

Praise for *The Point of Rescue* and Sophie Hannah

'Sophie Hannah just gets better and better. Her plots are brilliantly cunning and entirely unpredictable. The writing is brilliant and brings us uncomfortably close to the dark, ambivalent impulses experienced by the parents of difficult, demanding children'

Guardian

'The fresh and the original have been Hannah's hallmark since her debut *Little Face*. This third book is her most accomplished yet . . . As the revelations tumble forth, the tension is screwed ever tighter until the final shocking outcome. Exemplary'

Daily Express

'A compelling and disquieting story, told with the author's usual panache'

Sunday Telegraph

'Sophie Hannah is adept at picking creepy scenarios that are guaranteed to terrify, with plot complications that keep you guessing until the last page. Hannah doesn't allow the tension to slacken for a second in this addictive, brilliantly chilling thriller'

Marie Claire

'Chilling, compulsive and with a genius twist'

Elle

'This is a superior exercise in storytelling that takes time away from the killer-on-the-loose cop chase to reflect on the chillingly plausible thin line between parenting and psychosis'

Financial Times

'The genius of Hannah's domestic thrillers – along with the twistiest plots known to woman – is that she creates ordinary people whose psychological quirks make them as monstrous as any serial killer'

Guardian

Also by Sophie Hannah

Little Face
Hurting Distance
The Other Half Lives
A Room Swept White
Lasting Damage
Kind of Cruel
The Carrier
The Orphan Choir
The Telling Error
The Monogram Murders
A Game for All the Family

About the author

Sophie Hannah is the internationally bestselling author of ten psychological thrillers, as well as *The Monogram Murders*, the first Hercule Poirot mystery to be published since Agatha Christie's death and approved by her estate. Sophie is also an award-winning short story writer and poet. Her fifth collection of poetry, *Pessimism for Beginners*, was shortlisted for the 2007 TS Eliot Award and she won first prize in the Daphne du Maurier Festival Short Story Competition for 'The Octopus Nest'. Her psychological thriller *The Carrier* won the Crime Thriller of the Year award at the 2013 Specsavers National Book Awards, and *The Point of Rescue* and *The Other Half Lives* have both been adapted for television as *Case Sensitive*. Sophie lives in Cambridge with her husband and two children, where she is a Fellow Commoner at Lucy Cavendish College.

S O P H I E
H A N N A H
the point
of rescue



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For Susan and Suzie

I

Monday, 6 August 2007

Or your family.

The last three words are yelled, not spoken. As Pam elbows her way through the crowd in front of me, I hear nothing apart from that last spurt of viciousness, her after-thought. She made it four syllables instead of five: ‘Or your fam-ly’; four blows that thump in my mind like a boxer’s jabbing fist.

Why bring my family into it? What have they ever done to Pam?

Beside me, several people have stopped to stare, waiting to see how I will react to Pam’s outburst. I could shout something after her but she wouldn’t hear me. There is too much noise coming from all directions: buses screeching around corners, music thumping out of shop doorways, buskers beating unsubtle notes out of their guitar strings, the low metallic rumble of trains into and out of Rawndesley station.

Pam is moving away from me fast, but I can still see her white trainers with luminous patches on the heels, her solid, square body and short, aubergine-coloured spiky hair. Her livid departure has cut a long, straight furrow out of the moving carpet of people. I have no intention of following her, or looking as if I am. A middle-aged woman whose shopping bags have carved deep pink grooves into the skin on her arms

I

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repeats, in what she probably imagines is a loud whisper, what Pam said to me, for the benefit of a teenage girl in shorts and a halter-necked top, a newcomer to the scene.

I shouldn't care that so many people heard, but I do. There is nothing wrong with my family, yet thanks to a purple-haired midget I am surrounded by strangers who must be convinced that there is. I wish I'd called Pam that to her face instead of letting her have the last word. The last three words.

I take a deep breath, inhaling traffic fumes and dust. Sweat trickles down both sides of my face. The heat is thick; invisible glue. I've never been able to handle hot weather. I feel as if someone is blowing up a concrete balloon inside my chest; this is what anger does to me. I turn to my audience and take a small bow. 'Hope you enjoyed the show,' I say. The girl in the halter-necked top smiles at me conspiratorially and takes a sip from the ridged plastic cup she's holding. I want to punch her.

Once I've out-stared the last of the gawpers, I start to march in the direction of Farrow and Ball, trying to burn off some of my indignant energy. That's where I was going, to pick up paint samples, and I'm damned if I'll let Pam's tantrum change my plans. I push through the mobile crush of bodies on Cadogan Street, elbowing people out of my way and enjoying it a bit too much. It's myself I'm furious with. Why didn't I reach out and grab Pam by her ridiculous hair, denounce her as she had denounced me? Even an uninspired 'Fuck off' would have been better than nothing.

Inside Farrow and Ball someone has turned the air-conditioning up too high; it whirs like the inside of a fridge. The place is empty of customers apart from me and a mother and

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daughter. The girl has bulky metal braces on her top and bottom teeth. She wants to paint her bedroom bright pink, but her mother thinks white or something close to white would be better. They squabble in whispers in the far corner of the shop. This is the way people ought to argue in public: quietly, making sure that as few words as possible are overheard.

