had reached that delightful stage of the day when everyone involved has ‘I was supposed to have pissed off home two hours ago’ burned into their irises. Two fashion juniors were in the corner, perspiring slightly after having won a fierce battle against a mountain of unruly, tangled coat-hangers, which they were now attempting to jam onto a rack already frothing with beautiful clothes. Which they then wheeled out of the room. I looked at my drab grey dress, which did nothing for my skin tone and had an empire-line seam that flattened my boobs. Oh, and look, there’s my

frayed black bra peeking out over the bust line. Brilliant.

I gulped and walked over to where the make-up artist had all of her utensils laid out. She appeared to be busy sorting out living arrangements with her boyfriend.

‘You *said* he would be off our sofa LAST week. What are we? A shelter for drug-fucked losers?! For fuck’s SAKE, I want him OUT! *TODAY!*’

While she would probably be a lot of fun to sit with as she held pointed implements near my eyeballs, I felt I should let her finish chatting.

I turned around to face a young girl sitting on the sofa reading a magazine. I looked at her with raised eyebrows and ‘Sooo, what should I do now?’ eyes. She looked at me, shrugged, and went back to her reading.

Finally, the make-up artist got off the phone.

‘Sorry, I had to deal with that.’ She wasn’t sorry.

She came over to me, frowning and looking at my face. She pulled back some of my fringe and scanned what was on offer.

‘Oh, you’ve already got make-up on.’ (Hour-old lip gloss.) ‘So you’re already made up, yeah?’ (Bare-faced.) ‘And you’re a beauty writer?’ (Editor.) ‘So you’re probably an expert at applying make-up anyway, right?’ (Rubbish.) ‘So you could just finish it off yourself, probably, couldn’t you?’ (Absolutely not.)

She nodded and scrunched up her nose as though we were agreeing on these questions.

‘Cool. Well, I’m out of here then. Don’t worry, you look fine,’ she yelled out as she started packing up her stuff. Three minutes later, she was gone.

I couldn’t believe it. No make-up. No hair. No clothes. I was fucked.

I was trying to at least smooth down my hair when a small man in tight black jeans and a white T-shirt exploded through the door.

His hair was curling from underneath a black fedora and his eyes darted around the room. He had a camera in one hand and a BlackBerry in the other, and he looked far more interested in the latter.

‘We ready to roll or what?’ he said in a loud cockney accent.

He was not going to be the encouraging type. I started to fret. But no more than, say, a deer being chased by a large spotted cat.

‘Uh, ready...I guess,’ I said.

‘Over you go, then. Ain’t got all night, ’ave we?’

I looked at the blank white ‘set’. No props, no chair, *and where was the wind machine?* Everyone knows you need a wind machine! I walked over and stood awkwardly on the spot marked with tape. I put one hand on my hip. I took it off. I folded my arms. I unfolded them. I had no idea what to do, and I never would. It didn’t matter how often I was photographed, in the face of a lens I suddenly became less exciting than bark. I just froze up.

‘Just smile like you’re happy to be ’ere,’ the photographer said lazily, as he focused his lens.

I smiled.

‘Like you’re happy, not terrified, luv.’

Easy for him to say, he wasn’t the one sans make-up with a monstrous camera pointed at him.

I took a deep breath and smiled again. He snapped a few shots.

‘Head down.’

I put it down.

‘Not that far down.’

I raised it.

‘No one wants to see a double chin, do they?’

I raised it even higher.

‘Chin down, not head, just chin. Okay, now, look at me, but not *at* me.’

I moved my head ever so slightly to face him, concentrating intently on which way my head, eyes and chin were each facing.

‘Jesus, smile, darlin’. *Smile!*

Cue fake smile.

‘Teef? You got any?’

I flashed my teeth, trying to think happy thoughts.

He took maybe ten more shots and then put down his camera. He was probably just checking the settings.

‘You done good, luv. Nice work. Now, Amber, where’s my fuckin’ loight-a? I need a dart and I need to be at the pub and I need both now.’

Ohshitno. Please no. We were done? That was it? *That* was my moment? As I watched Pete Doherty pack up his camera while the girl from the sofa searched for his lighter, I realised with horror that we were indeed done.

If I never saw those photos, it’d be too soon.

