



Oh my God.

Oh my *God*.

My hair is orange.

How could this happen?

I applied the dye carefully in sections, ran it all the way through to the ends, and left it on for exactly fifteen minutes. I wore the stupid plastic gloves and used the timer on my kitchen stove to make sure it didn't overprocess.

And it turns *orange*?

Damn it!

Calm down. Breathe. It's not so bad. It's not orange, per se. It's . . . auburn. Slightly amber. Burnt sienna, really.

Stop fooling yourself, Bella. It's orange, you idiot.

"Crap!" My voice echoes around the small, product-laden bathroom, every available inch of counter space smothered with bottles of mousse, antiaging serum, eye cream, and mascara, and I wonder if my roommate Emily Tyler can hear me. Her bedroom is down the hallway, but our walls are paper thin. Sure enough, her scratchy voice calls accusingly, "Bella? What did you do?"

"Nothing! It's nothing! I just . . . *uh*, tripped!" I yell back, my heart skipping beats as I envision the ribbing I'll have to endure if my best friend walks in and sees the catastrophe my beauty "skills" have caused. She'd never let me live it down.

I need to fix this *immediately*. I am a *beauty writer*. I am supposed to be able to handle something as elementary as dyeing my hair without ending up with a pumpkin on my head. This is much worse than the unfortunate time I burned off my eyebrows trying to dye them blonde. If I show up tonight at my profile interview for the *New York Post* looking like this, I will become a laughingstock of the beauty industry, and my editor, Larissa Lincoln, will inevitably decide I have no business writing my monthly The Beauty Expert column for *Enchanté*, and she will fire me for being incompetent and useless, and then I will have no income and will not be able to afford living in New York. I'll be homeless. Worse, I'll have to go back to Ohio. My life will be ruined!

And all because of a stupid dye job! Damn it.

I silently berate myself for freaking out. Get it together, Bella. It's just hair.

What to do? Dye it back to blonde? Half my hair might fall out. Besides, the whole point of my assignment is to see what it's like being brunette.

Why? Why did I decide to do this two hours before my interview? I went to Northwestern. I have a degree in journalism. I am, at least, *theoretically*, intelligent, although lately it seems like nothing I do reflects this. So how do I end up in situations like this time and time again? My father's voice floats through my head, clear as crystal, pulling me back fifteen years to a dinner with his Lieutenant Colonel: "Bella's book smart, but doesn't have much common sense. Now, Susan, on the other hand. She *is* the elder child, after all . . ." My mother squeezed my hand under the table as she interjected, "Chuck, please don't compare the girls! They each have their own gifts." Yes, indeed. Where shall I collect my first-class prize for being a total spaz?

I have an hour to fix this before I have to hop in a cab and rush down to Pamplona, the magazine industry hot spot

I'm meeting the *Post* reporter at. Even if I wanted to dye it back and then fix it tomorrow, I wouldn't have time to blow it out. And in any case, I'm going to be photographed, so I'm *definitely* not going to make the mistake of trusting my own dyeing skills again. I'm getting my first big profile piece, in one of the most widely read, influential papers in the country . . . and I'm going to look like I stuck my head in a vat of carrot juice.

Can I wear a hat? I don't own any hats. I hate hats. Showing up in a hat is even more embarrassing than showing up with orange hair. What about a head scarf? Jackie O wore head scarfs. Princess Grace wore head scarfs. It's very Monaco circa 1971 and is so ridiculously out there that I think it might work. The photographer will probably think I'm just another diva, self-absorbed, magazine head case.

I run into my bedroom and yank open the top drawers of my wooden dresser, rummaging frantically through them. Through the years, I've accumulated countless fancy scarves that I've never once worn, all sent by beauty publicists as thank-yous for stories written about their products. Finally, they'll come in handy.

I dump the scarves onto my bed and spread them out, surveying the stock before picking out two possibilities. Tan and cream silk Hermès dotted with chain links? Or psychedelic blue cotton Pucci with a green and white geometric print?

The Pucci projects more of an image—a style *moment*. This, I can work with—all I need to complete the look is an A-line coat, shift dress, knee-high boots, and sunglasses. It's more than a little costumey, but after years of holding court at photo shoots, I know that the getup will at least photograph well. Very retro.

Wrapping the scarf around my head is more complex than I'd anticipated, however. How do celebrities do it so effortlessly? I try tying the ends around my chin, but I look like

Queen Elizabeth with her dogs. Tying the ends behind my head near the nape of my neck simply makes me look like a Von Trapp.

Fifteen minutes of playing with the scarf yields nothing. I've mastered the Erykah Badu-thing, but not the St. Tropez-with-Roger-Vadim-at-my-side thing.

I only have half an hour left. The restaurant will inevitably be crawling with other editors and it's too late to change the location. I have to fix this now.

The answer—so obvious that I can't believe I didn't think of it immediately—pops in my head: Nick.

