

Chapter 1

You can do this. You're confident and smart, smart and confident. Smile. It's only an interview . . . even if it is the only way to start a career after seven years of studying and temping. God! No, don't think like that. Breathe. Everything is going to be fine . . . although I wish Mr Nailer, my interviewer, would stop frowning at my CV like it's a list of criminal offences.

His eyes briefly meet mine over the top of my CV, but he doesn't smile. Is that a bad sign?

Stop it – you're over-analysing. Breathe and relax.

Uncross your legs and sit up straight.

Smile and assume the calm exterior of a perfect teacher.

Yes, that's better. After all, I've only said 'hello, I'm Hannah,' 'yes' and 'thank you'. How can that be wrong? And it's always possible that this is just part of his interview technique – see if I crack under the pressure. Or maybe he's got indigestion . . . or a headache . . . or his wife left him this morning.

'So your first degree was in Art History?' he asks, as if it was a degree in dog walking. Although, if I'm honest, there are probably more job opportunities in dog walking nowadays.

'Yes. I actually began with just plain History, but I didn't really enjoy it. In fact, I found it quite boring, so I switched to Art History, which I loved.'

'Really?' Mr Nailer eyeballs me coldly. 'I read "just plain History" at university – found it fascinating,' he says, slowly turning his attention back to my CV.

My smile is frozen on my lips. I surreptitiously rub my clammy hands on my trousers and try to swallow.

I mustn't panic. People like different subjects – fact of life. No need to read too much into it, just stay personable, get a place on this teaching course and the future is golden. After all, there's every chance I'll be excellent at teaching. I might stroll into the classroom and find I have a hidden talent for honing young minds into geniuses . . . ? Genii? Or is it like sheep and the same plural as singular? Anyway, I could be the ultimate teacher. It could be like *Dead Poets Society* – the beginning, at least . . .

'Then you had a year in the workplace, with . . .' Mr Nailer runs his finger down the page, his lips moving as he counts ' . . . eleven different companies?' His eyebrows almost merge with his hairline.

'Yes, there weren't any jobs going in Art History, so I worked as an office temp and having a lot of employers goes with the territory.' I smile reassuringly, but he doesn't look convinced.

'And you are now in your final year of an English degree?'

'Yes.'

'And you want to train as an English teacher?'

'Yes.' I think I sound positive but, if anything, he looks even more doubtful. His qualms must be infectious because I'm really starting to wish I had a Plan B to fall back on.

'And you like children?' asks Mr Nailer, watching me carefully as he places my CV to one side.

My prepared spiel about how much I adore the little darlings suddenly seems naïve. Do I like children? Well, not the little toad who lives next door to Mum and Dad's, who throws eggs at their front door even when they give him sweets at Halloween. But maybe that's the point: all children are different. Maybe Mr Nailer's asking if I understand that.

'Are we talking about any children in particular, or children as a general subset?' Did I really just say 'subset'?

Mr Nailor pushes his glasses up onto his forehead and rubs his eyes wearily.

‘Hannah,’ he begins, with so much exaggerated patience it makes me cringe. ‘I am only asking if you like children. It isn’t a trick question. But to answer *your* question, I am asking about children in general, children in classes, children on playing fields. I don’t know . . .’ he waves his hands about helplessly ‘. . . nephews and nieces, if you like? Surely you understand that, as a teacher, you will inevitably encounter *children*. It’s helpful if you like them – even the difficult ones.’

‘No, you misunderstand me! Of course I like children. I love children. Children are great. I’ve always loved children – all children.’ Woah, better rein it in a bit. ‘Well, no, not every single child. Of course not! No one can say that, in the same way they can’t say they like *all* people. No one says they like Hitler, Vlad the Impaler or Genghis Khan, do they, and I guess they were children once? I bet *their* teachers had a few tricky parents’ evenings?’ A chirp of laughter escapes me, but Mr Nailor remains unmoved.

‘Probably,’ he agrees after a painful pause. He flicks through his list of candidates, possibly to check I really am one of the English department’s brightest and best, or maybe just to see how many more students he has to intimidate today. ‘Let’s just say, for the sake of argument, that you like *some* children, shall we?’

I nod meekly.

‘Let’s run through a few scenarios – they might help us decide what age range would suit you best. Tell me, what would you do if you found a puddle on the classroom floor?’ He smiles tightly.

It’s bound to be wee. I open my mouth to answer, but hesitate. Will he think I’m immature if I immediately assume it’s wee? ‘Could you tell me what age I’m teaching?’

‘Early years.’

It’s definitely wee. ‘Does it smell of wee?’ I ask tentatively.

‘You tell me.’

Okay, I suppose the roof could be leaking, or a child spilt their drink, so I should treat it as a random puddle to be on the safe side. ‘I think I’d ask one of the teaching assistants to sort it out while I continued teaching the class.’

That sounds responsible, but Mr Nailer purses his lips. ‘You don’t have a teaching assistant.’

I feel a stab of annoyance. Early years? Of course I have a teaching assistant – isn’t there some child-to-teacher ratio that means I have to have one? OK then, who else cleans up puddles? ‘Call the caretaker?’