The following morning, Kate popped around to my office and dropped the proof sheet onto my desk. And oh, what proof it was. My décolletage-length brown wavy hair was parted unflatteringly in the centre, my normally quite olive skin appeared pale, the fine lines under my eyes were pronounced and my dark-brown eyes seemed dull and dead. Fish-like. The shots were extra ordinary. Note the gap.

‘They’re nice, Hannah!’

‘They’re awful, Kate.’

‘No they’re not. Don’t be silly. It’s probably just that you look better in the flesh.’ Even Kate – adorable, always-sweet-and-complimentary Kate – was struggling to wheel out her usual hyperbole.

‘Well, *I* think they’re nice.’ She smiled and frolicked away.

I looked at my shots again. They were gross. I would have to sweet-talk Antonia, *Gloss*’s retoucher, into performing some magic.

I knew she liked Body Shop stuff; maybe I would make her a little bribe hamper. I needed shine and colour on my lips! Warmth in my skin! Eyes that sparkled! Blush that gently hugged my cheekbones!

I sighed loudly. Like a guy with a bladder full of beer and a tree in his sights, the photo going into *Gloss* was unstoppable: you gotta have a headshot, and this was mine. I tried to think about it philosophically. In a way, it was symbolic: I was always going to be the girl with unblended foundation, a wobbly trail of liquid eyeliner, and a cluster of anti-frizz balm sitting nonchalantly behind her left ear. In fact, the more I thought about it, it was an absolute farce that I was advising women on how to look perfect.

But somehow, *somehow*, I had managed to hoodwink everyone into thinking I had a clue about this beauty thing.

Until now, anyway.



Chapter Two

Ultra-confident and sucky

Be sure to always keep a spare cosmetic kit in your desk at work for emergencies. Blotting papers, a pinkish lip colour that can double as crème blush, a sample size of a fragrance you love, a foundation stick that also masquerades as concealer, black kohl and a comb for teasing your hair should be your starting point.

I looked at the pigsty in front of me. It was as though a teenage girl had unloaded the contents of her bathroom vanity onto her father's work desk: nail polishes mingled with overseas magazines; shampoo and conditioner with expense forms. It wasn't that I was a filthy girl; it was just that the sheer volume of 'things' coming in to my area every day was too much for me to handle. I *could* clean it, but my desk would only be stacked with a whole new mountain of mess within twenty-four hours, so why bother.

My phone beeped.

Han, can u please bring me some plum lipstick tonite? Hv hot 40s dress that NEEDS plum lips. Thx, luv u xx

I only have 768 plum lipsticks here. To begin frivolously handing them out could start a precedent I couldn't possibly maintain. I'm sorry.

u can bring me 5 for that.

If possible, my best friend Isabelle, aka Iz, loved my new job as the beauty editor of *Gloss* more than I did. The perks, after all, were multiple and obvious. For both of us. I was sent bags and bags of product every single day. And because *Gloss* was one of the country's bestselling magazines it wasn't the no-frills kind of gear either. Sharing it with Iz made me feel like some form of Beauty Claus, handing out make-up, fragrance and skincare as though it were candy.

But it wasn't all Jesus juice and cupcakes. I had a whole new art – beauty writing – to learn, and a whole new breed of women to befriend. Like any new job, the hours were all-consuming and mildly soul-destroying, but I took solace in the fact that a new job would only be new for so long, and then you could slacken off because no one cared which ring tone you had, or that you did your make-up at your desk in the morning. Iz, who loved the idea of life imitating art, was labouring under the illusion that magazine jobs were an exact replica of *The Devil Wears Prada*, but the reality was not nearly as horrendous. That's not to say I wasn't 'enjoying' the unique brand of self-confidence building that comes from constantly being outdressed and outwitted at *Gloss*. But, like I said, I was still new, and things were bound to get better over time.

My last job had been as a slave-slash-PA to a beast of a man who highlighted his hair and thought monogamy was a type of board game. He was the kind of man who told people how wealthy and generally brilliant he was (he was neither) as a valid form of conversational currency. The kind of man who called young women ‘baby’ and openly looked them up and down. The kind of man who wore white dress shoes. That his wife was an executive with the Beckert Group, *Gloss*’s publisher, and had suggested I apply for this job had been enough of a pay-off, though. Without her I’d still be filing his shonky tax receipts.

Iz was my rock of normalcy in my flashy new world, and she had warned me not to turn into ‘one of those magazine bitches’.