Nick Darling is one of my closest friends, and a professional makeup artist and hair stylist who just happens to have done practically *everybody*. Julia Roberts, Jessica Simpson, Kate Hudson, Beyoncé, JLo, Reese Witherspoon; you name it, he's glammified them. After months ringing him up on deadline looking for a quote about girl-of-the-moment's makeup, we became "real world" friends, and Nick has slowly wormed his way into the tight-knit group Emily and I share with our friend Jocelyn Reeves, a beauty publicist. Before meeting Nick in person, I incorrectly assumed he was gay, just by sheer virtue of his industry position. It took only five minutes of watching Nick at one of our photo shoots, trying to coax three of the Amazonian models to come back to his pad later for "a small party," for me to realize that my assumption was sorely mistaken.

It rings four times before he answers. "Yeah, it's Nick," he says in a deep, lazy voice that would be rather sexy if I didn't know what a dirty tramp he is—a fact Joss, Em, and I harass him about to no end. (This, of course, only makes him prouder.)

"Hey, babe! It's Bella!"

Short pause.

"Bella? What's wrong?"

“What?” I ask innocently. “Nothing! Why do you automatically assume—”

“Cut the crap,” he interrupts, laughing. “I can hear the panic in your voice. What did you do this time?”

“It wasn’t my fault!” I huff. “I was supposed to dye my hair brown for the July column—a ‘Blondes don’t always have more fun’ angle—and somehow I messed up.”

“What do you mean ‘messed up’?”

I hesitate to give Nick ammunition to use against me later, but fixing my hair in the next half hour is, for now at least, more important than my pride. “It’s . . . orange.”

He snorts. “Only you.”

“You jerk. I’m The Beauty Expert!”

“Beauty expert . . . beauty disaster . . .”

“I didn’t call so you could make fun of me,” I say indignantly. “The *Post* is interviewing me for the Pulse section and I’m supposed to be crosstown for the interview and photos in forty-five minutes.”

“Hey, why didn’t you tell me? That’s a big deal.”

“I *know* it’s a big deal, Captain Obvious. That’s why I’m calling you.”

“Don’t snip at me because you butchered your hair *yet again*. Your problem, not mine. If you’re not nice, I’ll call the *Post* and give an anonymous tip about how the golden girl of the beauty industry is a secret disaster.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” I gasp, horrified.

He erupts into hearty laughter. “No, I wouldn’t. But the threat was worth it just to hear you go all *Dynasty* on me. I have a date in fifteen minutes, so hurry up—how can I help?”

“You have to leave in fifteen minutes?” I ask, my heart still pounding at the thought of Nick exposing my complete and utter ineptitude when it comes to, well, basically everything.

“No, no, the date is in fifteen minutes. So I need to leave in twenty, which will make me about fifteen minutes late. It’s just round the corner.”

Nick’s guerrilla dating tactics never cease to amaze. “Let me get this straight. You’re *planning* to be late? Do you hate the girl? Are you trying to get her to break up with you? Which girl is it, anyway?”

“Annika. The Swede? The one I met at the gym and have been trying to sleep with for two months? She’s way too hot. I need to take her down a few pegs, *then* she’ll sleep with me.”

Despite myself, I smile. “You have serious problems, my friend.”

“Yup. Okay, so, your hair. Tell me again why you decided to dye it an hour before a photo shoot for a major newspaper?”

“I wasn’t thinking.” My voice trails off as I mumble something about glamour and reinvention.

He snickers.

“Nick, come on! I thought I might wear a scarf, but I’ve been playing with one for almost half an hour now, and depending on how I tie it, I either look like a chambermaid, a snake charmer, or Queen Elizabeth.”

“And you’re hoping for Bardot, right?”

“Exactly!”

“How long is the scarf?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is it square? Or is it long and skinny, like a chubby tie?”

“Well, neither. It’s long, but it’s rectangular, like the kind that old French ladies wear. I want to *completely* cover my hair so that no orange peeks out, otherwise I’d just go for the long, skinny headband.”

“Get some bobby pins,” he commands. “Here’s what you need to do . . .”

Nick spends the next ten minutes talking me through it. Once he's done instructing, I'm giddy—it's perfect! (Well, I suppose "perfection" wouldn't *technically* be orange hair with a scarf covering it—but that's a minor detail.)

We make plans for drinks over the weekend with Emily and Joss and hang up, Nick promising to bring along Annika, who will be "putty in my hands" by Saturday, he claims. I'm already ten minutes late and I'm still in my "hair-dye outfit": black bleach-stained Pearl Jam concert T-shirt and red-and-black-tartan flannel boxers. Combined with my chic headgear, it makes for quite a picture.

Back up a step. I'm Bella Hunter, beauty writer for *Enchanté* magazine, the fastest growing, hottest women's magazine in the country. (At least, according to last week's killer article in the *New York Times*, which actually mentioned me by name!) We just passed one million circ, which means that we're under pressure like never before to make each issue innovative, exciting, informative, and—it goes without saying—fun to read. I graduated from college nearly eight years ago and have been with the magazine ever since, from conception to its current status as the industry darling.