I tell the sales assistant who approaches me that I am just browsing, and turn to face a wall of colour charts: Tallow, String, Cord, Savage Ground. I'm supposed to be thinking about paint for Nick's and my bedroom. *Tallow, String, Cord* . . . I stand still, too full of rage to move. The sweat on my face dries in sticky streaks.

If I see Pam again when I leave here, I'll knock her to the ground and stamp on her head. She's not the only one who can take things up a notch. I can overreact with the best of them.

I can't shop if I'm not in the mood, and I'm definitely not in the mood now. I leave the chilled air of Farrow and Ball behind me and head back out into the heat, embarrassed by how shaken I feel. I scan Cadogan Street in both directions but there is no sign of Pam. I probably wouldn't knock her to the ground – in fact, I definitely wouldn't – but it makes me feel better to imagine for a few seconds that I am the sort of person who strikes quickly and ruthlessly.

The multi-storey car park is on the other side of town, on Jimmison Street. I sigh, knowing I'll be dripping with sweat by the time I get there. As I walk, I rummage in my handbag for the ticket I'll need to feed into the pay-station slot. I can't find it. I try the zipped side pocket but it's not there either. And I've forgotten, yet again, to make a note of where I left my car, on what level and in which colour zone. I am always in too much of a hurry, trying to squeeze in a shopping trip

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that has been endlessly postponed and has finally become an emergency between work and collecting the children. Is there something about work I need to remember? Or arrange? My mind rushes ahead of itself, panicking before any cause for panic has been established. Do I remember where I put the scoping study I did for Gilsenen? Did I fax my sediment erosion diagrams to Ana-Paola? I think I did both.

There's probably nothing important that I've forgotten, but it would be nice to be certain, as I always used to be. Now that I have two small children, my work has an added personal resonance: every time I talk or write about Venice's lagoon losing dangerous amounts of the sediment it needs to keep it healthy, I find myself identifying with the damn thing. Two strong currents called Zoe and Jake, aged four and two, are sluicing important things from my brain that I will never be able to retrieve, and replacing them with thoughts about Barbie and Calpol. Perhaps I should write a paper, complete with scientific diagrams, arguing that my mind has silted up and needs dredging, and send it to Nick, who has a talent for forgetting he has a home life while he is at work. He is always advising me to follow his example.

Only forty minutes to get to nursery before it closes. And I'm going to waste fifteen of those running up and down concrete ramps, panting, growling through gritted teeth at the rows of cars that stubbornly refuse to be my black Ford Galaxy; and then because I've lost my ticket I'll have to find an official and bribe him to raise the barrier to let me out, and I'll arrive late at nursery again, and they'll moan at me *again*, and I haven't got my paint samples, or the toddler reins I was supposed to buy from Mothercare, to stop Jake wriggling free from my grasp and launching himself into the middle of busy

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roads. And I can't come into Rawndesley again for at least a week, because the Consorzio people are arriving tomorrow and I'll be too busy at work . . .

Something hits me hard under my right arm, whacking into my ribs, propelling me sharply to the left. I reel on the kerb, trying to stay upright, but I lose my balance. The tarmac of the road is on a slant, tilting, rising up to meet me. Behind me, a voice yells, 'Watch out, love – watch . . .' My mind, which was hurtling in the direction of anticipated future catastrophes, screeches to a halt as my body falls. I see the bus coming – almost on top of me already – but I can't move out of its path. As if it is happening somewhere far away, I watch a man lean forward and bang his fist on the side of the bus, shouting, 'Stop!'

There's no time. The bus is too close, and it isn't slowing down. I flinch, turning away from the huge wheels and using all the power in my body to roll away. I throw my handbag and it lands a few feet in front of me. I am lying in between it and the bus, and it occurs to me that this is good, that I am a barrier – my phone and diary won't get crushed. My Vivienne Westwood mirror in its pink pouch will be undamaged. But I can't be lying still. I must be moving; the tarmac is scraping my face. Something shunts me forward. The wheels, pressing on my legs.

And then it stops. I try to move, and am surprised to discover that I can. I crawl free and sit up, preparing myself for blood, bones poking through torn flesh. I feel all right, but I don't trust the information my brain is receiving from my body. People often feel fine and then drop dead soon afterwards; Nick is for ever accosting me with gloomy anecdotes from the hospital to that effect.

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My dress is shredded, covered in dust and dirt. My knees and arms are grazed, bleeding. All over me, patches of skin have started to sting. A man is swearing at me. At first it appears that he is wearing beige pyjamas with a funny badge on them; it is a few seconds before I realise he's the bus driver, my almost killer. People are shouting at him, telling him to lay off me. I watch and listen, hardly feeling involved. There has already been shouting in the street today. This afternoon, screaming in public is normal. I try to smile at the two women who have nominated themselves as my main helpers. They want me to stand up, and have taken hold of my arms.