I guessed that deep down she was worried I would become all refined and snobby, leaving her and her (our) rip-off Chloé bags for dead. She needn’t have worried. We’d been friends since we were fifteen years old, and I wasn’t about to give her up for some blunt-fringed, chain-smoking nutjob. And besides, it was her non-refined side, her innocence and her insatiable curiosity that I loved most about her.

It wasn’t like I was killing it with my sophistication anyway. The girl whose job I had taken, Michelle, had left before any handover could take place, and Karen, the editor of the magazine, openly admitted that I’d got the job because, in a field that failed to inspire, my quirky CV, the recommendation from my ex-boss’s wife, and the fact I was an ultra-confident, enthusiastic, sucky freak had got me over the line. Karen knew I was out of my depth, and so had enlisted Jacinta, the *Gloss* features editor, to look after me in my first few weeks.

Jacinta Treveli, aka Jay, was my best friend so far at *Gloss*. She'd been lovely from day one, although I'd given it a week or two before deciding to be her friend. I knew not to make best friends with anyone on the first day as they would definitely turn out to be mental.

But Jay was far from mental. She was unreal. All lips and hair, she was half Italian and, in certain outfits, could pass as Monica Bellucci.

She was *Gloss* personified. One of those girls who couldn't possibly have any other job than one on a women's magazine. One of those girls who inspires you to spend more money on your wardrobe.

One of those girls you see at the gym who makes you think: why is she at the gym? She doesn't need to be at the gym. She could be making better use of her time. Like starring in a Snoop Dogg video clip.

Jay waltzed over to my desk and stopped to peer at the new line of lip glosses that had just come in from Dior. Today she was wearing a slinky olive-green dress – it looked *very* Gucci and probably was – of the calibre I would save for special occasions. Her skin was flawless. She had shampoo-advertisement hair, and one of those svelte figures that allowed me to use the word 'svelte' for the first time in my life. I always felt like a schoolkid next to her.

'So, what are you up to tonight, New Girl?'

Jay loved to ram home the torture of being the new kid.

'Just meeting up with Iz; got a birthday dinner on.'

'That pretend boyfriend of yours back yet?'

I seethed for a second. Jesse was still away for work and wouldn't be able to make it. He really was the invisible boyfriend. It was both embarrassing and boring having

to make excuses about his whereabouts all the time, not to mention fronting up to everything from weddings to fat Uncle Bart's sixtieth solo.

I still missed him when he went away, even after two years and four months together you'd have thought I'd be use to it. But his job as a news presenter meant he was often on location, and I had to deal with it.

I gave a grim smile and shook my head.

'Nope. Not till next week.'

'That must get boring, him always being away...' Her focus was still on the gloss, which she was picking up, twisting the wands out to inspect the colours. She suddenly snapped to attention.

'Anyway, have fun tonight, darling. I'm off to a real-estate awards night – don't get too jealous – so I'd better haul arse. Kisses!'

With that she pranced back to her desk, and I was left with the scent of her Chanel Chance and roughly four minutes to redo my make-up before leaving.



Chapter Three

I know how Jessica Simpson feels now

Fake a rosy, dewy flush by using a crème blush instead of a powder. Unlike powder, crème sits on top of your skin, giving a fresh sheen. Apply to the fleshy part of your cheeks and gently dab it upwards and backwards. So fresh! So fast! So pretty!

‘Another coffee?’ The waitress hovered over my table, jamming a pen into a bun she’d made of her long hair. She was wearing lashings of black mascara, tight black jeans, tight black T-shirt, black trainers, and would’ve weighed about the same as a grasshopper. She raised her eyebrows impatiently.

Why not? I wasn’t in a rush. It was Saturday morning and the only thing I had planned was a manicure and pedicure at Lovely Luck Nail at two. With Jesse away and Iz always working, having recently set up her own catering company, I was getting used to luxurious, lazy weekends to myself. Plus, I had only made my way through a quarter of the papers. I had been intently reading the *Times*’ beauty pages, trying to figure out how their beauty editor managed to write about

exfoliation and make it sound enthralling. It was an art, I realised. I spooned in another mouthful of my gluten/fun-free muesli and began flicking through the gossip pages, where I was abruptly faced with a huge picture of a smiling Jesse, with an inset image of a pretty brunette.

What the—?

My heartbeat quickened as I read the headline of the quarter-page article.

