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Written by Harriet Evans

Published by HarperCollins

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HARRIET EVANS

Happily Ever After



HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2012
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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-735026-1

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Set in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
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For Lynne
with thanks for everything and love x x

She read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives.

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

PROLOGUE

August 1988

A Happy Ending for Me by Eleanor Bee
They laugh at me, the girls in the canteen,
But one day I will laugh at them.
Black boots jack boots they are everywhere
But I won't wear them just because they are trendy.
Oh, you treacherous night,
Why won't you take flight?
For I am like a little red spot that
That . . .

ELEANOR BEE PUT down her pen and sighed. She stretched her arms above her head, with the weary movement of one who is wrestling with her own *Ulysses*. Unfortunately, this action inadvertently caught her hand in the gleaming yellow headphones of her new Sony Walkman. The plastic case was yanked abruptly into the air, dangling in front of her face for a brief second before falling to the ground, with a loud crack.

'Oh, no,' Eleanor cried, talking to the floor in a tangle of

long limbs, simultaneously pulling off her headphones and thus further entangling herself. 'No!'

The sound of Voice of the Beehive's 'Don't Call Me Baby' from *Now That's What I Call Music 12* in her ears was abruptly silenced. The Walkman lay on the floor, the lid of the cassette player snapped off and lying several feet from her amongst a nest of dust and hair in the corner of the room. Eleanor picked it up and stared at it in despair. The door of the bedroom was ajar, and through it she could hear the sound of glasses clinking, cutlery scraping on plates. And raised voices.

'You said you'd take her tomorrow, John. You did.'

'I did not. That's utter rubbish.'

'You did. *You just weren't bloody listening, as per usual. It's fine. I'll take her.'*

'Not if you're still in that state you won't. God, if you could see yourself, Mandana –'

'You sanctimonious shit. Listen –'

Eleanor jammed the headphones on again. Pressing her hands against her ears, she crawled across to the dusty corner and snatched the plastic tinted cover, brushing herself off as she stood up. She stared out of the window at the pale lemon evening sun, sliding into the clear blue sea. On the beach, the last few swimmers were coming out of the water. An intrepid band was building a fire, getting a barbecue ready, for this far north in August, the sun didn't set till well after ten.

But Eleanor did not see the view or the people. She stared blindly at the rickety wooden path down to the sea and wondered if she should burst into the kitchen, tell them she didn't want to go to Karen's in Glasgow any more. But she was also afraid of interrupting them; she didn't want to hear what they were saying to each other.

Mum's dad had died, two weeks before they'd come to Skye. At first it hadn't seemed like that big a deal. Eleanor

felt bad about it but it was true. He lived in Nottingham and they lived in Sussex, and they hardly ever saw him and Mum's mum. Mum didn't get on with him and Eleanor and Rhodes had been to the house in Nottingham only twice. The first time he'd smelt of whisky and roared at them when they played in the tiny back garden. The second time he'd had a go at Mum, shouted and told her she was a disgrace. He'd smelt of whisky that time, too. (Eleanor hadn't known what it was, but Rhodes had told her. He loved knowing everything she didn't.) Their granny visited them in Sussex instead or saw them for day trips to London, which Eleanor loved, even though nowadays it was annoying Granny didn't understand she was fourteen and didn't want to go to babyish things like Madame Tussauds; she wanted to hang out by herself at Hyper Hyper and Kensington Market.

But Mum had been much more upset about Grandpa dying than Eleanor would have expected. *Everyone's parents argue,* she reminded herself. Karen had said that last week, when Eleanor had cried all over her and said she didn't want to go on holiday with her parents and her brother. *Not like this, they don't*, Eleanor had wanted to say. She was so used to worrying about things – whether she would break her arm falling off the horse at gym, just like Moira at school, whether her mum or dad would die of a terrible disease, whether she herself was dying of a secret disease because she was sure her periods were heavier than everyone else's, and the letter in *Mizz* magazine had said if you were worried about it you should definitely go to the doctor – all these things kept her awake at night, till her heart pounded and then she worried that her heart rate was too fast and would explode and she had never noticed that all of a sudden her parents seemed to hate each other. Suddenly something was, she knew, wrong, terribly wrong, and it was only when she played her music really loud or curled up on her bed with a book that the tide of fear seemed to recede, for a little while.

