

# The Handbag of Happiness

And other  
misunderstandings,  
misdemeanours  
and misadventures

Alannah  
Hill



The  
Handbag  
of  
*Happiness*

And other misunderstandings,  
misdemeanours and misadventures

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BOOKS



Alannah Hill is an iconic designer, bestselling author and sought-after public speaker. For seventeen years she was the creative director of the trailblazing brand she founded, Alannah Hill. In 2015 she left and launched her own label, Louise Love. Alannah's memoir, *Butterfly on a Pin*, was released to critical acclaim in 2018. She lives in Melbourne with her son and her beaglier, Jack.



For my son, Edward.

Our children will always be the sun around  
which we spin, long after they've untied our  
apron strings. And their baby hands the only  
hands of which we can never let go.

And to you, dear reader.  
Are you tired of opening a book and not seeing  
your name in the dedication? I am too, so  
*The Handbag of Happiness* is also for you!

A LETTER FOR YOU

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## *A letter for you*

Welcome to *The Handbag of Happiness, and Other Misunderstandings, Misdemeanours and Misadventures*.

Stop sweeping and mopping and feeling guilty! You've done the right thing in purchasing my book today, so stuff it inside your handbag, kick off your sky-high heels, run yourself a bath, pour yourself a dessert sherry, love, and listen to me!

You've come to understand that life doesn't go according to plan, no matter how perfectly laid out your life plans might have been. You've told yourself you're young at heart and can get through anything. That age is just mind over matter – and if you don't mind, it doesn't matter. You've already guessed that we can't always get what we want and that often we get what we *don't* want *or* need. You might be marvelling at how parenting wouldn't be so difficult if we didn't care how our children turned out, and how in time our little miracles naturally turn away from us, leaving us bereft, resentful, confused and very, very sad!

Life throws jewels and baubles and sometimes a brooch of bad luck our way, making us tick tick ticking little timebombs ready to explode at any given moment.

*I'm ready to explode at any given moment!*

I explode quite regularly, don't you?

I believed I had no words left in me after I wrote my memoir, *Butterfly on a Pin*. I was bereft of the written word but, unfortunately, I still felt like I was going to explode (at any given moment).

And so I reinvented myself as a public speaker, speaking at events about trauma, resilience, lovelessness, how to become

successful, how not to become successful and how not to make the same mistakes I did.

Reinvention can be a tremendous thing, but then I was back to being just me – because we take ourselves wherever we go.

And so, one blistering, hazy Sunday afternoon around 4 pm ... I started writing again!

Real-life episodes from my life tumbled onto the page, causing an occasional howl of laughter and the odd sparkly tear, stories about what happens when things don't go according to plan – which, in my experience, is pretty much most of the time!

I wanted to jam-pack *The Handbag of Happiness* with black humour about modern-day chaos, with punked-up defiant stories, like the time I turned a Mentos lolly into a tooth and the tooth flew right out of my mouth (in public!). You'll find that splendidly embarrassing story in 'The Handkerchief of Bravado'.

I wanted to write about lament, love, shame, resilience, triumph, silent sadness, delusion, disdain and utopia with mini-epiphanies, anti-epiphanies and a new kind of epiphany I haven't thought of yet.

I hope my stories bring a gentle, hilarious and devilish, zen-like calmness while you sit reading under your favourite tree ...

And I hope to see you soon, just you and misdemeanour me!

*Love, Hannah*

The handbag of  
*happiness*



Can a really, really expensive designer handbag make you happy?

Twelve years ago, I bought a really, *really* expensive handbag because I thought it would make me happy. My Miu Miu handbag dazzled with black and silver Italian sequins, often startling envious bystanders into staring at it until they risked going blind. The interior of the Miu Miu was black kid leather, the clasp innovative and silvery cool. The handbag was so *devastatingly* beautiful that I forked out \$4000 for it – the *most* money I have *ever* spent on an accessory, a shoe or a handbag.

I didn't believe in wasting money on designer clothing, jewellery or handbags. I preferred the knock-offs because I always ruin the interior of a bag. Lipstick, hairspray and lip gloss – they all *love* blowing themselves to pieces inside my handbags. I think it's because I leave my bags in the hot sun and it somehow forces the lipstick and hairspray to just kind of ... blow up – lipstick everywhere!