Now, most people know all about the fashion industry (or at least *think* they do), but really have no idea what goes on in beauty. Beauty is one of those jobs that you can't quite believe you actually get paid to do. In a nutshell, I research beauty trends—hair, makeup, skincare, spas, celebrity looks . . . you name it—and then write about them. Each day I meet with public relations people, makeup artists, and beauty executives, and they explain to me why their client is the best, their skills the hottest, their company the most innovative. Of course, I get inundated with all the newest makeup and face creams and perfumes before they're released to the public, because I have to test them before creating a nice little write-up to ensure that the masses go

out and buy them. That's the normal part of the job—goes with the territory. But then there are the perks. That's where the real action is.

Let's say I need a haircut, or my roots are threatening to expose my natural hair color (drab brown) to the world. A quick call to a public relations person gets me in—gratis—to see Roberto, or Jean-Pierre, or Lalo, who all own the hottest salons in the city and charge the price of a Louis Vuitton bag for an appointment. Or what if my neck is aching? A normal person with a real job would have to call up a spa and fork over one hundred dollars for a massage. But if I call one of my favorite people (PR execs are miracle workers), I can get in *that very day* to Lei or Relief or one of the other countless chichi spas in New York for a ninety-minute hot-stone massage . . . during work hours . . . as “research” . . . for free. And that miracle antiaging cream that's featured in every magazine and costs \$575? If I call it in, it'll arrive at my desk via messenger within the hour.

And this doesn't even take into account that I've somehow become a bold-faced beau-lebrity who breezes past velvet ropes at clubs and has lunch and dinner at Nobu or Waverly Inn or Pastis every other day with PR people who insist on picking up the tab because a mention in my column ensures product sales.

Honestly? It's mind-blowing. I love to write, I love beauty, I *love* getting free things. And whenever I see myself on Page Six or in Gawker, I think, *I'm a nobody. How the hell did I get here?* Luckiest girl ever, right?

Definitely.

Except . . .

Well . . .

Okay, here's the deal.

I adore beauty, and I'm thrilled to have such a creative, recognized position. (It's a public-service job, really. Any girl

who's ever felt depressed after being dumped can attest to the power of a sexy haircut or great eyeliner.) But while on the surface it seems as though everything's perfect and I'm a whiz at beauty and understanding the market . . . it's all a total fluke. I feel like the biggest fraud this side of James Frey. Let's put aside the fact that I'm a former army brat from small-town Ohio—not Darien or Chatham or Oyster Bay like all the other editors—and have had to spend the better part of the last decade secretly and frantically learning the ins and outs of the charmed life to appear as though I, too, belong. For argument's sake, we'll ignore my pathological need for acceptance and approval—apparently caused by my militaristic father, identified after months of twice-weekly sessions with a very patient therapist down in the Village—which leads me to agree to the most insane requests from my even more insane boss, Larissa. And my appearance? Well, let's just say that while I might appear well groomed and, I suppose, attractive *now*, it's taken me years of beauty-hamstering (you know, running endlessly toward an unattainable physical goal) to get this way: highlighting, hitting the gym, waxing, lasering, blowouts, and manicures ad infinitum. Middle school was a nightmare, and though I “blossomed” toward the very end of high school into something socially and physically acceptable, I've never been able to shake that awkward, outsider, oh-shit-is-everybody-staring-at-me? feeling of panicky otherness. I'm kind of obsessed with my appearance, actually, which is humiliating to admit—who wants to own up to being a narcissist?—but . . . it's the truth. Sometimes I feel as though it's the only thing I *can* control—and even then, I muck it up regularly.

Right, my appearance. I believe in focusing on your positive attributes (otherwise you'll lose sleep over the negative ones!). So, I thank the genetic gods daily for long, thick, wavy hair that could give Elle Macpherson a run for her money. It's still fairly shiny and smooth, considering the hell I've put it

through over the years (current color: orange; twenty minutes ago: blonde; last month: brunette), although one day I'm expecting it all to just fall off. I like my green eyes, too, but they aren't a gorgeous emerald green or even a complex hazel. They're so dark most people think they're brown, which kind of defeats the entire purpose, in my opinion. As for the rest of me, well: I'm five-nine, snub-nosed, slim (but only because I live at the gym, believe me), and have no butt and no breasts, which makes me feel incredibly self-conscious around guys or in a bikini, but *is* pretty useful for wearing clothes. I've been told now and again that I look like a cross between Jennifer Garner and Mandy Moore (I can see the Mandy thing, but I look *nothing* like Jennifer Garner—people automatically make the connection because of my dimples, another plus I try to focus on when the rest of my face is completely broken out or my bottom teeth look like they've become even more crooked), although I wish with all my heart and soul that I looked tough and sexy like Angelina Jolie or Scarlett Johansson, who's a dead ringer for Emily. Instead, I get “cute,” like a koala or some diaper advertisement.

To be perfectly honest, since high school, the years have been kind to me. I felt incredibly ugly then, and I'm still coming to terms with the fact that something, somewhere, eventually went right, and I now look okay—better than okay, maybe—to people. What they see doesn't reflect what I see in the mirror, though. You never shed your gawky preteen skin, and the bigger the trauma, the deeper the scar.