*NEWS ANCHOR FALLS FOR GORGEOUS WEATHER CO-HOST
Channel 3's resident ladies' man, Jesse Carey, is clearly enjoying the station's addition of the exotic Lisa Sutherland, with the pair said to be absolutely smitten with each other. One co-worker said of the two, 'They can't keep away from each other,' while our sources saw the photogenic pair cuddling up at last week's Care for Cancer ball, before making a quick exit as soon as the formalities were over.*

These sentences had the right letters and syntax, but made no sense at all. I was shaking and felt overwhelmingly alert, in the same way I imagined you would just before you were hit by a car.

'Here we go – skim latte.' Grasshopper placed the coffee down right on top of Jesse's face and spun away.

I didn't know what to do except to read the article again and look at the photo of Jesse, all preppy private school with his blond wavy hair, blue eyes and broad chest – only it wasn't him but a complete stranger, because surely none of this was really about him. Surely they had the wrong guy. Surely it was all some big mistake.

After a few minutes, my conviction that they had made an

enormous error made way for the revolting possibility that, in fact, they had exactly the right guy – only he was supposed to be *my* guy.

I closed the paper and focused on not being sick. I suddenly felt ill. Just-eaten-a-warm-oyster-milkshake ill. Rage and hurt and embarrassment and completely irrational thoughts flashed through my head. Like, who would see it? My new workmates?

Ladies' man?

Smitten?

Can't keep away from each other?

I reopened the paper and stared at his face, unable to process it. And what did 'exotic' mean anyway?

I grabbed my phone and called him.

'Hi, you've reached Jesse. You know what to do.' Beep.

I hung up.

Dialled again.

Same thing.

Why was his fucking phone off? I took a deep breath and dialled again. This time I'd leave a message. But what the hell was I going to say? I hung up, realising I had no idea.

I dialled Iz instead, to blow off some steam. It rang out, and as she didn't have voicemail I couldn't even leave a distraught message.

I belted out a text:

Call me NOW please and look at gossip pages of Times.

I dialled Jesse again and, holding back tears so as not to give myself away, very slowly said, 'Hi, it's me. I need to speak to you. Call me urgently please.'

I didn't want him to know he was in deep shit or he might

never call. He was rubbish in confrontational situations. Hang on: why was I making allowances for him? For all I knew he'd been sleeping with some weather wench.

I wanted answers. Time to text.

Is Lisa Sutherland someone I should know about?

Sending...sending...sent. I immediately wondered if I'd now given him ammunition to lie with. He wouldn't dare. He was my boyfriend. I deserved a goddamn answer. A truthful one. Jesus, where had this all come from? I'd thought we were happy; in love; that everything was going well – although I never *could* understand why I wasn't invited to things like that ball. He just said they were work functions, and that as I had so many of my own work functions now he didn't want to put me through more.

Struggling to compose myself under the weight of all that was racing through my mind, I got a twenty-dollar note out, left it on the table, gathered my things and the offending paper, and left in a hurry. Outside it had started to rain. Of course it had. I ducked for cover and thought about what I should do next. My phone buzzed.

What are u talking about? I can't talk right now. Will call soon.

I called him straightaway but his phone rang out. What the *hell* was he playing at? My rage was building by the second. I called again – no answer. Three times – nothing. Huddling under a flimsy awning, I texted him with such anger and speed that I kept punching in the wrong letters; I cursed as I retyped.

Your little love affair made the papers. I deserve a fucking phone call.

Nothing.

I walked down the street, calling Iz. Dammit, why was no one answering their phone, today of all days. I had almost made it home – and was consumed by what I would say to Jesse when I finally got to him – when my phone beeped.

I've just seen papers. It's complete bullshit, Han. No idea where it's come from. Lisa just a workmate, nothing going on. I'm sorry you're upset, understand why of course, but it's nothing to worry about. Can't call coz we're in crisis meeting about being sued, but will call asap. X

His text threw me. What exactly do you write back to something so dismissive? *Okay, honey, I believe you – can't wait to see you next week! xxx* Not likely. A text was the easy way out. He was a coward. I needed him to defend himself in person, or at least over the phone.

Oh, well, okay, I guess everything's fine then coz, you say so. Are you for real?! Be a man and at least defend yourself over the phone.

I told you, I'll call when I can. Settle down.

Oh no he didn't. He didn't just patronise me when *he* was the one who had been busted cheating. Mumbling a brand of swear words usually reserved for angry pirates, I pumped

out a few replies, but none of them nailed the exact sentiment I was trying to express, which was along the lines of: *Gosh, you've really annoyed me! I am quite upset with you and wish you many hours of torture in a Chinese prison and a string of nasty STIs also.*

Midway through composing The Text, my phone rang.