They'd had an OK day today. A walk along towards Talisker Bay where the whisky was made; Dad had told Rhodes he could try some at the distillery, since he was nearly eighteen. The air was fresh and clear, the sky was a perfect powder blue, the last of the midges really had gone, and Eleanor was almost glad to be out of her room for once, outside with her parents and her brother. Just like a normal family on a normal holiday.

The trouble had started today when they got back and there was frozen pizza for lunch. Dad had had a go at Mum because it wasn't properly defrosted, soggy in the middle, and she'd shouted at him. Eleanor and Rhodes were used to this at home, but Dad was a GP who worked late and often didn't notice the burnt pasta, the half-cooked chicken Kievs.

'It's disgusting,' he'd said eventually, pushing the plate away. 'I can't eat it, Mandana. You should have defrosted it before we went for the walk.'

Mum was on her second glass of wine. 'Right. Of course, it's beyond the realm of possibility that you'd make lunch, John, isn't it? It's a holiday for me, too, I've had a bloody hard time and you don't even—'

Dad had stood up, pushing the table away, and stalked off into the sitting room; he'd stayed there with the door shut, watching the cricket till Mandana had gone in to remind him about driving Eleanor the next day.

A knocking sound made Eleanor jump. Her mother opened the door, slowly. 'Ellie, love?' she said. 'Are you all right?'

'I'm fine.' Eleanor took her headphones off. 'I just –'

Mandana came into the room. She wiped her face with one hand, tiredly. 'I'm sorry for the yelling. Just a misunderstanding, your dad didn't realise about driving you, you see. . . .'

Adolescent rage, made up of anger and fear, boiled inside Eleanor. 'I know, you didn't ask him. You drank too much and forgot. Again.'

'Ellie!' her mother said sharply. 'Don't be rude. Of course I didn't. It's not that. Your father and I just aren't getting on very well at the moment, that's all.'

'Are you going to get a divorce?' Eleanor heard herself asking the question, and held her breath.

'Love, of course not! What makes you think that?' Mandana patted her soft dark hair, rather helplessly, and said before Eleanor could answer, 'Anyway, I just wanted to apologise for all that noise. Daddy'll take you to the station tomorrow, it's no problem.'

Mandana's voice was trembling, and her cheeks were flushed. Eleanor rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. 'Why are you being like this?'

'Like what?' Mandana said.

'You're different since Grandpa died. I don't understand, you always said you hated him.'

'I didn't really hate him,' Mandana said. 'I just feel bad. I never saw him. He was a sad man, and it makes me sad, and it makes me think about things. It's just a hard time at the moment, that's all.'

'Why was he a sad man?'

'Look,' Mandana said, in the brisk way she sometimes suddenly had. 'Just be ready, get your things ready. It's . . .' She trailed off. Eleanor stared at her mother. 'Oh. I lost my train of thought, Ellie. Just be ready, won't you?'

'Don't call me Ellie.'

'OK,' Mandana said, one hand on the door. 'Supper's soon. On our knees, we thought we'd watch a video tonight. Won't that be fun? I'm making lasagne.'

It was pointless trying to talk to her. It was just pointless. 'Fine,' Eleanor said. 'Thanks, Mum. See you in a bit. I'll pack.'

'Good. And – please don't worry, love. Everything's going to be fine! You're just a worrier, that's your trouble. I think we should talk to Dr Hargreaves when we're back. Maybe some cranial massage would help you.'

The door shut softly behind her, and Eleanor was left looking out of the window once more.

It'd be better at Karen's – well, Karen's granny's – that was for sure. Only one more night and then she'd be there. She put the useless Walkman on the bed and hummed as she reached for her bag. She didn't hear the door open again.

'What the fuck are you doing?' Rhodes, her seventeen-year-old brother, stood in front of the bed. 'Why are you wearing your headphones with nothing plugged into them, you freak?'

Eleanor hugged herself. 'Shut up, you spazmo. I'm packing, to go to Karen's, not that it's any of your business.'

'You look like a freak.'

'Wow, Rhodes, you're so eloquent.' Eleanor made a face.