This wouldn't be such a problem—everybody has the occasional twinge of feeling as though they don't belong, don't they?—if I weren't (1) working for the universally acknowledged chicest, snobbiest, most exclusive magazine in the history of the world, and (2) suddenly in possession of a beauty page that was dubbed by the *New York Times* as “the most influential page in beauty.” Translation? I'm not just

some girl who's worked her way up the masthead and writes about lip gloss. I'm "The Beauty Expert." That's what my page is called, at least, and the sudden zoom to the top of the pack has left me with a distinct and all-too-queasy feeling of vertigo.

Millions of people look to me—me!—for beauty advice every month, and I feel as though I have no idea what the hell I'm doing. So when is the other shoe going to drop?

I've been at a crossroads recently, which has led me to countless hours spent listening to the Shins and the Arcade Fire, staring moodily out of my bedroom window onto Fourteenth Street and wondering about my future, like I'm a ridiculous character in some bad Zach Braff movie. Grace Donovan, the beauty director at *Catwalk* magazine, called me last week on the DL to offer a position as her new beauty editor. While, yeah, *Enchanté's* hot now, *Catwalk* has been the industry standard for decades. A job with them would firmly ensconce me on the A-list . . . but there's no way I could hack it at *Catwalk*—surely Grace, an ice queen to the manor born, would see right through me. I live in fear of somebody discovering that I'm a certified beauty disaster. I'm supposed to be the guinea pig, helping women achieve better, lip-glossier, frizz-free lives through beauty, and instead I'm barreling around salons like a train wreck, getting green-enhancement contacts stuck in the back of my eye socket and turning my hair orange.

Really. It's just embarrassing.

But no time to think about that now. I'm supposed to be out the door for this interview in the next five minutes, and I have to at least *attempt* not to look like an utter disaster.

Twenty minutes later, I'm standing outside the door of Pamplona, gathering my courage before walking inside. I catch my reflection in a window and my cheeks begin burning as I survey my outfit. To offset the scarf, I decided

to go for a retro '60s vibe, with a multicolored Pucci mini-skirt and knee-high brown leather stiletto boots. It's either going to flop spectacularly . . . or set a trend. My fingers are crossed.

As I walk in, my eyes dart around the room like heat-seeking missiles, scoping out who's here and where everybody's standing. The media crowd tend to gravitate toward the same two or three venues—whatever's hottest that season—so if you're out and about in the city, you're guaranteed to run into the same few socialites, alcoholics, and writers (all the same, really) over and over. After years of going to beauty events three or four times a week (sometimes more during Fashion Week and the product launch seasons in May and December—in time for the huge September and March fall and spring issues), I've perfected the vital skill of instantaneous room scoping, which helps me walk through a door and immediately head in the appropriate direction. (Friendly editors to the right. Hostile fashionistas to the left: Abort! Abort!)

Beauty and fashion editors clutter the room, scattered between the “civilians”, clustered in groups of threes and fours and clutching cosmos and glasses of red wine (for the polyphenols, of course). I spy Adrienne Loman, beauty director of *Silk*; Danielle Rousseau, director of *Amour*; Heidi Svenson, beauty director of *Flash*; Mandy Milano from *Velvet*; Kelly (or is it Katie?) from *Glamour*; Jill from *Woman*; Courtney from *Plenty*; Sabrina from *Better Ladies*, the new girl from *Cosmo*—check, check, and check. The gang's all here.

Adrienne and I make eye contact across the room, where she's at the expansive glass-covered bar holding court with several attractive but vaguely sleazy-looking men with plentiful stubble and messy hair—probably writers at one of the lad mags. Her face brightens and she smiles, wagging her fingers at me before returning her attention to the group of wannabe lotharios.

“Hi, Bella!” calls Mandy, who’s standing at the bar next to Heidi. The two of them are like Siamese twins; always joined at the hip. Whereas Mandy is a tiny sprite of a girl, with pixie-ish Winona Ryder hair, chocolate brown eyes, and the skinniest frame this side of Hollywood, Heidi is a cool, statuesque brunette, with striking hazel eyes and a killer fashion sense. Heidi and I don’t know each other very well, although we’ve of course chatted countless times at events. Mandy and I worked briefly together a few years ago, before she moved over to *Velvet*, and while we were never best friends, our exchanges at work and at beauty events have always been pleasant and cheery.

Heidi sees me and lights up. “How are you?” She leans in to give me a kiss on each cheek, European-style, then gestures broadly to my outfit. “What’s with all this? I *love* it. Very chic.”

“Very retro,” agrees Mandy. “I read your February column yesterday in Dr. Brandt’s waiting room. Killer! So fabulous.”

“Thanks.” I thought this column—on the latest breakthroughs in lunchtime cosmetic surgery and dermatology, peppered with quotes from the top docs and a few off-the-record celebs and socialites—was insanely dull, but Katharine Whitefield, the steely, Eva Perón–chignoned editor in chief of *Enchanté*, steadfastly rejected all my attempts to liven it up. She perpetually seems less than thrilled by my presence at her magazine; Emily reassures me constantly that I’m simply being paranoid.