It was Iz. Finally.

'What's going on?'

'Have you seen the papers?'

'No, not yet. What's happened?'

As usual when talking to Iz, I exaggerated a little for dramatic effect.

'There's a huge story on Jesse in the gossip section saying that he's having an affair with the weather girl!'

'He's what? What do you mean he's having an affair? Jesse doesn't have affairs... Jesse can't be in the gossip section. Han, this is mad; I don't understand!'

'And he's denying it, but in such an arsehole of a way that I'm starting to think *it might even be true.*'

'Oh Han...this is just awful. Is there proof? Like a photo of them together? Do you think that it might just be total rubbish, like when they say Lindsay Lohan is pregnant but really she's just eaten pasta?'

'There's no photo – but several eyewitness accounts. And you know these things don't just come from nothing. And he does always work back, and travel for business, and she would too, so it's not like it's far-fetched to think he could be, be...cheating...'

The tears came on without warning and with great ferocity. As I sobbed into the phone, Iz comforted me with 'there there' and 'Han, you just let it all out,' until finally I

calmed down to sniffs and eye-wiping.

‘I guess you’re right, Iz. I should get some better proof before I take this as gospel. But how? It’s not like I can call this Lisa girl and ask if she’s been sleeping with Jesse, is it?’

‘Hmmm. Well, I guess you’ll have to rely on Jesse to tell you the truth. Which I’m sure he will, and you know you’re fierce at body language so I’m sure you’ll be able to tell if he’s lying.’

‘Fierce’ was Iz’s new favourite word, and she used it to describe everything from a new bra she’d bought to the weather. Last month everything was ‘magic’.

‘That’s all fine and good, but he’s away for another five days. How am I meant to see where his eyes are looking over the bloody phone?’

Iz was the right person to ask – she was the chief detective of love gone foul after having overstayed her time in a self-destructive relationship with an absolute arse of a man called Finbar. He hadn’t so much as cheated on Iz as brought her into his harem of women.

‘Okay, when he calls you do the psychologist’s trick and be silent so he does all the talking. Works a treat: they get all awkward and over-talk, and that’s when you’ll catch him out. If there’s anything to catch him out on. People always feel they have to fill any gap in conversation. Oh, and if he ridicules it all, and defends himself excessively without being prompted, that’s a bad sign too. All bad liars do that. They usually even protect the tart they’ve been cheating with, too, can you believe it? And if he starts making final comments, using you being pissed off as a sign that you two may as well give up altogether? *Very bad sign.*’

Realising how serious and morbid what she’d just said

was, she backtracked. ‘But I don’t think you’ll get any of those, darling. Seriously, I mean, this is *Jesse* we’re talking about! He adores you! I’m sure it’s just stupid gossip.’

The idea of staying alert to all of those things exhausted me in advance, but I promised to play silent on the phone when Jesse called, and to phone Iz straight after so she could dissect his words. I consoled myself by confirming I now knew how Jessica Simpson must feel when she read gossip about *her* relationships.

Not two minutes later, the phone rang. It was him. I stared at his name flashing on my screen and proceeded to cry all over again. I couldn’t answer in this state – no way. I’d be useless at playing policewoman. He’d just play Doctor Soothe and make everything okay, and my only chance to catch him out would be gone. I let it go to message bank, finger poised on the voicemail button for the second the little envelope came up. Beep beep.

‘Hannah, why aren’t you answering your phone? You’re clearly all worked up over this silly article. I know you’re upset and it’s not a very nice thing to see, but I haven’t done anything wrong and I’d at least like the chance to tell you that in person before you write me off. Lisa’s just a friend. Nothing more. And yes, we go to work functions together, but there’s nothing seedy about going somewhere with workmates so I’ve never felt I needed to mention her.’ (Sigh.) ‘Look, call me back, okay?’

So he HAD been hanging out with her! *Dirty little tramp*. My mind hit the red zone. Maybe the gossip dragon *was* right! Maybe he *was* cheating with gorgeous, flirty Lisa Sutherland! I felt my breath quicken.

I had no idea what I would say, but I dialled his number.

‘Hello?’

That he answered like that when my name would’ve come up irritated me immediately.

‘It’s me.’

‘Oh, hey, Hannah. Did you get my message?’