'I'm all right, really,' I say. 'I think I'm fine.'

'You can't sit in the road, love,' one of them says.

I'm not ready to move. I know I can't sit in the road for ever – the team from the Consorzio are coming, and I have to cook supper for Nick and the kids – but my limbs feel as if they've been welded to the tarmac.

I start to giggle. I could so easily be dead now, and I'm not. 'I've just been run over,' I say. 'I can sit still for a few seconds, surely.'

'Someone should take her to a hospital,' says the man who hit the side of the bus.

In the background, a voice I sort of recognise says, 'Her husband works at Culver Valley General.'

I laugh again. These people think I have time to go to hospital. 'I'm fine,' I tell the concerned man.

'What's your name, love?' asks the woman who is holding my right arm.

I don't want to tell them, but it would sound churlish to say so. I could give a false name, I suppose. I know which name I would give: Geraldine Bretherick. I used it recently,

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when a taxi driver was showing too much interest in me, and enjoyed the feeling that I was taking a risk, tempting fate a little bit.

I am about to speak when I hear that familiar voice again. It says, ‘Sally. Her name’s Sally Thorning.’

It’s odd, but it’s only when I see Pam’s face that I remember the firm, flat object that rammed into my ribs. That’s why I fell into the road. Pam has a face like a bulldog: all the features squashed in the middle. Could the hard flat thing have been a hand?

‘Sally, I can’t believe it.’ Pam crouches down beside me. The skin around her cleavage wrinkles. It is dark and leathery, like a much older woman’s; Pam isn’t even forty. ‘Thank God you’re all right. You could have died!’ She turns away from me. ‘I’ll take her to hospital,’ she tells the people who are bending over me, their faces full of concern. ‘I know her.’

In the distance, I hear someone say, ‘That’s her friend,’ and something in my brain explodes. I stand up and stagger backwards, away from Pam. ‘You hypocrite! You’re not my friend. You’re an ugly, evil gremlin. Did you push me into the road deliberately?’ Today it is normal to slander people in the street. But the onlookers who until now have been keen to help me don’t appear to know this. Their expressions change as it dawns on them that I must be mixed up in something bad. Innocent people do not fall in front of buses for no reason.

I pick up my handbag and limp towards the car park, leaving Pam’s astonished face behind me.

When I pull into Monk Barn Avenue with my cargo of children, an hour later than usual, I still have that

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lucky-to-be-alive feeling, an unreal glow that coats my skin, even the patches that are throbbing, where the blood is congealing into scabs. It's similar to how I felt after I had Zoe, with diamorphine coursing through my veins: unable to believe what has just happened.

I am pleased to see my house for the first time since we bought it. Relieved. Given a choice between being dead and living here, I would choose the latter. I must remember to say this to Nick next time he accuses me of being too negative. I still think of it as our new house, although we've lived here for six months and it's only a flat, part of what must once have been a spacious, elegant house that had some integrity. More recently, a team of architectural philistine vandals has divided it into three, badly. Nick and I bought a third. Before we moved here we lived in a three-hundred-year-old three-bedroom cottage in Silsford with a beautiful enclosed garden at the back that Zoe and Jake loved. That Nick and I loved.

I pull up beside the kerb, as close to our house – flat – as I can get, which today is reasonably close; it won't be too much of a slog getting the children and their bags and toys and comfort blankets and empty bottles to the front door. Monk Barn Avenue is two neat rows of four-storey Victorian terraces with a narrow strip of road in the middle. It wouldn't be so narrow if there were not cars parked bonnet to bumper along both sides, but there are no garages, so everybody parks on the street. This is one of my many gripes about the place. In Silsford we had a double garage with lovely blue doors . . .

I tell myself not to be absurdly sentimental – garage doors, for Christ's sake – and turn off the ignition. The engine and radio fall silent and in the silence the thought rushes back: Pam Senior tried to kill me today. No. *She can't have*. It makes

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no sense. It makes as little sense as her screaming at me in the street.

Zoe and Jake are both asleep. Jake's mouth is open as he snores and grunts softly, his plump cheeks pink, sweaty brown curls stuck to his forehead. His orange T-shirt is covered in stain islands, remnants of the day's meals. Zoe, as always, looks neater, with her head tilted and her hands clasped in her lap. Her curly blonde hair has expanded in the heat. I send her to nursery every day with a neat ponytail, but by the time I arrive to pick her up the bobble has vanished and her hair is a fluffy gold cloud around her face.

My children are breathtakingly beautiful, which is odd because Nick and I are not. I used to worry about their obvious perfection, in case it meant they were likely to be snatched by a ruthlessly competitive parent (of which there are many in Spilling), but Nick assured me that the blotchy-faced, snot-encrusted little characters at Kiddiwinks nursery look every bit as irresistible to their parents as Zoe and Jake do to us. I find this hard to believe.

I check my watch: seven fifteen. My brain is blank and I can't decide what to do. If I wake the children, either they will be manic after their early evening recharge and up causing chaos until ten o'clock, or they'll be groggy and whiny and have to be rushed straight to cot and bed, which will mean they will miss their supper. Which will mean they will wake up at five thirty and shout 'Egg-IES!' – their pet name for scrambled eggs – over and over again until I haul my exhausted body out of bed and feed them.