“Did you get your invite for the Face Group Paris trip yet?” Mandy asks. “I am *so* excited!”

The Face Group, one of the biggest companies in beauty, is flying a group of ten editors to Paris in late July, five months from now, for five days, and it promises to be one of the most lavish press trips ever. For the uninitiated, a press trip is the *Can-You-Believe-This-Is-Actually-Considered-Work?* practice

of a beauty company taking editors to some far-flung locale for several days and nights of breakfasts, lunches, dinners, cocktail parties, sightseeing, and events, all designated to make you think that their new product is the most amazing thing to ever hit the market in the history of the world. Usually it's just three or four days celebrating a new eye cream or a hairbrush or something similarly unexciting. Those are the smaller scale trips: San Francisco, Miami, Phoenix, Southampton, Las Vegas. Small potatoes. But every once in a while the big companies—the ones that own practically every single beauty item you've ever heard of—throw a press trip. Those trips feature voyages that the average person will experience once in a lifetime, if they're lucky: South Africa, Peru, New Zealand, Egypt, the Maldives, or Fiji. There's a rumor that Ice Skincare is organizing an expedition in Antarctica next year to promote their new Wrinkle-Freezing range. (I'm surprised some PR company hasn't flown all the editors into outer space for a weekend.) *Those* trips are mind-blowing. Private jets, five-star hotels, dinners personally created by Alain Ducasse or Nobu Matsuhisa or Thomas Keller, seventy-five-year-old bottles of wine, four-hour massage “journeys” and helicopter trips to the Pyramids or the ancient Greek ruins or the Great Barrier Reef. Of course, the president or CEO of the company will come with all the chief marketing and advertising executives, and they'll wine you and dine you while extolling the virtues of their face cream or makeup line. And when you leave the cozy fantasy world they've created to return to your life, they give you a parting gift—invariably Gucci, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, or Hermès. (The sunglasses, purses, and wallets are nice, but the thing that *really* gets everybody excited is store credit.)

I studied in Paris my junior year of college—it's where Emily and I met, and we kept in touch until we both moved to New York after graduation—so I'm pretty familiar with

the city, though I haven't been back since I was twenty. Now that I'm older and have a different life perspective, I think the experience will be richer. The City of Lights! The Eiffel Tower! River cruises on the Seine! Eight-hundred-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets at the Ritz! And, of course, *l'amour*. I can practically hear Édith Piaf warbling "La Vie en Rose" right now.

I snap back to reality. "I got my invite a couple of days ago—I can't wait!" I say.

A sweet-looking blond girl with a wide, round face, saucer blue eyes and a sprinkling of freckles across her rosy cheeks and pinkish nose walks by. "Hi, Bella. Hi, Heidi . . . Mandy."

"Hi, there!" Mandy says, turning to the bar to order another Porn-Star Martini—the cocktail *du jour*.

Heidi smiles and nods her head regally. "Sarah. How are you? Enjoying yourself?"

"Yes, thanks," she says, smiling shyly. "Just on my way to the bathroom."

"It's over there," Heidi says, pointing to the back of the restaurant. "Steer clear of Justin Utney, or he'll demand that you dance with him," she laughs. Justin is one of the few male editors in the business—gay, of course.

Sarah scuttles away. "Who was that?" I ask.

"Sarah Jeckles. Assistant at *Beauty* magazine. Really sweet girl, but so shy. Having a conversation with her is painful, poor thing. Why is she even here? Don't the assistants all hang out in the Meatpacking, or somewhere tragic like that?"

"Oh my God, I *love* this song!" Mandy squeals, shimmying by the bar and grabbing my hand. "Come on, Bella, dance with me!"

"Thanks, but I'm here for an interview and quick photo shoot with the *Post* and I'm insanely late." I politely extricate myself from Mandy's grip as I gesture toward a table where

a petite redhead is waving at me. “I think that’s the reporter. Have fun, girls!” I say, excusing myself.

Maddie Daniels, one of Page Six’s new additions, kisses me on both cheeks as I walk over and introduce myself, removing my coat. A slip of a girl with wavy red hair and Lisa Loeb-style glasses, Maddie waves her hand up and down at my outfit. A tape recorder rests on the table in plain sight.

“You Bonneau-Martray girls are so chic! What’s the look, Brigitte Bardot?” she asks, pointing at my scarf, which covers every last inch of orange hair thanks to Nick’s tutorial.

“Right, I was going for Bardot—or maybe Grace Kelly,” I say in my best media voice, trying to shake off the sudden feeling of nervousness that has washed over me. *Sit up straight, Bella! Project your voice! Feign confidence! Just . . . don’t make an ass of yourself by being too confident. Nobody likes a stuck-up snob.*

“So fashion forward. Love it. Tell me, have you ever been interviewed before?”

“No,” I say, silently pondering the countless ways I could possible screw up this interview. As long as I say as little as possible, throwing in the occasional winning smile—a tactic that has guided me through the better part of a decade—I should be fine. Maddie might simply peg me as aloof, like all the other Bonneau girls.