Rhodes laughed. Eleanor didn't say anything. She just shut her eyes and conjured up the image she liked best, that of her brother being slowly lowered into a pit of fire, screaming hoarsely, his eyes popping out, flesh starting to melt away, and her standing over him, nodding at the guard who asked, 'Lower, madame?'

She liked that image. She had called on it more and more over the last year. There was also the one where Rhodes, chained up and begging for mercy, got sliced into bits by a gang. But this one was the best. She was in control.

'What the fuck is this?'

'Get off, Rhodes, it's private.' Eleanor lunged, but too late. Rhodes snatched up her open notebook. His eyes lit up, he scratched the back of his fuzzy brown hair in excitement.

'Poetry!' He laughed. 'You're writing . . . ha ha!' He clutched his sides. 'Ha! You're writing poems! "They laugh at me, the girls in the canteen" – you bet they do, sis!'

'I HATE YOU!!' Eleanor shouted. 'I hate you, you . . . you bastard bitch!' She looked around for something to throw at him, and grabbed *Forever Amber*, which she was halfway through.

'What's it called?' Rhodes peered at the top of the page. '"A Happy Ending for Me." Ha! Ha ha ha!' He bent over, and slapped his knees.

'It's a good title. What would you know, you div? You can hardly spell your own name, let alone write poetry.' Eleanor was shaking with rage.

'God, you take yourself so seriously, don't you?' Rhodes said, his pleasure almost manifest in the room, like a dancing devil behind him. 'You think you're better than me, just because you read books all day and moon around writing stupid poems. You don't know anything about real life. You've never even snogged anyone, no boy'd go near you, unless they were gay, you look like a boy!'

'I'm not even listening, Rhodes. I feel sorry for you,' Eleanor said haughtily. She aimed the book at him. 'I just really do.'

'What does "A Happy Ending" mean then?' Rhodes said. His eyes were bright, his pupils dilated, his breath short. Like he'd just won a race. 'Come on.'

'It's called "A Happy Ending for Me", and actually it's—'

'No. I'm not asking that. Do you know what a Happy Ending is? Have you heard of it?' He laughed again.

'You're so weird, I don't even know what you're talking about.' Eleanor put the book down and stuck one finger up at her brother, which was about the rudest thing she knew how to do. 'You're such an idiot. You're only being like this 'cause you're upset about Mum and Dad.'

His face clouded over and his eyes narrowed. 'You don't know anything,' he said. 'No, I'm not, so fuck off.'

'No. Go away. I hate you.'

'What a weirdo.' Rhodes smiled. 'A Happy Ending is when you wank someone off. Give them a happy ending. Yeah? Wanking. Rubbing my dick till I spunk.' He grabbed his crotch. 'Like Lucy Haines did to me, last month. *That's* a happy ending. Oh, yeah.' He smiled, and rocked his hips back and forth. 'Oh, oh, oh, *yeah*.'

Eleanor didn't know what to say, or where to start. She was silent. 'You are disgusting,' she said after a pause. 'You are vile. Go away.'

Rhodes was still smiling. 'I'm going. Happy endings. Mmmmm.'

'Piss off.'

Eleanor slammed the door after him, then opened it and slammed it again, as hard as she could, and then she pushed the chair from the desk up against the handle and put her hand up to her mouth, clamping her lips together. She sorted her books into a pile: the Sylvia Plath poems, the Sylvia Plath biography, *Forever Amber* and a couple of spare books just in case so she didn't have to resort to those stupid magazines like *Just 17*, *19* and *Mizz*. They riveted her as well as terrifying her, full of silly girls going on about boys and rubbing almond oil into your cuticles – she didn't even know where cuticles *were*. It was so stupid, trying to pretend that silly stuff was part of real life, when real life was ugly and horrible, like Rhodes, like this house, like . . . everything.

She looked down at the poem. 'A Happy Ending for Me'. She ripped the page out of her notebook and tore it into tiny pieces, her bottom lip sticking out as the tears she had pushed down inside her came up; and as she sank to the floor, Eleanor Bee hugged her knees and told herself that one day, it'd be OK. She'd be a grown-up, and she *would* have a happy ending. The nice sort. Happily ever after, with a house full of books, a video recorder to tape *Neighbours* and all the clothes she wanted from Dash and Next.