I believed in spending money on designer kitchens, marble bathrooms, vintage hand-blown pink chandeliers, dodgy real estate and a staggering shares portfolio with \$300 worth of Rio Tinto and a few diamond shares. (Unfortunately, the Rin Tin Tin soon plummeted to catastrophic new lows and looked like it might never regain consciousness.)

But suddenly I wanted to know what it felt like to say, ‘My bag? Oh ... it’s *Miu Miu!*’ You see, I was a successful 45-year-old businesswoman but I’d never owned a designer handbag. I didn’t think I deserved to and, quite frankly, I thought people who purchased handbags over \$1000 were insane! The few people I allowed inside my home would often comment on what they considered a *disappointing*, lacklustre, designer-deprived wardrobe.

‘... not *even* a Dolce & Gabbana *wallet?* Chanel purse? A Balenciaga *tampon* holder? Come *on* ... you *must* have a few vintage Yves Saint Laurent leather totes lying around? They’re iconic!’

Yeah ... and they’re \$50K!

One bitter-cold November afternoon when I was in New York for business, I marched into Bergdorf Goodman on Fifth Avenue, slammed the ludicrous \$4000 onto my Black American Express card and then levitated.

I’d never been so happy in all my life! In fact, I was so happy I levitated six floors up, suddenly appearing in the fancy Bergdorf Goodman restaurant, where I congratulated myself with a Bergdorf burger and Diet Coke. I’d done it! I finally owned a designer handbag. My handbag suggested to everybody I swanked toward that I was a successful person showing economic prosperity – the stains of childhood insecurity miraculously gone!

For ten minutes I was so puffed up with happiness I felt like a bright red helium balloon.

And then the happiness disappeared. And so did the red helium balloon.

After ten minutes, I was back to being me. Just me in an NYC department store, spending \$4000 on a bag in the hope it would make me happy. And it did, but only for ten minutes.

I often ask myself the question, *What does make women happy?*

And the brutal answer is, nothing! Not for more than ten minutes at a time. But perhaps those perfect ten minutes are worth living for, and the hours that circle them worth fighting for, making the ten minutes feel just a little bit longer.



*Postscript:* I was burgled in 2013. My new Mercedes-Benz was stolen from the garage, three laptops, iPads, four phones, Chanel sunglasses ... *all* stolen ... along with the happiness glitter bag! I was devastated. Mainly about the happiness bag! I worked alongside a St Kilda detective and helped him track down the bag. I found it on Facebook! The burglar had given my car and happiness bag to his mother, who of course *had* to show off her new stolen gifts online. The mum stood proudly next to my stolen Mercedes clutching my happiness handbag. Her crim son lay spread-eagled across the car bonnet wearing my black Chanel sunglasses with a sanctimonious crim-like smirk.

Mother and son were eventually caught, but the only thing I really wanted was that bag back.

Two weeks later the detective from St Kilda knocked at my front door. He was hand-delivering my Miu Miu happiness bag. I felt the rush of red helium balloon happiness all over again – but only for ten minutes – and then I was back to being just me!

The frock of  
*how dare you!*

I'm a loner. And if you take the L and R out of loner, there you have it: one.

L one R

Loners like to walk aimlessly because that's what loners do.

It took me years to discover the pleasures of walking aimlessly because you *can't* walk aimlessly when you're strapped into a pair of sky-high heels. It pains me now to think that in my more *immature* years, I thought walking was reserved for those afflicted by singledoom, and isolated co-dependent pessimistic couples. I was very alarmed by walking new mums who hogged the footpaths with great big terrifying prams, but if I saw a dad with a baby in a pram or a toddler in a stroller, I'd smile and wink with a little stroller-by flirting. (I don't know what I wanted but I'm sure it was admirable.) I thought walking was for people with a few extra kilos on the hips, those with a love for the jam donut and an ice-cold beer.

That was until I found the loner in me and hit the streets in vintage Nikes chosen by my son. I soon discovered how light I could feel. My feet were no longer in shoe jail and I found myself taking much bigger walking risks with my new quick steps.

Of an evening, I liked to walk through the streets with Jack the dog and a pair of secateurs, snip-snip-snipping ... a rose here,

a lemon there, a lavender bush over there ... I loved a grand, rundown house amid a grand, rundown garden in a rundown cobbled back street. I loved gardens left to flourish unattended, leaving flowers and citrus fruits *flowing* onto the footpath, meaning they were there *for the taking*.