I pull my mobile phone out of my handbag and dial our home number. Nick answers, but takes a while to say, 'Yeah?' His mind is on something else.

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‘What’s up?’ I ask. ‘You sound distracted.’

‘I was just . . .’ Full marks to me. Nick is too distracted, apparently, even to finish his sentence. I hear the television in the background. I wait for him to ask me why I’m late, where I am, where the children are, but he does none of these things. Instead, he startles me by chuckling and saying, ‘That is *such* bollocks! As if anyone’s going to fall for that!’ I know from long years of experience that he is talking to the *Channel 4 News*, not to me. I wonder if Jon Snow finds him as irritating as I sometimes do.

‘I’m outside, in the car,’ I tell him. ‘The kids are both asleep. Turn the news off and come and help.’

If I were Nick, I would be outraged to find myself on the receiving end of a command like this, but he is too good-humoured to take offence. When he appears at the front door, his dark curly hair is flat on one side, which I know means he has been lying on the couch since he got in from work. On my phone I can still hear Jon Snow.

I lower my window and say, ‘You forgot to put the phone down.’

‘Jesus, what happened to your face? And your dress? Sally, you’re covered in blood!’

That’s when I know I’m going to lie. If I tell the truth, Nick will know I’m worried. He’ll be worried too. There will be no chance of pretending it never happened.

‘Relax, I’m fine. I fell over in town and got a bit trampled, but it’s nothing serious. A few scrapes and bruises.’

‘A *bit* trampled? What, you mean people actually walked over you? You look a state. Are you sure you’re okay?’

I nod, grateful that it never occurs to Nick not to believe me.

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'Shit.' He sounds even more concerned as his eyes move to the back seat of the car. 'The kids. What shall we do?'

'If we let them sleep, we could be sitting in the car till nine o'clock and then they'll be up bouncing on the sofa cushions until midnight.'

'If we wake them, they'll be a nightmare,' Nick points out.

I say nothing. I would rather have the nightmare now than at nine o'clock, but for once I don't want to be the one to decide. One of the main differences between me and Nick is that he goes out of his way to put off anything unpleasant, whereas I would always prefer to get it over with. As he regularly points out, this means that I actively seek out the problems he sometimes gets to avoid altogether.

'We could order a takeaway, bring a bottle of wine outside and eat in the car,' Nick pleads. 'It's a warm night.'

'*You* could,' I correct him. 'I'm sorry, but you're married to someone who's too old and knackered and grumpy to eat pizza in her car when there's a perfectly good kitchen table within reach. And why only one bottle of wine?'

Nick grins. 'I could bring two if that'd swing it.'

I shake my head: the party-pooper, the boring grown-up whose job description is to spoil everyone's fun.

'You want me to wake them up.' Nick sighs. I open the car door and ease my wounded body out. 'Jesus! Look at you!' he shouts when he sees my knees.

I giggle. Somehow, his overreaction makes me feel better. 'How did an alarmist like you ever get a job working in a hospital?' Nick is a radiographer. Presumably he would have been sacked by now if he made a habit of startling prone patients by shouting, 'Jesus! I've never seen a tumour that size before.'

II

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I open the boot and start to gather together the children's many accessories while Nick makes his first tentative advance towards Zoe, gently urging her to wake up. I am a pessimist by nature, and guess that I have about twenty seconds to get through the front door and well away from the danger zone before the children detonate. I grab all the luggage and my house key (Nick has, of course, forgotten to put the door on the latch and it has swung closed), and head for shelter. I sprint up the path with nursery bags and blankets trailing in my wake, let myself in, and, gritting my teeth against the pain that I know will come when I try to bend and unbend my stinging knees, begin my ascent.

Number 12A Monk Barn Avenue has one extraordinary feature: it consists almost entirely of stairs. Oh, there's a strip of hall, and a narrow stretch of landing, and if you're really lucky you might stumble across the odd room, but basically what we bought was stairs in a good location. A location, crucially, that we knew would guarantee places at Monk Barn Primary School for Zoe and Jake.

Perversely, I already resent the school for making me move house, so it had better be good. Last year it was featured in a television documentary, the verdict of which was that there were three state primaries – Monk Barn, one in Guildford and one in Exeter – that were as good as any fee-paying prep school in the country. I'd have opted to pay, and stay in our old house, but Nick had a miserable time as a teenager at a very expensive public school, and refuses even to consider that sort of education for our children.

From our bathroom window there's a good view of Monk Barn Primary's playground. I was disappointed when I first saw it because it looked ordinary; I'd uprooted my family to

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be near this place – the least they could have done was carve some scholarly Latin texts into the concrete.