‘The caretaker isn’t available.’

Shit. ‘Cleaning lady?’

‘She only works after school.’

Damn it, he wants me to clear it up. Fine, if that’s what it takes to make him happy. ‘In that case, I’d find a mop.’ I smile innocently at him.

Mr Nailer gives me a hard look and scribbles something in his notes. I crane my neck, but his writing is as illegible as a doctor’s. He glances up with lightning speed, and I look away, my face reddening.

‘You are teaching a junior class and notice a rat on the classroom floor. What do you do?’ he fires at me.

I stare at him. What’s his obsession with classroom floors? ‘I assume I don’t have a teaching assistant and the caretaker is unavailable?’ I check.

‘That is correct.’

I knew it. OK, so there’s a rat on the floor. Drawing attention to the rat will cause all hell to break loose. Besides, I’m not qualified to catch a rat. Isn’t that a job for the council or something? ‘I ignore it and report that we have a rat problem to the school office at the end of class.’

‘You ignore the rat?’ he asks incredulously. ‘You have thirty screaming children, some of whom are standing on desks, and one of the boys is kneeling on the floor attempting to make friends with it. He’s dangerously close to having his hand bitten. You cannot ignore the rat.’

Oh great, now they’re screaming. How convenient. ‘I take the class outside?’

‘It’s raining.’

Of course it is. ‘Take them to the gym?’

‘There’s another class having PE in there.’

There would be. Relaxing my jaw, which is starting to clench, I force a smile. ‘Can I smack the rat away with a papier-mâché rocket we made last week as part of a class project on space exploration?’ I wait for him to deny the existence of my papier-mâché rocket and possibly the whole concept of space exploration.

Mr Nailer opens his mouth, and an air of self-satisfaction creeps over him. ‘Let’s follow that thought through, shall we . . .’ he glances at my CV ‘. . . Hannah?’ I bristle. ‘It’s an eco-school and the children have just witnessed you beating their beloved pet mascot, Ratty. They are now traumatised. Parents will write in complaining—’

‘But I’d recognise “Ratty”!’ I explode. ‘This wasn’t Ratty! This was a diseased rodent from the sewers of the disgustingly underfunded and filthy school without a caretaker that I’ve been assigned to. I had to get the rat away from the boy, and far from being traumatised, the children don’t care, in fact they’re cheering and whooping with bloodlust and I’m their hero. I, on the other hand, am shaking with shock and desperately need a cup of tea, but have to carry on with the class, because I don’t have a teaching assistant. As for the parents, they don’t even know yet and are probably too busy working three jobs to keep their little darlings in computer games to worry about something that happened at school. They don’t even care.’ I halt, breathing heavily. I think I might have gone a bit far. I might even sound like I’m panicking. Which I’m totally not . . . I don’t think.

Mr Nailer leaves a telling silence, his eyebrows descending into a frown. ‘Oh no, you are quite wrong – they care,’ he says, his voice dripping with calm malevolence. ‘Believe me, parents care. They come in, and they complain. Parents always do,’ he mutters. I picture an enraged mob of parents brandishing pitch forks as Mr Nailer cowers under a minute preschool desk.

I smother a grin as he assesses his list of questions and, seeming to find them redundant, puts them to one side. He steepled his fingers and starts drumming them tip to tip. ‘Entertaining as I’m sure this is, I’m going to be straight with you. Based on today and the frequent changes of career I see in your CV, I don’t think teaching is the right path for you.’

‘But—’

He holds up a finger. ‘Teaching is not a fall-back position, it’s a profession in its own right. You need zeal and determination to be good at it. Many think that because George Bernard Shaw said “He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches” they can always take up teaching, but it’s simply not true. It’s a vocation, and to be frank, I’m not feeling your passion.’

I know this interview hasn’t gone brilliantly, but is he really turning me down? What will everyone say? Mum and Dad will be devastated, my sister Lauren will sneer and Grandma Betty’s ‘runt-of-the-litter, knew-she’d-come-to-no-good’ disdain doesn’t even bear thinking about. No, I can’t leave here without a place. I have to rescue this car crash of an interview. So if he wants passion . . .

‘Look, Mr Nailer, perhaps we got off on the wrong foot. I love books, I love reading and, honestly, I’m utterly passionate about teaching English. I know we’ve discussed early years, but I think I’d be great with older secondary children and brilliant at teaching A level. I loved it when I took it and I’d inspire them, I’m sure I would.’ I can see their rapt faces staring up at me as I read out extracts from Dickens, Shakespeare and Wilde. ‘I really want this. Honestly, I do! And if you want a quotation showing how I feel about teaching, how

about, “The touchstone of knowledge is the ability to teach”? That’s from the *Auctoritates Aristotelis*.’ I know this because I looked it up when I got fed up of people quoting the Shaw one at me, and I’ve found that just saying *Auctoritates Aristotelis* shuts most people up. ‘Mr Nailer, I want to be a teacher. Please give me a chance.’ I sit back, slightly out of breath. Surely he can’t refuse me after that.

But Mr Nailer is already shaking his head mournfully. ‘The *Auctoritates Aristotelis* also says “Silence is a woman’s finest ornament”, so are you certain you want to hitch your wagon to that particular text?’