I called it 'the overhang'.

Mine for the taking!

When I was a high-flying designer, my salary package included a weekly delivery of fresh flowers from legendary Fitzroy florist Flowers Vasette. After I left the company in 2014, the bouquets of freshly cut roses were one of the perks to go. I thought about making a Faustian flower deal with Vasette ... but instead chose to rely on the 'overhang'.

I'd carry armfuls of overhang through the doors of my Victorian house. Each room looked like a funeral parlour but I didn't care. The dining room smelt gorgeous and my bedroom was a funeral parlour dream. I snipped oranges, hydrangeas, garden roses and, one time, I accidentally dug up a boronia bush in a rundown apartment block.

I once asked a policeman (after being chastised for carrying armloads of overhang) to please clarify whether overhang was public or private property. The policeman stared right into my eyes and said in long, slow syllables, 'Well, there's no law stating that a person cannot take flowers or citrus fruit from an overhanging branch – no law that I *know of*. But, look, people just don't like it – in fact, they *hate* you for it.'

I carried on with my evening walking. That policeman had no idea what he was talking about.

But what I discovered through my new passion for walking were people living rough on the streets, their sleeping bags scattered across the footpath. I could feel their intolerable sadness all sausaged up inside.

People living rough on the streets have always made me feel terribly sad, curious and guilty all at the same time. What did I do? Not enough. I didn't know what to do. And that's why I felt guilty. Not to mention Jack's scavenging of their KFC – he wolfed it down, even crunching the chicken bones.



Deep down, I think we're all a little alarmed by the homeless. The combination of hopelessness and dispossession is too much for us to take in, and so we look the other way. I try my best not to be judgemental, but I sometimes fail, so I settle for a little bit of judging here, a little bit of judging there and a lot of judging over there – a little bit of judgy Alannah everywhere!

I have a lifelong habit of stickybeaking into every conversation within earshot, which is why I often find myself conducting *60 Minutes*-style interviews with some of the wilder characters.

Sometimes the saddest part about the interviews were that the person they dreamt of becoming was just a breath away, but through bad luck, drugs or truly awful parents, they found themselves living rough on the streets. I'd learnt a lot in my fifty-six years on this earth – I thought nobody could fool me because I wouldn't allow it. I was reinvented and un-foolable! I'd also developed the art of the bird's-eye view, so that in the middle of a

little self-generated chaos, I'd float up from myself, metres above the carnage, stare down and think, *Oh dear, look at you, Alannah. Are you really going to soldier on with this idea?* And the 'real' me would think, *Well, I'm in the thick of it now ... But I can handle anything – I was, after all, officially Wonder Woman of the Year!\**

But sometimes my bird's-eye view held no perspective at all.

One particular evening I was walking past the tram stop, delicately stepping over the rough sleepers around the supermarket entrance. The magic hour had magically disappeared, and the first blast of night sprawled across the midnight skies. I was eating my fourth mini Magnum (and had two more secretly tucked in my pocket).

And then I saw him. A shadow. An outline – barely a person. Limping toward me in black denim jeans with no shoes, no socks, no shirt. He asked for a flower from my overhang and a lemon. Where was his sleeping bag and the KFC for Jack? My FBI eyes scanned his inflamed red skin and sensed his deep longing for someone or something. He was shaking and convulsing; large sections of his torso and back were blistering, while other parts looked like a family of deathly jellyfish had taken up residence. His head was shaved, showing a poorly executed tattoo that simply said 'what' (no question mark). He was stocky, forlorn, despondent and inexplicably angry.

And then I saw it – he had no ears!

As in *ear-less* ...

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\* It's true! In 2019 I was crowned Momentum Wonder Woman of the Year.

I tried not to stare but I was a long-time stare-bear. I could not look away.

'Flower Lady! Heh! Flower Girl ... you're an angel – you're beautiful ... I can see right into your eyes ... I can see you ...'

*Don't fall for this, Alannah*, I told myself. These kinds of compliments could easily trigger compassion and huge amounts of misplaced sympathy and, to top it off, a momentary loss of judgement. Jack was very much on guard, his beagle nose in overdrive, sniffing murderously. My stickybeak curiosity hit an all-time high. Did he *really* think I was an angel, or was he just in an altered state? I was *all ears*!