‘Yep.’

‘Well, I don’t have much else to say really.’

I bit my lip so as not to explode and ruin my psych-out effect.

He was *already* being an arsehole.

‘Are you there, Han?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, aren’t you going to say something? I mean, I feel like I’m pretty unfairly under attack here.’

Shhh, Hannah, shhh.

‘And you know, put yourself in my shoes for a second – how would you feel being accused of this and not having a chance to defend yourself?’

‘This is your chance.’

‘All I need to say is that it’s crap, and that if Lisa and I go to a function as workmates, then why should we be crucified? If she were a fat old man, this wouldn’t be happening. It’s a joke.’

He was being defensive. He was defending her. My heart was beating furiously with the realisation that there was a real chance the papers weren’t lying. I had to say something.

‘Why would this just come from nowhere? What does the paper have to gain from making up a story on a couple of over-hairsprayed news muppets?’

‘Oh, gee thanks, Han. Great to see you’re taking some gossip writer’s word over mine. Talk about guilty until proven innocent.’

Hold back, hold back, *hold back*.

‘I mean, really, is this what our relationship comes down to? Me defending myself against a fucking gossip columnist? Honestly, I thought we were stronger than this, that my word would mean something, but no, seems you’d rather believe the tabloids. But, you know, if that’s all it takes to spell doom, well then, maybe we really are doomed, Hannah.’

There it was. The slimy cop-out. I couldn’t believe it, this was textbook stuff – he had done everything Iz had predicted!

‘Are you for *real*? You’re busted cheating and *that’s* your out?’

‘I’m not taking any out, Hannah, because, as I keep stressing, *there is nothing going on between Lisa and me.*’

‘Could’ve fuckin’ fooled me, Romeo.’

‘Is that necessary? Look, maybe we should wait until I’m home to talk about this. You’re angry and being unreasonable and this conversation isn’t getting us anywhere.’

‘Great idea. And with Lisa up there with you, I’m sure you two can nut out a brilliant exit speech for when you decide to tell me that you’ve been thinking, hey, know what, maybe it’s better we don’t see each other and—’

‘Oh, for God’s sake. I don’t need to listen to this.’

‘Yeah, well, neither do I. Or read about it either, for that matter. I mean, Jesus, how do you think I felt when—’

‘We’ll talk Thursday. Goodbye, Hannah.’

Click.

I blinked a couple of times. I couldn’t breathe, let alone comprehend what had just happened. I had a furious urge to call him back and demand he explain himself, but I knew Jesse. He wouldn’t answer. He preferred to let me steam off my anger when we fought, while he carried on with his lunch/surf trip/toenail-clipping in non-emotional-man bliss.

I sat on a stranger's brick wall and openly cried. It was a quiet street, but a procession of half-naked Italian male models could've walked past and I wouldn't have had the strength or inclination to hide the fact I was in emotional ruins. After ten minutes, when I had finally got home and the tears had eased to loud sniffing, my phone beeped.

I am sorry about the story in the paper, Han, but I've said all I can, and after seeing how little trust you have in me, and with all that's going on with work, I think I – we – need some space. I'm sorry to do it by text but you're impossible to speak to right now. I can't say when but I'll be in touch.

Had I just been dumped by text?

I could've sworn I'd just been dumped by text.

I reread it and realised that, yes, I had been dumped by text by a man. A man who had possibly been cheating on me. Today *had* to be some sick, twisted joke.

'I need some space.' I'll give you space, fuckface. 'Space' was just boy-speak for 'we're finished' and I knew it. How stupid did he think I was, exactly? I wasn't going to wait around for him to think, 'Hmmm, maybe I'll get back with Hannah today. No, wait, I've got that golf tournament. Maybe tomorrow...' Suddenly, a thought flashed through my head. It was, I guessed, the same brand of thought that popped into people's heads when they were about to be eaten by a grizzly bear and the brain chucks it in and starts misfiring. It was a calm thought, one that cooed that I'd be fine, I'd be totally fine; people break up all the time, right? *I'd be fine.*

Plus, he had probably, no, *definitely* been cheating on me,

and if he was cheating on me, then I was better off without him anyway.

Prick! *Cheating prick!*

Was he a cheating prick? I was so confused.

I called Izzy. After three rings I was screaming into the phone, 'Answer, for fuck's sake. Just this one time, *answer!*'

She picked up.