Shit, does it? I feel myself shrink to the size of a gnat.

Mr Nailer takes a resigned deep breath and as he inflates, my heart sinks. ‘Secondary schools need staff who can teach all of the children in their care. There is no picking and choosing, and since English is a core subject, and only elective at A level, you must see that the majority of your time you would be teaching younger years with varying abilities and backgrounds. And what’s more, the majority of job vacancies are in the less salubrious schools.’

‘The ones with wet floors, no caretakers and rats?’

Mr Nailer shrugs and gives a small smile. ‘Perhaps those are extreme examples, but children are not all little angels from the best homes with the highest intelligence. Schools are not all like *Malory Towers*,’ he says, clearly pleased by his analogy.

I don’t know what to say. I stare at the parquet floor, examining its pattern, following its zigzag joints out to the edge of the room, but he isn’t finished.

‘I know what you said, and I’ve never actually had to ask this in a PGCE interview before, but do you really want to be a teacher?’ he asks gently.

I’m almost tempted to tell him the truth: yes, I’m twenty-five and I want a job with prospects, the holidays sound great, and after all the difficulties over finding funding for a second undergraduate degree I want to put my parents’ minds at rest over my six-year

double university-debt. It would also be nice to have a job I can tell people about without their faces freezing awkwardly – but no, I don't want to be a teacher.

'Well?' prompts Mr Nailer.

I hoist a smile onto my face. 'Absolutely. I want to be a teacher, and I'd be really good at it. Really.'

Mr Nailer shakes his head as though I've disappointed him. 'I just don't see it, I'm afraid. Try something else. For your own good,' he adds. With a dull thud in the pit of my stomach, I realise the interview is over.

I shake his hand. 'Thank you,' I say, trying to maintain at least some semblance of dignity. 'It was nice to meet you.'

He manages a tight smile and carefully stacks his papers as I leave, somehow making my exit even more shameful.

Outside, in the waiting room, I sag onto a chair and take a few minutes to recover. I'd love to put my head in my hands and do a bit of wallowing, but two girls from my course are waiting for their interviews. I don't know them that well, and I certainly don't want to tell them what happened, so I collect my coat and try to slide by unnoticed. But then one of them beckons me over. The door's right there, but there's no acceptable way to avoid speaking to her.

'How did it go?' she asks.

I open my mouth with no idea what to say. Dreadfully? Ghastly? Fine? My phone pulses with an incoming text in my coat pocket, giving a credible impression that it's ringing, and I grab it thankfully.

'Sorry,' I mouth holding it up apologetically. 'Good luck,' I add and flee out the door. 'Hello? Yes, I've just come out . . .'

I babble on happily until the door is firmly closed, then sigh and run my hands through my hair. Desperate for a distraction, I take a seat on a bench to read the text from my sister. Just sent email about next week – Mum asked me to tell you.

Next week? What's she talking about? I can only guess it's some family thing Mum has asked her to tell me about in the mistaken belief we're forever gossiping, when really Lauren has as little to do with me as possible.

The truth is, we barely tolerate each other. Lauren is a successful recruitment agent, amassing huge commissions, living the high life, partying and going through men like tic tacs, and in her mind I'm a nonentity and a perpetual student. We have a mutual arrangement that started in our teens where Mum and Dad thought we were inseparable and always together when really Lauren was out with friends and boys while I went to the library. Lauren had her social life, and I gained my independence. The downside is that we've had to fake a lot of friendly feelings and Mum gives us messages to pass on to each other.

I log in to my account and read Lauren's email.

To: Hannah Wilson

From: Lauren Wilson

Subject: Don't even think about saying no.

Hannah,

The whole family has been invited to a party at Great-Uncle Donald's next Wednesday. Everyone's going. Aunty Pam and Uncle Nigel said even Nicholas is taking a day off work, so you're coming too – no excuses. Take the train to Mum and Dad's on Tuesday night and one of us will collect you from the station.

Lauren

That's weird – I've never even met Great-Uncle Donald. He and Grandma Betty had a big row years ago, and she's supposedly been keeping us safe from his 'subversive influence' ever since. I wonder what's changed and why we're suddenly going to his party.

I write Lauren a quick text. It will annoy her because, as far as she's concerned, she's passed on the message, job done – so I smile as I send it. Hi Lauren. What party? Why?

Hannah

The reply comes almost immediately. Family thing – everyone meeting Great-Uncle Donald. Just say yes.

I mean, it sounds interesting, but I have an assignment due next week and it's not long until my finals. I suppose I could write the essay on the train. I sigh and tap in a quick message. OK. Will be on train. Tell Mum if she phones.

Tell her yourself bleeps Lauren's reply.

I guess I should have expected that.

I pocket my phone, do up my coat and look up at the education department building. My stomach squirms uncomfortably, a curdled mixture of embarrassment and annoyance. How did that interview turn into such a disaster? In fact, beyond causing actual bodily harm, I don't see how it could have gone much worse. I suppress the urge to stick out my tongue at the building before I head back to my digs. What the hell am I going to do now? Something had better turn up, because I'm all out of ideas.