My straight-up FBI questions were getting terrific results. He was quite tuned into ears. He told me they had nothing to do with how we hear – he spoke about frequencies and how we only use 10 per cent of our hearing. He thought ears were pointless!

'Ya eardrums are like ... nowhere near ya ears, so ya don't even need ears!'

'So ... we don't need ears but ... where are *your* ears?'

He told me they had been bludgeoned off by a cellmate during a long stint in jail for a crime he didn't commit. He'd traded his ears for a gram of meth.

'What did the person do with your cut-off ears? Who'd even want a pair of ears?'

'Who *wouldn't* want a pair of ears in jail, darlin'? Jesus, you know nuthin' ... ya protected if you can get ears – king of the whole jail ... ya can get anything ya want from the screws. Fuck, darlin', haven'tcha ever been in jail?'

'The pain though? How did you handle the pain?'

'It was nuthin' – like getting a good clip round the ears,' he said grimly, not even aware he'd made a little joke.

No Ears looked sixty-five but was only twenty-three. And once I started with my curious questions, nothing could stop him talking. He told me he'd been in jail half his life, that he knew he was a 'fuck-up', but he wanted to see his parents. They'd closed the shutters on parenting and were ignoring his overtures. He said all he'd done was to steal his parents' three cars, the family caravan and their priceless family heirlooms. He'd once hacked their bank accounts, but he got caught. He didn't understand why his parents had taken out a restraining order and why they wouldn't forgive him.

I wanted to tell No Ears the sad, unholy truth. Drugs and alcohol were not his problem: his reality was. He hadn't felt a molecule of love for himself or from anybody else for years. He was lonely. Afraid. Complicated. A drug addict. Addiction starts with pain and ends with pain. It was impossible for me to imagine No Ears as an innocent newborn with a mother who loved him.

I felt a rush of sympathy and gave him a lemon from the overhang and my spare mini Magnum ice-creams – a kind of love, I told him, even if they had melted.

The next morning, decked out in a brand-new frock and matching runners, I was fast-stepping it home from my son Ed's school run and, to be honest, I thought I'd never looked better. The dress was made from 100 per cent silk with 100 per cent silk lining, and was covered in vintage red roses. It was a glamorous Alannahfied version of a 'housecoat' and was perfect for walking. It was loose where it needed to be and firm where it needed to

be. (I attempted to design matching Spanx but they weren't so triumphant.) The sleeves were bell-shaped and, because I loved a pocket, the frock featured a French envelope-style pocket, lined in red silk, precisely cut to hold a pair of ladies' gardening secateurs. I mean, who knows when I'd be required to do a spot of public pruning?

This particular morning, as I approached my house I saw the boot of my Batmobile was wide open. That was odd. I'd never leave the boot open. Had I left my keys inside?

I walked around to the driver's side and instinctively baulked – there was a strange man in the driver's seat.

It was No Ears.

I couldn't hear my heart beat or feel my legs.

No Ears had followed me home, No Ears had waited for me to slip out and now No Ears was *in my car*.

How. Dare. You.

I quickly turned into a trifecta of the Hulk, Wonder Woman and a rabies-riddled German shepherd, showing no fear. I barked ferociously and saw his arms flailing through the air, his face a black hole as he ripped the rear-vision mirror off and stabbed the sound system with a knife. No Ears had no mercy. He was literally tearing my car apart.

I couldn't believe I'd shared my ice-cream with him. I turned into Lucifer when I saw my handbag of happiness being thrown around the car. I was suddenly the fourth member of a punked-up Charlie's Angels team.

'GET OUT OF MY EFFING CAR,' I yelled at him. 'You're not going to find redemption *there*!'

'This is myyyyyyyyy CAAAAR – you stole it – you're the devil,' he shouted back through the window. 'You're NOT even here. Are you a fucking cop? You're a COP, aren'tcha?'

I stopped shrieking and backed away, my eyes drilling into him. I concentrated on pregnant pauses for maximum effect: 'Just. Get. Out. Of. My. Car.'

Silence ... and then No Ears reanimated.

'WHERE'S the keys? I got a job interview in Adelaide at midnight then I'm drivin' TO AYERS FUCKING ROCK! STOP asking questions! I told that Nazi doctor and all of youse that I'm not doin' it no more. I'm not taking ya pills for any mental illness cos ya know what – I figured it out. I'm not mental – YOUSE all are!'