But even as she sat there, rocking herself, tears dropping freely onto her scabby knees, her dark fringe falling into her eyes, she knew that sounded stupid.

'London eats up pretty girls, you know.'
'Not me!' she assured him triumphantly. 'I'm not afraid!'

Kathleen Winsor, *Forever Amber*

April 1997

'SO, ELLE, WHAT are you reading at the moment?'

Her palms were stuck to the leather chair and Elle knew if she moved them they would make a loud, squeaking sound.

'Me? Oh . . .' Elle paused, and tried to gently manoeuvre one hand out of the way, but found she couldn't. 'I don't know. Um . . .' She racked her brains for the 'buzz phrases' she and Karen had gone over that morning in Karen's tiny kitchen. Karen had written them on Post-it notes.

Buzz phrase. Buzz phrase. Oh, God.

'Well, I love reading,' she said eventually. 'I'm passionate about it.'

Jenna Taylor tapped her biro on the grey plastic desk. She cast her eyes over to the blue fabric wall dividers, then looked back, forcing a smile to her face. 'Yes, that's great, so you've said. What are you actually reading at the moment, though?'

Elle already knew this interview could not be going more badly. It was like when she'd begun her second driving test by pulling out and nearly crashing into a grey Mercedes which meant an automatic fail, and she'd still had to take the rest of the twenty-minute test. But her mind was a total blank. She could feel the angry red blush she always got

when she was flustered starting to mottle the skin below her collarbone, creeping up her neck. Soon her face would be luminous red. She moved one hand. A high-pitched, farting shriek emanated from the chair. 'Um – what kind of thing do you mean?'

Jenna's voice was icy. 'I mean, can you demonstrate that you're up to speed with what's going on in the world of publishing at the moment? If you love books as much as you keep saying you do, it'd be great if you could give some examples of what you've read lately.' She smiled a cold smile.

Elle looked around the tiny open-plan office. It was almost totally silent. She could hear someone typing away at the next office space to Jenna's, and the whirr of the air conditioner, but apart from that, nothing. No one talking at all. They were all reading, probably. Being intellectual. Making decisions about novels and biographies and poetry and other things. How amazing. How amazing that she was even here, having an interview at Lion Books.

'Lately . . .' Elle knew what the truthful answer was, but she knew there was no way she could actually admit it. She was halfway through *Bridget Jones's Diary* and it was the funniest book she thought she'd ever read, plus at least once every other page it made her shout, 'Oh, my God, *me too*!'

But she couldn't say that. She was at an interview for one of the most respected publishers in London. She had to prove she was an intellectual person of merit. Intellectual person, yes. She coughed.

'Well, the classics, really. I love Henry James. And Emily Brontë. *Wuthering Heights* is like one of my favourite books ever. . . . I love reading. I'm passionate about . . .' *Oh, no.*

Jenna crossed her legs and wheeled the chair a little closer. 'Eleanor, look around my office. If you'd done your research you'd know I publish commercial women's fiction.' She slapped some spines on a shelf, dragged out a handful of thick paperbacks. 'Gold foil. Legs in lacy tights. I need a

secretary who wants to work with commercial authors.' Her face was hard. 'If you like Henry James so much perhaps you should be applying for a job at Penguin Classics.'

Elle could feel hot tears burning at the backs of her eyes. The red blush was crawling across her cheeks, she knew it. *I don't understand Henry James. I only liked* The Buccaneers *on TV. I've applied for jobs everywhere and no one's interested. I've been sleeping on a friend's floor for three months and eating Coco Pops twice a day. I'm drinking in the last-chance saloon, Jenna. Please, please give me a break.*

'. . . If you'd told me you liked *Bridget Jones*, for example, or you were reading Nick Hornby, or Jilly or even bloody *Lace* I'd have some indication that, despite your total lack of office experience, you were interested in working in publishing. Hmm?' Jenna fingered a lock of long Titian hair with her slim fingers.

'I do like *Bridget Jones*,' Elle said softly. 'I love it.'

'Really.' Jenna obviously didn't believe her. She looked at her watch. 'OK, is there anything else you'd like to say?'