I wince as I drag my battered, stiffening body up the first stretch of stairs, past the downstairs loo, the bedroom that Zoe and Jake share, and the bathroom. The centrepiece of our flat is a large rectangular obstruction that looks as if it might have been sculpted by Rachel Whiteread. Inside this white-walled blockage is the house's original staircase that now leads to flats 12B and 12C. It annoys me that there is a big box containing someone else's stairs inside my home, one that eats up half the space and means I keep having to turn corners. When we first moved here, I kept leaping to my feet as I heard what sounded like a stampede of buffaloes on the landing. I soon realised it was the sound of our neighbours' footsteps as they went in and out, that the thudding wasn't coming from inside my new home – it only sounded as if it was.

As I limp past the kitchen, I hear screams from the road. The children are awake. Poor Nick; he would never suspect that I rushed inside to avoid having to deal with the mayhem I knew was coming. I turn another corner. Nick's and my bedroom is a few steps up on the left. It is so small that, if I stood in the doorway and allowed myself to fall forward, I would land on the bed. The idea appeals to me, but I keep going until I get to the lounge, because that's the only room that has a view of the street, and I want to check that Nick is holding his own against the combined forces of Zoe and Jake.

Tutting at the browning banana skin that perches like an octopus on the arm of the sofa, I walk over to the lounge window. Nick is on his knees on the pavement with a wailing Zoe tucked under one arm. Jake is lying in the road – in the gutter, to be precise – red in the face, screaming. Nick tries to

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scoop him up, fails, and nearly drops Zoe, who screams, ‘Dadd-ee! You nearly dropped m-ee!’ She has recently learned how to state the obvious and likes to get plenty of practice.

Our neighbours Fergus and Nancy choose this moment to pull up in their shiny red two-seater Mercedes. Roof down, of course. Fergus and Nancy own the whole of number 10 Monk Barn Avenue in its original form. When they pull up in their sports car after a hard day’s work, they can go straight inside, pour themselves a glass of wine and relax. Nick and I find this incredible.

I open the lounge window to let some air in, put the phone back in its holder, and turn off the TV. The best way to stop my wounded skin from stiffening is to keep moving – this is what I tell myself as I quickly repair the lounge: cushions back on the sofa, TV guide back on the coffee table, Nick’s jacket to the wardrobe, race down to the kitchen with the banana skin. If I ever leave Nick for another man, I’m going to make sure it’s someone tidy.

Back in the lounge – our only large room – I unpack the nursery bags, sorting things into the usual five piles: empty milk bottles and juice cups, dirty clothes, correspondence that needs attention, junk that can be binned, and artwork that must be admired. The children are still howling. I hear Nick trying, as tactfully as possible, to fend off Fergus and Nancy, who always want to stop for a chat. He says, ‘Sorry, I’d better . . .’ Jake’s yelping drowns out the rest of his words.

Nancy says, ‘Oh dear. Poor you.’ She might be addressing Nick or either of the children. She and Fergus often look anxious when they see us struggling with Zoe and Jake. Now they probably think something terrible has happened at nursery – a rabid dog on the loose, perhaps. They’d be

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horrified if I told them this was normal, that tantrums on this scale are a twice-daily occurrence.

By the time Nick manages to lug the kids up to the kitchen, I have put on a load of washing, wiped all the surfaces, spooned some defrosted shepherd's pie into two bowls and put it in the microwave. My children spill into the kitchen like survivors from the wreck of the *Titanic*: damp, unkempt and full of complaints. I tell them in a bright voice that it's shepherd's pie for tea, their favourite, but they appear not to hear me. Jake lies face down on the floor and sticks his bottom in the air. 'Bottle! Cot!' he wails. I ignore him, and continue to talk brightly about shepherd's pie.

Zoe sobs, 'Mummy, I don't *want* shepherd's pie for supper. I want shepherd's *pie!*'

Nick zigzags around her to get to the fridge. 'Wine,' he growls.

'You're *having* shepherd's pie, darling,' I tell her. 'And you, Jakie. Now, come on – everyone sit down at the table!'

'Nooo!' Zoe screams. 'I don't want that!'

Jake, seeing Nick pouring wine into two glasses, sits up and points. 'Me!' he says. 'Me turn.'

'Jake, you can't have wine,' I tell him. 'Ribena? Orange squash? Zoe, you don't want shepherd's pie? What do you want, then? Sausages and baked beans?'

'Noooo! I said – Mummy, listen. I said, I don't want shepherd's pie, I want shepherd's *pie.*'

My daughter is very advanced for a four-year-old. I'm sure none of her contemporaries would think of such a simple yet brilliant way to infuriate a parent.

'Want dat!' Jake points again at Nick's wine. 'Want Daddy drink! Srittle!'

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Nick and I exchange a look. We are the only people in the world who understand every word Jake says. Translation: he wants to sit on the sofa with a glass of wine and watch *Stuart Little*. I can relate to this. It's almost exactly what I want to do, give or take the odd detail. 'After supper, you can watch *Stuart Little*', I tell him firmly. 'Now, Zoe, Jake, let's all sit down at the table and you can have some nice shepherd's pie, and you can tell me and Daddy all about your day. We can have a nice family chat.' I sound like a naïve idiot even to myself. Still, you have to try.