'I'll give you ten seconds,' I warned. 'I have a weapon in my pocket and I'm not afraid to use it.'

I counted back from ten ...

And then No Ears opened the door and jumped out.

He pushed past me with a giant kick to my shins. I refused to let him see me double over in pain. He ran to the front of the car and stood there with his arms crossed, shouting about how he was going to cut my ears off if I called the police. In my head, I sharpened my blades and reloaded my guns. *I'll fight him with any weapon, even my lady secateurs.*

On high alert and wondering what I might have left on the car console, I ordered him to empty his pockets. For a moment I saw the frightened little boy inside that terrifying man, and how much he hated what he'd become. He'd followed all his compulsions and found nothing on the other side. He broke into

a sprint, and I sprinted after him. I could run in a sky-high heel or a Nike runner – never underestimate the power of a woman who can run in both!

I chased him and somehow backed him up against a brick wall. I could see the outline of my iPhone in his left jeans pocket. I wanted it back – I *needed* it back. There were thousands of videos and photographic evidence to prove Ed loved me when he was younger, and I needed those memories now he was a teen.

Now, readers, I do understand that at *this* point, or perhaps even earlier, most people would have cut their losses and let No Ears have the stupid iPhone. But I wasn't a cutter-of-losses sort of person and so I went him. Like a moth to a flame – like a goth at a ball game.

'Give me back my phone! I can see it. I've got a pair of secateurs in my pocket – I reckon that's what they cut your ears off with! *Secateurs!*'

Bingo!

He stopped moving, reached inside his pocket and dropped the phone. I caught it as it fell, and quickly started to film No Ears while he lunged toward me. Running backwards, I beat him to the car, got inside and locked the doors. He climbed onto the bonnet. The idiot, couldn't he see I was winning?

Once inside the Batmobile, my mood went full feral. I grabbed the car keys from my secret pocket, fired the ignition and floored it. He rolled right off like a stunt double, and I saw him stagger into a block of flats and disappear inside a stairwell.

I drove to the nearest police station, shaken and shattered, but somehow triumphant. The detective told me No Ears was a



lost cause and that he was safer inside the system. The system? Is there a system? When someone like No Ears gets out of jail they go straight back to what they know: fumbled car burglaries. There was no freedom for people like No Ears. Addiction and trauma had wiped away all present and future love.

I drove home slowly, feeling sorry for No Ears.



The next day on my morning walk with Jack, we were both on the lookout. I wondered where No Ears had run to, and made sure my car was locked. The police had offered counselling, but why would I need counselling?

My lady secateurs had picked up a scent and we'd just found the best overhang I had *ever* seen. Magnolias, oranges, lavender and an abundance of red roses. *They'd really POP in my funeral parlour*, I thought. I stood on a nearby bright green milk crate and started to snip ... eight red roses, snip snip, four lemons, snip snip ... snip snip SNAP!

I heard a car screech to a halt beside me: a police car! Perhaps the police were helter-skeltering to let me know No Ears had been caught and was back inside the system.

'Hey! What are you doing? You're destroying public property. Where did you get that crate from? Get down off the crate!'

I didn't like the policeman's accusatory tone. *How dare you*, I thought ... *How dare you tell me I'm a destroyer!*

My instinct was to sprint away like a red rose on ice ... but then my special bird's-eye view came to the rescue.

*Alannah, are you really going to soldier on with this idea?*

Before I could answer a cocky yes to that inner voice, I heard a scream from the house next door. It was a posh-looking local, crying and shaking. She told the policeman she'd just been robbed. Out of nowhere a man had grabbed her handbag right off her arm in *broad daylight!*

Before the constable could open his mouth, I fired off questions. 'Was he alone, love? Did he steal money? What was he wearing? Have you seen him around here before? Are you all right, love? What was on his feet?' And finally, 'What did he look like?'

The woman cried, 'As weird as it sounds, he had *no ears*.'