'Iz... Iz...he...he...we...dumped by...by...text. It's *over!*'

'Hannah, what happened? Ohmigod, Han!'

'I...he...he...Jesse...you were right about psychology. He ch-ch-cheated on me!'

'I'm coming over. You're in no state to be alone.'

I heard Izzy coming down my street before she appeared at my door. Her car wasn't noisy, but her dragging muffler was. Her car was always dented or dinged or derelict. She barely noticed. Two minutes later she was inside. Her white-blond backcombed ponytail gave new meaning to the term 'bedhead', her green-brown eyes were locked into place with layers of black eyeliner and she was wearing a skimpy coral-coloured slip-dress that would be appropriate in, say, Miami, and Ugg boots that would be suitable in, ooh, Siberia. This was one of her post-work outfits, based on comfort rather than style.

'Oh, honey, I am so sorry...'

She held me and allowed me to just cry all over her bare, tanned shoulder.

'I just can't believe he could be so cold,' I said.

'Let it all out, darling. I'm here now.'

With Iz holding me, rubbing my back, a strange peace washed over me. The situation clearly hadn't sunk in.

Iz made us some chamomile tea and then listened as I raved about Jesse for two hours. As what came out of my mouth was largely rhetorical, Iz's job was just to mm-hmm and nod.

'And, you know, he's just so *selfish*, Iz. This whole thing was because of him. I didn't do anything wrong! And yet, *I'm* being dumped in one hundred and sixty characters or less! Oh, *I hate him*. Good luck to that Lisa skank, I say. She can have him.'

Cue more tears.

Iz didn't know it that afternoon, but as she sat with me I was silently awarding her an A in Best Friend Break-Up Management. (She *would've* got an A+, but the criteria for that included producing Jesse, the two of them admitting it was all a big joke and then hugging me before suggesting we all go for ice-cream.) She was genuinely soothing, and didn't suddenly morph into a marine biologist generously highlighting the fact that there were plenty more finned, gilled animals in the sea. She just listened and nodded and found positivity where there should have been none.

By 7 p.m., I was exhausted. Now that I'd verbally vomited up those first raw feelings, I kind of wanted to be alone so I could be overly dramatic and carry on like a bit of a loser. Wail a bit, slap pillows in anger and rip photos: that sort of caper.

'Now, are you sure you don't want me to stay over?' Iz stood at the door, eyebrows raised, keys jangling in her hand. If her nail polish had been any more chipped, she could have skipped the remover altogether.

'I think I just need to be alone. But thank you, my love.' We hugged and finally I broke away, fresh tears in my eyes.

'Love you, girl. Call me anytime – my phone is on and in

my hand for you. Promise. We'll talk tomorrow, okay?'

As she drove out of my driveway, I cried and cried and cried until it got to the point where I couldn't help but watch myself cry in my built-in wardrobe's mirrored door as I lay on my bed, because it was so theatrical.

And so, alone and miserable and with nothing to do but fall into a restless slumber, I pulled back the covers and went to sleep, fully clothed.

When I woke up on Sunday, I had to think about why I felt so odd. Within seconds it hit me: Jesse had turned into an alien and I had been relocated to hell, albeit sans the flames and small, malevolent devils running around with pitchforks. I grabbed my phone from the bedside table: no missed calls, and two awkward texts from well-meaning friends about the papers. But nothing from Jesse. He hadn't contacted me. After all this time, I meant that little to him.

I figured a funny movie would be a good distraction, and that Iz would be brilliant company. I dialed her number, praying she would answer.

Bingo. 'How are you today? Have you heard from him?'

Tears sprang immediately. 'No... Iz, he hasn't even texted.' My voice cracked on 'texted'.

'Oh darling... I'm so sorry. Poor sweetie... And my *God*, what a king of an asshole! How can he just drop you into this situation and not even check how you are? I tell you what, I've half a mind to call him myse—'

'Don't give him the satisfaction, Iz,' I sobbed. 'I'll be okay. Can you come round? Can we watch some movies? It's shit weather anyway...'

'Oh, Han... I would love to. But I have that Jewish wedding

at three, remember? Mr Goldberg and his homosexual poodles? I'm so sorry – you know I will be there the *second* I am done, right? And if he calls or texts, call me immediately.'

'Pfft. Unlikely. Probably having a long brunch with *Lisa*.'
As I said the words, my gut coiled over itself in pain.