'Oh.' Elle looked down at her sweating thighs, clad in bobbling black tights and a grey and black kilt that, she realised now, was far too short when she was sitting down. 'Just that . . . Oh.'

I know I screwed this up, can you give me another chance?

I really need this job otherwise I have to go back to Sussex and I can't live with Mum any more, I just can't.

I have read Lace, *some bits several times, in fact, it's just I can't talk about it without blushing.*

My skirt is too short and I will address this issue should you employ me.

No, no, no. 'I – no. Thank you very much. It was lovely to meet you. I . . . fingers crossed!' And Elle finished by holding her hands up, making a thumbs-up sign with one, and crossing her fingers with the other.

'Right . . .' Jenna said. There was a pause as both of them

stared at Elle's hands, shaking in mid-air. 'Thanks for coming in, Ellen. Great to meet you.'

'Eleanor . . .' Elle whispered. 'Yes,' she said more loudly. 'Thanks – thank you! For this opportunity.' That was one of the phrases, she remembered now. 'I'm a keen enthusiastic self-starter and I'll work my guts out for you,' she added, randomly. But Jenna was ushering her out down the narrow maze of passageways, and Elle realised she wasn't listening, and furthermore she, Eleanor Bee, still had one hand cocked in a thumbs-up sign. 'Idiot,' she muttered, as they reached the lifts.

'I beg your pardon?' Jenna smoothed down her lilac crêpe dress and fanned her fingers through her glossy hair.

'Ah. Nothing,' Elle added. She got into the lift. 'Thanks again. Sorry. Thanks then – bye.'

The lift doors closed, shutting out Jenna's bemused face.

I MADE A thumbs-up sign.

Elle weaved her way down the Strand, swinging her handbag and trying to look jaunty. 'Let's all go down the Strand,' she sang under her breath. 'Have a banana. Oh, what . . .' Her voice cracked, and she trailed off. She glanced at her reflection in a shop window and shuddered. She looked *awful*, that stupid short skirt, why had she bought it? And that silly blue top, it was supposed to look like silky wool, but what that actually meant was that she had to hand wash it. Her light brown hair was too long and thick, tucked behind her ears and sticking out in tufts. She stared at the window again, and winced. She was looking into the window of a Dillons bookshop with a banner bearing the legend 'Our Spring Bestsellers'.

'*Captain Corelli's Mandolin* . . . I read that last summer, why on earth didn't I say that?' Elle smacked her forehead gently with her palm. '*The Celestine Prophecy* – oh, God, that's the crazy book Mum's reading, did she really want me to talk about that? That's not literature!' She stared at the array of books. '*The Beach . . . Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* . . . what does *that* mean?'

Elle slumped her shoulders and stared at the Pret A Manger

next to the bookshop, where busy office workers were coming out clutching baguettes and soup. *She* wanted to eat in Pret A Manger. She'd never seen them before she came to London and to her it seemed the height of glamour, to go into a shop with other office workers and buy a proper coffee and a croissant.

But she didn't have the money for a coffee from Pret A Manger, nor a desk nor a job. Elle caught her bottom lip with her top teeth to stop herself from crying. *Come on*, she told herself, standing in the middle of the Strand as people pushed past her. *Buy an* Evening Standard, *go back to Karen's, have a cup of tea while you go through the Jobs section and you'll feel much better. There's something out there for you. There is.*

The truth is, Eleanor Bee was starting to get desperate. It was April. She'd left Edinburgh University the previous summer, and was still trying to find a job. It seemed all her other friends had something to do: Karen had a job as a runner at a TV production company, her old university flat-mate Hester was doing an MA in Bologna, and the other, Matty, was in teacher training college. Her ex-boyfriend Max was a trainee accountant, she'd bumped into him off Fleet Street the other day. It was just before an awful interview at an educational publisher where Elle had not really understood what they were talking about and when they'd said, *So do you think that sounds like something you could do?*, she'd replied, *Sure, can I let you know? No,* the grumpy, large, middle-aged man in cords had said. *I wasn't offering you the job. I was asking if you thought you'd be able to cope with the job. Thank you, we'll let you know.* She was sure bumping into Max was the reason she'd been so flustered. Not that she even cared about Max that much – he was using hair gel, for God's sake, and kept getting out his stupid new CD Walkman to show off to her. But it was the principle of the thing.