Maddie opens her mouth and a torrent of high-pitched words speeds out. “Don’t worry about it! Relax! I’m interested in your background, where you’re from, how you got this job so young, what it’s like being the biggest columnist at the most popular magazine in the country, how much fun it is being a beauty editor. You know. The usual! If you don’t want to talk about anything, let me know and we won’t even go there. Promise! I’m keeping this recorder here so I don’t have to write anything down. Just chat naturally and I’ll tran-

scribe everything later. If I ask you anything you don't want to answer, feel free to let me know. Okay? Then we'll have the photographer take a few pictures of you afterward, you know, sipping your wine and stuff. Sounds good?"

"Sounds good."

We study the menu and a minute later a waiter appears. Maddie orders a bottle of red wine before rubbing her hands together excitedly. "Okay! So, where are you from?"

"I was an army brat for most of my childhood, but we eventually settled in Ohio. Sweet Falls."

"Right, right," she says, nodding. "And where did you go to college?"

"I went to Northwestern. Journalism major."

"*Whoo*, fancy!" she teases. "How was that? Did you just love it?"

"It was phenomenal. Northwestern is fifteen minutes outside Chicago, and it was my first time near a big city, so we went out frequently. You can imagine what *that* was like—college kids on the loose! And the program, of course, is fantastic. It was there I first entertained the idea of becoming a magazine editor." God, I sound so formal. Loosen up, Bella.

The wine arrives and Maddie waves off the waiter, indicating that we don't need to 'test' it before he pours. "So how did you land a job at *Enchanté*? Bonneau-Martray is one of the hardest companies to break into, but you were hired right out of college, right?"

"Yes," I admit, "but I spent years working at internships during the summer. I lucked into an internship at *Plenty* following my freshman year, and after I had that on my résumé, I was able to get internships at *Bazaar*, *Cosmo*, *Velvet*, and *Beauty*. I essentially harassed the human resources woman at Bonneau until she agreed to meet with me!" I say, chuckling politely, hoping I don't sound too braggy while listing my credentials.

“And fast-forward to now, when you’re one of the most celebrated writers in New York City,” she says admiringly. “How does that make you feel?”

My heartbeat speeds up. How do I answer this question? Should I be modest? Aggressively confident? Do I admit my rampant insecurities? I decide to respond cautiously. “Well, I’m only a beauty writer, and there are so many writers in this city who are better than I am, I couldn’t even begin to count them! But I do feel very lucky to be where I am right now, and all I can hope is that readers are enjoying the column,” I conclude diplomatically. Miss America, eat your heart out.

“Did you always know you wanted to work in beauty?”

“Not at all! I was the original tomboy growing up—climbing trees, camping in the backyard, playing baseball every night with the neighborhood boys. When I was in college, I wanted to be a journalist, but a friend of mine landed an internship at *Plenty*, which is how I got in the door. After that, I interned in fashion, and my next two internships were in beauty. It’s addictive. Once you’ve sampled the beauty goods, it’s hard to go back! I think I’d probably be a terrible journalist, anyway.”

“But, in a way, you are a journalist,” she points out, sipping her wine. Behind Maddie, I notice Heidi dancing seductively by the bar, the gaggle of men smiling drunkenly as they encircle her. “As far as beauty goes, you’re referring, of course, to the swag and all the free products you get.”

“The swag is insane, but it’s the orgy of products that blows your mind. And haircuts, highlights, massages, et cetera, are all on the house. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not a free-for-all—it’s our job to sample the new products and services on the market so we can write about them. If they weren’t free, there’s no way we editors would be able to afford it all!”

“Of course. By the way, let’s talk more about your outfit. Totally stylish!”

I feel my cheeks reddening. “You know,” I say vaguely. “Just wanted to mix it up a little.” Or hide the fact that my hair looks like a school crossing guard vest. Toss up.

“The scarf is to die for! Was it a gift?”

“From one of the PR companies. Q Communications, I think. It’s hard to keep track.”

“I’m not surprised. Back to the swag—you guys get so much stuff, don’t you?”

“You have *no* idea,” I snort, sipping my glass of red wine. So delicious! Maddie ordered a bottle of Stag’s Leap, one of my favorites I’d noticed while perusing the menu. “My bedroom looks like I robbed Barneys.”

She laughs. “What kind of things do you get?”

“Oh, you name it. Purses, plane ticket vouchers, gift cards to the Apple store and Saks, *tons* of designer stuff. Christmas is when the real action is.” I suddenly realize that I probably shouldn’t be discussing this. Everybody knows about the swag—it’s been publicized to high heaven, and some magazines have even banned employees from receiving gifts—but talking about it is frowned upon. Shit. I’ve probably already been too loose lipped.

“Okay, but do you think it’s ethical that you get all of this free stuff?”

I frown, trying to toe the line and produce an acceptable, top-level sanctioned response. “I suppose it’s technically not very ethical to send somebody free purses while you’re sending them products to write about, but no editor worth her salt would cover a bad product just because a publicist had sent her a nice present. Gifts have *no* bearing upon what gets written.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugs. “It seems weird. If I were a reader who knew all the behind-the-scenes dirt, I wouldn’t

trust the magazines as much.” She pauses. “Do you think readers know about the relationships between the publicists and the editors?”