Nick picks Jake up off the floor and puts him in a chair. He wriggles off and wipes snot all over Nick's trousers. Zoe clings to my leg, still insisting that she both does and doesn't want shepherd's pie. 'Okay,' I concede, moving mentally to Plan B. 'Who wants to watch *Stuart Little*?' This suggestion attracts an enthusiastic response from the junior members of the household. 'Fine. Go and sit on the sofa, and I'll bring your supper in there. But you have to eat it all up, okay? Otherwise I'll turn the TV off.' Zoe and Jake run out of the room, and begin to clamber up to the lounge, giggling.

'They won't eat it,' Nick tells me. 'Zoe'll sit with hers on her lap, mashing it around with her fork, and Jake'll throw his on the floor.'

'Worth a try,' I call over my shoulder as I race upstairs with a bowl of shepherd's pie in each hand.

Jake reaches the top of the stairs first. When Zoe's head appears a second or two later, he smacks her lightly on the nose. She hits him back and he falls into me. I fall too, and spill both bowls of food. When Nick arrives to see what's happened, he finds Zoe bawling on the stairs, Jake bawling in the lounge doorway, and me on my hands and knees on the

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carpet, collecting fluffy mincemeat, carrots, mushrooms and lumps of potato to put back into the bowls.

'Right,' says Nick. 'If everybody stops crying *right now* . . . you can have some chocolate!' He's got a half-unwrapped Crunchie bar in his hand and is holding it as a highwayman might hold his gun, pointing it at the children. I see undiluted desperation in his eyes.

Zoe and Jake are writhing on the floor, demanding both chocolate and *Stuart Little*. 'No chocolate,' I say. 'Bed! Right now!' I abandon the shepherd's pie clear-up operation, pick them up and carry them downstairs to their room.

Utterly determined to complete the task I have set myself no matter what obstacles I encounter, I finally manage to get Zoe into her nightie and Jake into his pyjamas and sleeping bag. I tell them to wait while I get their bedtime milk, and when I come back to their room, they are sitting side by side on Zoe's bed. Zoe has her arm round Jake. They both smile up at me. 'I brushed my teeth, and Jake's, Mummy,' says Zoe proudly. I notice a pink and a blue toothbrush protruding from under Jake's cot, and large white smears on the carpet and on Jake's left cheek.

'Well done, darling.'

'Tory?' says Jake hopefully.

'Which story do you want?'

'Uttyumbers,' he says.

'Okay.'

I take Dr Seuss's *Nutty Numbers* off the shelf and sit down on the bed. I read it without interruption, and Zoe and Jake take turns to lift the flaps and find the hidden pictures. When I've finished, Jake says, 'Gain,' so I read it again. Then I put Zoe in her bed and Jake in his cot and sing them their

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goodnight song. I made it up when Zoe was a baby, and now Nick and I have to sing it every night while the children laugh at us as if we're eccentric old fools, singing a song that contains their names and lots of words that don't exist.

I kiss them goodnight and close their door. I don't understand children. If they're shattered and want to go to bed, why don't they just say so?

I find Nick sitting cross-legged on the floor, a dustpan and brush idle in his lap. He is watching the news again and drinking his wine, surrounded by small piles of cold shepherd's pie. Nick loves every sort of news: 24, Channel 4, CNN. He's hooked. Even when nothing of any interest is happening, he likes to hear all about it. 'How were they?' he asks.

'Fine,' I tell him. 'Sweet. Aren't you going to . . . ?' I point at the mess.

'In a sec,' he says. 'I'm just watching this.'

It's not good enough. Not now, not on the day that somebody tried to kill me. Is it possible to push a person under a bus and not be trying to kill them?

'You could do both at the same time,' I say. 'Watch the news and clear up the mess.' Pointless; it's the sort of comment someone like Nick doesn't understand.

He looks at me as if I'm crazy.

'I'm just saying, it'd be more efficient.'

When he sees I'm serious, he laughs. 'Why don't I just go straight to the last day of my life?' he says. 'That'd be really efficient.'

'I'm going to ring Esther,' I say through gritted teeth, picking up the phone to take into the bathroom. A warm bath with lots of lavender-scented bubbles in it will make everything all right.

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‘Remember to make dinner and sleep and have tomorrow’s breakfast at the same time,’ Nick calls after me. ‘It’s more efficient.’

He is joking, and has no idea that I often do cook and make phone calls simultaneously. I’ve made entire meals one-handed, or with the phone tucked under my chin.

I turn on the hot tap and dial Esther’s number. Hearing my voice, she says what she always says. ‘Have you saved Venice yet?’

‘Not yet,’ I tell her.

‘Damn, you’re slow. Pull your finger out. Decontaminate those salt-marshes.’

I work three days a week for the Save Venice Foundation, which Esther thinks is a hilarious and sensationalist name for an organisation. We have been best friends since school. ‘Talking of slow . . .’ She groans. ‘The Imbecile is *such* an imbecile. You know what he did today?’ Esther works at the University of Rawndesley. She’s secretary to the head of the history department. ‘A load of e-mails came through to me that he needed to look at and respond to, right? Six, to be exact. So I forwarded them to him, and – because I know what an imbecile he is – I gave him two options: either he could reply directly, himself, or he could tell me what he wanted me to say and I’d reply for him. Two clear options, right? You understand the choice on offer?’