In February, Elle's best friend from school, Karen, had said she could come and sleep on her sofa. 'You're never going

to find a job in publishing in a tiny village in Sussex, Elle,' she'd said briskly. 'Bite the bullet and come to London.' And Elle had accepted, nervous but also overwhelmed with excitement. *London*. She'd dreamed of moving to London, of living in the big city, since she was a little girl. She'd conquer it. She'd own grey wellington boots with heels. And have a matching grey briefcase, like the Athena poster of the city girl hanging off the back of a Routemaster bus blowing a kiss to her handsome boyfriend that Elle still had in her bedroom.

But London was very far from the welcoming and bustling literary salon Elle had expected it to be. Notting Hill was grimy, full of cracked pavements and crack addicts, and sleeping on the floor in Karen's was no fun. She'd been here two months now. She'd applied for every job going, written to every publisher she could find in the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* to ask them for work experience. But no one was interested. She was discovering she'd been totally naive to think they would be. She'd had four interviews, and this one today, at a major publishing house, was like the big one that had to work out, and she'd clearly totally one hundred per cent blown it. She'd thought she was so prepared: she had read everything, *everything*, in fact Karen said the trouble with her was she couldn't get her nose out of a book.

She hated the way she spent her days now. She'd sit in the silent flat, feeling crappy about herself and knowing she should buck up, watching Richard and Judy and dreading the moment when Karen would get back from work and say, in an increasingly unsympathetic tone, 'So, what did you get up to today then?' Her social life consisted of going to the pub or sitting around in the dark flat off Ladbroke Grove waiting for the electricity meter to run out. Plus Karen's other flatmates, Cara the chef and Alex the ad man, clearly found Elle a hindrance rather than a delightful addition to communal living.

On the Tube back to Notting Hill, Elle wondered for the

first time if she should have come to London at all. It wasn't how she'd expected it, and even though she was used to not fitting in, she'd never felt less welcome anywhere, in her whole life. It struck her that if she packed up her meagre possessions this evening and got a train first thing tomorrow, she'd be back at her mother's by lunchtime. But then – what? She and her mother, in the converted barn Mandana had bought after the divorce, doing what? Would it be worse than being here? Probably not.

Elle had a stroke of luck as she got off at Notting Hill Gate. Someone had left an *Evening Standard* behind on a seat and she scooped it up. It was a cold April day and she shivered in her thin coat, the paper clamped under one arm, as she walked through the empty streets, trying not to let her mood sink any lower.

It was just really hard, though, trying to find your place in the world. At university it had been so easy. You knew where you were going each day, what you were doing, and with whom. After university, the rules had suddenly changed, and Elle felt she'd been left behind. But the irony was, she knew exactly what she wanted! She'd always known! She just wanted to work with books, to read fine literature, to meet authors and to learn to edit, to have conversations like those she used to have with her Victorian Literature tutor Dr Wilson, about the Brontës and Austen and whether *Middlemarch* was the great Victorian novel or not and . . . that sort of thing. Of course, she knew she'd have to start at the bottom – she didn't mind that at all, in fact she rather thought she'd like it. But that didn't seem to make a difference.

What am I going to do? she thought to herself, walking briskly, head down. *Will I just be someone who falls through the cracks in society and never gets a job? And turns into one of those weirdos who keeps every newspaper from 1976 and carries a brown satchel and goes through the bins? Oh, my God, is that going to be me?*

The cold sharp breeze stung Elle's eyes. She wiped them with the back of her hand, and the *Evening Standard* dislodged and fell on the pavement, where a rolling gust of wind carried it off, into the middle of the road. She ran after it, and as she picked it up, noticed it was a week out of date. One whole week. She heaved her shoulders, and looked round for somewhere to dump the offending newspaper. There wasn't even a bin and she wasn't so far sunk into depression that she would just chuck it on the pavement. She stomped back towards the flat, muttering under her breath, not caring if she was taking one further step down the line towards being a newspaper-hoarding, bin-rifling weirdo, and thinking that the world was a cruel, cruel place.