“We recommend great products that actually work, so what’s not to trust? If there’s a little odd action behind the scenes, I don’t think readers really care.”

“What’s the daily schedule of a beauty editor like? Is it all glitz and glam?”

“It *is* glamorous,” I admit. “At least compared to most professions. But, no, it’s not all fun. A typical day . . . let’s see. A few deskside interviews with various beauty companies and publicists—that’s where they present their latest beauty products and try to get you to write about them—maybe a lunch or dinner event, and then a lot of writing and researching.”

“No press trips?”

“Not every day!” I laugh. “Can you imagine? Press trips are a once-every-three-or-four-months kind of thing.”

“So how do you decide what to write about? When you’re not getting bribed by publicists, that is,” she says, winking. Maddie’s pushy, but down-to-earth, I think, deciding that I like her.

“Every time we—that is to say me, the beauty director, the associate beauty editor, or the assistant—meet with a publicist or go to an event, we bring the products back to the office and put them in our beauty closet—”

“Oh! I’ve heard about the beauty closet!” she squeals. “That’s the magic room with Chanel and La Mer products for you to do whatever you want with!”

“In a nutshell,” I smile. “So, once a month, we go through all the new products, and we spot trends or breakthroughs and then write about it. For my column, the beauty director, Larissa, either assigns me a story or lets me pitch ideas to Katharine, our editor in chief.”

My cell phone rings—it's Larissa. I look at Maddie apologetically. "Speak of the devil. I'm so sorry, but it's my boss. It could be an emergency."

"Please, go ahead!"

"Riss?" I answer quietly, putting my hand over the phone and speaking into my lap.

"Doll face! What's the scoop? What are you doing? Are you with the reporter? Remember, don't say anything that makes me look bad, but don't forget to mention what a *wonderful* boss I am. And beautiful. Wonderful and beautiful," says Larissa, her voice perpetually low and smoky after decades of late night partying.

"Yes, we're here at Pamplona. I was indeed just saying how wonderful you are."

"Good girl. Pamplona? Is it *maddeningly* packed?" Larissa is dating an Englishman, Daniel, and has taken to speaking in a faux-Brit accent. Half the time, she sounds like a bad Madonna impersonator, but despite my pleas to speak normally, she insists on making up her own bizarre mid-Atlantic accent.

"It's pretty crowded. Heidi and Mandy, Adrienne, Courtney—"

"That *bitch*," she says savagely. Who knows what that's about? Larissa is notoriously mercurial.

"Yeah . . . *er*. Tons of industry people here, anyway."

"Send them all kisses for me. Listen, a quick question. For the life of me I *cannot*"—(cah-naww-t)—"remember the name of the bloody celebrity spokesperson for Fabergé Cosmetics."

"It's Jessica Biel." I look at Maddie apologetically and mime that I'll be off the phone in two seconds.

"Jessica Biel? I could have sworn it was either Keira or Scarlett."

"No, they offered it to Scarlett, but she passed, and they

were trying to sign Keira, but something came up. So now it's Jessica—the contract is for two years and she's getting four million. Not too shabby, huh?"

"Doll, you're the best. What *would* I do without you?"

"See you Monday," I say, laughing, then I hang up and apologize to Maddie.

"That was your boss? How is she? Do all the editors get along? Are they a catty bunch?"

"No! I mean, there *are* a few . . . but . . . well, no, not really." Shut up, Bella. "Definitely not."

"This isn't part of the article," she says quickly. "Just background for my own benefit."

I hesitate. The more she understands my world, the more she can write, but I don't want to fall into the trap of selective quoting. "We're people. Some editors don't get along, but most do," I say firmly. As if on cue, the door of Pamplona is flung open and in steps Delilah Windsor, the one person in this world I despise.

My former protégée, Delilah was beauty assistant at *Enchanté* years ago, back when I was associate beauty editor. Larissa loathed her on sight—too sugary, too much competition—but I was seduced by Delilah's long flaming-red hair, photo-shoot-ready makeup (beauty editors habitually look put-together, but Delilah is the only one who *always* wears foundation), rosy lips; hypnotic blue eyes; and charming southern accent. What can I say? I'm a beauty girl—a sucker for a pretty face. We'd instantly bonded, Delilah being only two years younger than I and seemingly on the same wavelength with me about everything from our love of the same rock music to a shared despair over the increasing lack of manners in society to a twisted, but normally hidden, sense of humor. I begged Larissa to hire her and quickly took her under my wing as my own. To this day, I can't fathom how she could greet me chirpily every morning, eagerly bring me