I say I do, and hope her story won’t go on too long. I want her to listen, not talk. Does that mean I’ve decided to tell her?

‘Three hours later, I get seven e-mails in my inbox, from the Imbecile. One tells me that he has replied to all the messages himself. Great, I think. The other six are the replies, to all sorts of important bods in the world of history academia

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– yawn! – that he thinks he’s sent to the bogs, but that in fact he’s sent to me. He just clicked on reply! He doesn’t know that if someone forwards you an e-mail and you click on reply, you’re replying to the forwarder, not the sender of the original message! And this guy’s the head of a university department!’

Her irate tone makes me weary. I ought to be angry, but instead I am numb.

‘Sal? You there?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What’s wrong?’

I take a deep breath. ‘I think a childminder called Pam Senior might have tried to kill me this afternoon.’

Pam has never been Zoe and Jake’s childminder but she’s one of our regular babysitters and she helped Nick when I was away for a week last year. She is usually cheerful and chatty, if a little opinionated about things like dummies and the MMR vaccine. When I saw her in Rawndesley I was pleased; I thought it would save me a phone call. On weekday evenings I’m often so tired by the time I’ve made and eaten supper that I find it hard to produce full, cogent sentences.

I called out to Pam and she stopped, apparently pleased to see me. She asked after Zoe and Jake, whom she calls ‘the bairns’, and I told her they were fine. Then I said, ‘Are you still okay to have Zoe for the autumn half-term week?’ I had my mum or Nick’s mum lined up for most of the school holidays, but both were busy that week in October.

Pam looked shifty, as if there was something she wasn’t telling me. The expression on my face must have been tragically-let-down-needy-working-mother to the power of

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a hundred as I anticipated being hit by a sudden childcare catastrophe. As indeed I was.

Monk Barn Primary's autumn half-term coincides with a conference I have to attend. Most of the Venetian environmental scientists as well as experts from all over the world who are working on how to preserve Venice's lagoon are convening for five days in Cambridge. As one of the organisers, I have to be there, which means I have to find someone to look after Zoe. I tried nursery first, hoping they'd have her back just for the week, but they're full. Once Zoe leaves at the beginning of September, another child will take her place. So I thought of Pam, who had helped me before.

'No probs,' she said when I asked her three months ago. 'I've stuck it in the diary.' There was no element of uncertainty, nothing about pencilling it in and confirming later. Reliability, I would have said before today, is Pam's main characteristic. Her navy blue NatWest Advantage Gold diary is never out of her hands for long.

Pam appears to have no interests. She is single, and her social life, from what I can tell, revolves entirely around her parents, with whom she still goes on holiday every year. They stay in hotels that belong to the same chain, all over the world, and clock up reward points that Pam is very proud of. Whenever I speak to her she gives me her latest score, and I try to look impressed. She has also told me defiantly that she and her mum always make sure to leave hotel rooms spotless: 'There'd have been nothing for the maid to do after we left – nothing!'

She doesn't read books or go to the cinema or theatre, or watch television. She isn't keen on exercise of any sort, though she always wears lilac and pale pink sportswear: jogging

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bottoms or cycling shorts, and skimpy Lycra vests under zip-up tracksuit tops. Art doesn't interest her: she once asked me why I have 'all those blobby pictures' on my walls. She isn't a fan of cooking or eating out, DIY or gardening. Last year she told me she was giving up babysitting at weekends because she needed more time for herself. I have no idea what she might do with that time. She once said that she and her parents were going on a course to learn how to make stained-glass windows but she never mentioned it again and nothing ever seemed to come of it.

Today, in answer to my question about the autumn half-term, she said, 'I've been meaning to ring you, but I've not had a minute.' She was trying to sound casual, but her squirming gave the game away.

'There isn't a problem, is there?' I asked.

'Well . . . there's a bit of a snag, yeah. The thing is, a neighbour of mine's having to go into hospital that week, and . . . well, I feel awful about cancelling on you, but I've kind of said I'll have her twins for the week.'

Twins. Whose mother would be paying Pam double what I'd be paying for Zoe. Was she seriously ill? I wanted to ask. A single parent? I needed to know that Pam was letting me down for a good reason.

'I thought we had a firm arrangement,' I said. 'You told me you'd put it in the diary.'

'I know. I'm really sorry, but, like I say, this lady's going into hospital. I can try and find you someone else, perhaps. Tell you what, why don't I ask my mum? I bet she'd do it.'

I um-ed and ah-ed. A large part of me was tempted to say, 'Yes, please!', the part that yearned to overlook all inconvenient details for the sake of being able to think of the matter

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as resolved. Sometimes – no, often – I feel as if my brain and life will shatter into tiny pieces if I am given one more thing to sort out. As it is, I start each day with a list of between thirty and forty things I need to do. As I blast my way through the hours between six in the morning and ten at night, the list goes round and round in my head, each item beginning with a verb that exhausts me: ring, invoice, fax, order, book, arrange, buy, make, prepare, send . . .