I schlepped down to the shops, wearing the same oversized tracksuit pants and stained hoody I'd had on since noon yesterday. I was one stinky bitch. I did not care.

When I got home, chocolate, popcorn, trash magazines and ice-cream in one hand, DVDs in the other, I sat down with everything within arm's reach, committing myself to a Freshly Broken-Up Stereotype fit for any chick-flick montage.

To laugh I watched *Anchorman* and *Starsky and Hutch*. Next, feeling brave, I watched *The Break-Up*. I sobbed and closed my eyes in agreement ('It's like she's *me*') when Jennifer Aniston had her heart broken, cheering internally when Vince Vaughn was miserable without her. Stupid men. When will they *learn*?

Hang on.

What exactly had made him miserable? It was that she was getting on with her life. Showing him that she didn't care. Didn't need him. Being busy. Extremely well-dressed. Slim. Tanned. She could date other men, look fabulous even when nude, and didn't even *think* about the foolish man who had let her go.

I sat up with a start. It was a revelation. *This was what I needed to do*. I made a pact with myself that this had to be a bleach-clean break. Jesse had said, 'I need space'. Well, he was gonna get it. After all, who was he to dictate when and

how our relationship was severed and when it could resume? He'd *cheated* on me! Fuckface!

How could Jesse realise *how much* he missed me if he didn't *miss* me? Even with Lisa Slutface to fill the void temporarily, he would have to be a bit tortured that I wasn't begging for reconciliation. I would need to ensure that I stayed strong and fabulous and untouchable, and as far away from weak and hopeless and pathetic as possible. I was suddenly very glad I hadn't called or texted him, even though I had come extremely close. Phew.

It had, of course, killed me that he hadn't contacted me yet, but I had a plan now, and so even if he did contact me, I wouldn't respond. It was a magnificent plan. It was empowering. I felt the best I had since seeing that piece in the paper.

I considered texting Jesse to prove how strong and awesome I was and to kick-start my Totally Brilliant Plan. I would write something devoid of emotion, and totally businesslike, such as:

Please drop over all of my things as soon as you return home.

This would prove that I was already shutting off emotionally, and thus held the upper hand. Then I wouldn't have to play the carefully calculated, just-had-to-pick-up-my-DVDs-while-looking-amazing game. But I decided against it. He might not reply, and then I would be *really* tormented. Bored of masterminding – how did Bond villains do it as a profession? – I put my phone on silent and shoved it deep inside my underpants drawer. Staring at its dark screen was killing me;

it was as though it were quietly laughing at me and, quite frankly, I was tired of its derision. I lit some candles, put on the mournful strains of Billie Holiday, and peeled off my clothes to shower.

As I massaged conditioner into my hair, my mind went into overdrive.

Maybe he really did mean he needed space and I was blowing this all out of proportion. I *had* been known to crowd him sometimes... Maybe he'd get home after a few days with no contact from me, and that would be all he needed. Maybe I was making a terrible mistake by cutting him off! Maybe our relationship would be stronger than ever after this fight! And make-up sex was wonderful, remember?!

Or maybe, in his mind, it was actually already over. He *had* been seeing Lisa on the side, and I was foolish to assign any hope to this situation. I was exhausted. Conflicting thoughts whirred and spun wildly through a head that throbbed with confusion, and I resorted to leaning my forehead against the shower wall, releasing fresh tears that mingled with the hot water flowing down my face. Stuff it; I was going to sleep, Iz would understand.

At roughly 3.56 a.m. I sat up sharply in bed. That was it! *Gloss* magazine would be my saviour. It would keep me aggressively busy because I would hurl myself into it so much that I wouldn't even notice I was single and hurt and sad and working like a fool to crush the quiet riot in my head that said I wanted Jesse back, needed Jesse back.

After hours of tossing and turning, I had brilliantly devised a way to combine my two schools of thought: the hardcore no-contact element would provide the foundation for the getting-my-relationship-back element. Jesse would realise how

much he missed me, become near-suicidal and beg to have me back by way of Spanish guitar and midnight serenades at my window. It was genius.

The first and most crucial part of my plan was that I was going to courier all of his things – DVDs, Abercrombie & Fitch hoodie, thongs, Phoenix and Foo Fighters CDs – to his work. It would be a pleasant surprise for when he got back to his desk, I thought. And quite the message about where I stood on this whole ‘space’ bullshit, too.

Feeling satisfied with The Plan and my new rules and regulations, I lay back down and went straight to sleep.