Suddenly I was *all ears!*

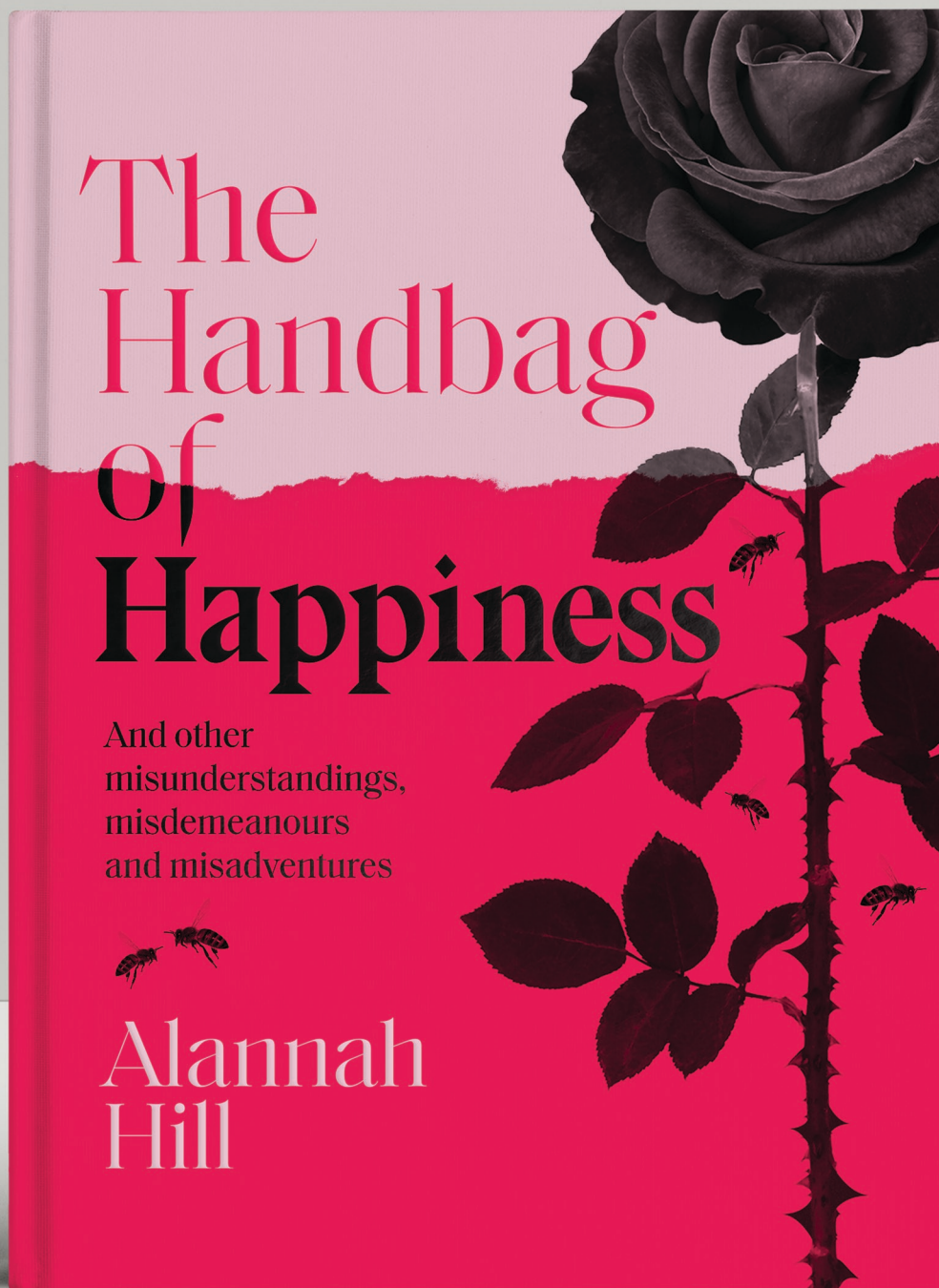
The policeman was too. He seemed to have forgotten my snip-snip-snipping and turned his attention to someone who really needed it. And with that, I turned on the heel of my vintage Nikes and headed toward the beach, walking aimlessly. It's what loners do; we walk aimlessly.



*Postscript:* On the way home, I flirted with a dad pushing a stroller. I revisited one of the best overhangs I have *ever* seen and, you might be pleased to know, I went back and recovered the overhang, the one that was rightfully mine!

***The Handbag of Happiness***  
**by Alannah Hill is available now in all**  
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*Hardie Grant*  
BOOKS