coffee, text me nonstop and—the killer—throw my twenty-fourth birthday party, all the meanwhile secretly spreading rumors around the office behind my back. They got back to me, of course, but who was I going to believe: the catty girls in the fashion closet or my darling best work friend? At my party, I caught her straddling Olivier, my college sweetheart of three years, in a dingy, half-hidden stairwell at the back of the bar, her hand down the back of his pants, his hands creeping up the front of her shirt, as they made out. I don't play the "blame the girl, forgive the guy" game—it takes two to tango, and I cut them both out of my life instantly. But what I couldn't forgive Delilah for was the fact that she *wanted* me to see them. She'd sent me a text ("Where R U? Come find me!"), and when I stumbled upon them, she locked her eyes onto mine, leaned her neck to the side for Olivier to kiss, and smiled languidly. Larissa froze her out against Katharine's wishes, refusing to speak to her until at last Delilah found another job two months later at *Velvet*. Delilah plays the victim, feigning innocence when other editors ask why we're not friends anymore, but the story inevitably "leaked out." (Larissa practically bought ads spreading the word.)

Maddie takes one look at my face, which must look as though I've just smelled something revolting, and swivels around in her chair to face the doorway. I take a huge swig of wine, finishing my glass and then pouring myself another.

"Do you know that girl?" she asks.

"Yes. She's another beauty editor."

"Friend of yours?"

I'm silent. I don't want to break down and give Maddie the whole story, but even though it's been nearly five years, I'm incapable of hiding my distaste for Delilah.

"Not really." I gulp more wine, hoping to calm my nerves. Delilah wears a strapless white minidress, her ample breasts smushed up against her collarbone, and walks into the fray,

immediately eclipsing Heidi's position as the center of attention with the lad muggers. She spots me and grins cruelly, blowing me a kiss, which causes Heidi and Mandy to look at each other in alarm, as if worried I'm going to charge over and throw down with Delilah in the middle of the bar.

Maddie looks at me carefully. "We can talk about it later. Next question. What's the best part of being a beauty editor?"

For the next two hours, we talk about the industry and drink, eventually polishing off two bottles. By the time the photographer has finished taking my picture, I'm completely drunk.

"So cute!" Maddie squeals, peering at the camera screen to look at one of the images. "The outfit photographs perfectly. You're going to look gorgeous—not that you need any help."

"Thanks," I say, surreptitiously peeking down at my chest to see if it's red and splotchy from all the wine. The edges of my vision are slightly fuzzy, like in those old films where the director smeared Vaseline on the lens. I think back over my conversation with Maddie. I didn't say anything inappropriate, did I? I've already forgotten half of what we talked about. I've purposely been ignoring the bar area during our conversation, but I allow myself a quick peek. Delilah, mercifully, has left.

"We're done. I think I've got the shot," the photographer says.

"Fab!" Maddie turns to me. "Do you have any plans tonight? A boyfriend?"

"Who has time? My friend Nick keeps trying to set me up with his friends, but they're all sluts," I say, wondering if I'm slurring. "He's straight, though. Cute, too. But a total player. He's a makeup artist."

"Ooh, he sounds fun."

"Who does?"

“Your friend Nick. He sounds fun!”

“Oh, he’s a total blast! We kissed a million years ago, but there’s no real chemistry. He’s my friend, you know?” I say, suppressing a hiccup. “I call him whenever I have a crisis. He’s like my gay best friend . . . except he’s straight. He’s a makeup artist. I had to call him tonight, to help with my orange hair!” I’m putting my phone in my purse and clumsily pawing through my bag, looking for a tube of Kiehl’s # 1 lip balm when I realize what I’ve said.

Maddie looks stunned. “Your what?”

“Nothing.”

She peers at my head. “Is that why you’re wearing a scarf?”

“No.”

“No, seriously!” she laughs. “Show me your hair!”

“I was . . . it’s nothing . . .”

“You know,” she says thoughtfully, “I saw an orange wisp peek out earlier, but I assumed it was my imagination. Were you doing a story?”

“Um . . .” I’m panicking. I’m completely drunk and this writer has just caught onto the fact that I’ve accidentally dyed my hair crimson, and as I see it, my options are either to flee—which is childish and unprofessional and, more importantly, would ruin the article—or swallow my pride and explain the situation. As much as I want to bolt out of the room, I’ve got to choose door number two.

“I was dyeing my hair brunette for an article, and somehow it ended up orange,” I confess, looking around to make sure no beauty girls are in sight before quickly pulling my scarf up a few inches to show Maddie the color.

“Oh *no*. How traumatizing! And right before the photo shoot, too!”

“I was kind of freaking out,” I confess. “I seem to find myself in these ridiculous scenarios a lot.”

“Everybody has bad luck once in a while. Don’t worry about it!” she says, and smiles, looking at me fondly like an indulgent child. “It doesn’t mean anything. And you couldn’t see the orange in the pictures, I promise. It looked mysterious. Very chic. And you’re *Bella Hunter*, so everybody will assume you’re starting a new trend, or something.”

“I hope so,” I say weakly, my head spinning.

Maddie dips her finger in her glass of wine and brings it to her lips, licking the tip thoughtfully. “This article is going to be killer, I can already tell.”

“Please don’t say anything about the orange hair,” I beg.

“Your secret is safe with me,” she says, winking. “The piece runs Monday—you’re going to love it.”