It would have been a great relief to be able to say, ‘Thanks, Pam, your mum’ll do nicely.’ But I’ve met Pam’s mother. She’s short and very fat and a smoker, and moves slowly and with difficulty. In the end I said no thanks, I’d find someone else myself. I couldn’t resist adding, nosily, that I hoped Pam’s neighbour would make a speedy recovery.

‘Oh, she’s not ill,’ said Pam, as if I ought to have known. ‘She’s going in for a boob job. She’ll be in and out in a couple of days, but the thing is, her husband’s away that week and so’s her sister, so she’s got no help, and you can’t lift anything heavy after a boob job, so she won’t be able to lift the twins. They’re only six months old.’

‘A boob job? Are you serious?’

Pam nodded.

‘When did she ask you?’ I must be missing something, I thought.

‘A couple of weeks ago. I’d say I’d have Zoe as well, only I’m not allowed more than three at a time, and I’ve already got another child booked in for that week.’

‘I don’t understand,’ I said, keeping my voice level. ‘I rang you to organise this months ago. You said you’d put it in the diary. When your neighbour asked you, why didn’t you just say no, that you’re already booked up?’

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Pam's mouth twitched. She doesn't like to be challenged. 'Look, I thought I'd be okay with four, just for the week, but my mum said – and she's right – that it's not worth breaking the rules. Childminders aren't allowed more than three at a time. I don't want to get into any trouble.'

'I know, but . . . sorry if this sounds petty, but why are you apologising to me instead of to your neighbour, or the parent of this other child?'

'I thought you'd take it better than either of the other mums. You're more approachable.'

Great, I thought: punished for good behaviour. 'Would it make any difference if I said I'd pay double? If I paid whatever the twins' mum was going to pay you, just to look after Zoe? I will, if that'll make a difference.' I shouldn't bloody well have to, this is outrageous, a voice in my head was shouting. I smiled my most encouraging smile. 'Pam, I'm desperate. I need someone to look after Zoe that week, and she knows you and really likes you. I don't think she'd be happy going to someone she doesn't know so well . . .'

All the warmth was draining from Pam's face as I spoke. Watching her eyes, I felt as if I was transforming into something disgusting in front of her, as if my skin was turning to green slime. 'I'm not trying to rip you off,' she said. 'I don't want more money out of you. What do you think this is, some kind of scam?'

'No, of course not. I just . . . look, I'm sorry, Pam, I don't want to whinge, but I'm a bit upset about this. I can't believe you can't see it from my point of view. I've got a really important conference that I *have* to go to. I've spent months setting it up. I can't not go, and Nick needs to work too – he's used up all his holiday this year. And you're letting me down

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for the sake of some woman who wants bigger boobs? Can't she get her silicon implants another time?' At no point did I raise my voice.

'She doesn't want bigger boobs! She's having a breast *reduction*, actually, not that you'd care! Because she's got chronic backache and it's ruining her life and her children's lives, because she can't get out of her bed some days, she's in that much agony!'

I started to backtrack and make apologetic noises – of course, if I'd misunderstood, if it was a genuine medical problem – but Pam wasn't listening. She called me a snobby bitch and said she'd always known I was trouble. And then she started screaming at me to get the fuck out of her face, to leave her alone, that she had never liked me, that she wanted nothing to do with me, never wanted to see me again as long as she lived. Or my family.

I cannot imagine ever yelling at anyone the way Pam yelled at me, not unless they'd harmed my children or set fire to my house. I say this to Esther and she says, 'Or pushed you under a bus.' She giggles.

'She didn't push me.' I sigh, pulling my hair away from my neck so that my skin is touching the cool rim of the bath. The water isn't as warm as I normally have it because it's so humid tonight and even the idea of hot water on my wounds is painful. 'If she'd pushed me, she wouldn't have come over and tried to help, would she?'

'Why not?' says Esther. 'People often do things like that.'

'Like what? Which people?' I stir the cloudy water with my toes, annoyed that there isn't more foam; I should have emptied the bottle. The bathroom is another thing that irritates me about our flat. It's too narrow. If you sit on

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the loo and lean forward, you can touch the cupboard door with the tip of your nose.

‘I don’t know which people,’ Esther says impatiently. ‘I just know I’ve heard of that kind of thing before: the guilty party helps his victim in order to look innocent.’ In the background, I hear her microwave beeping. I wonder what she’s heating up tonight – a ready meal or leftover takeaway. A fleeting pang of envy for Esther’s single, hassle-free life makes me close my eyes. She lives alone in a spacious purpose-built flat at the top of a curvaceous, design-award-winning tower block in Rawndesley, with a large balcony that overlooks both the river and the city. Two whole walls of her lounge are made of glass, and – the thing I find hardest to bear – she has no stairs.

‘Anyway, I doubt she was trying to kill you. She probably saw you walking ahead of her, saw a bus coming along, and was so angry that she couldn’t resist. That’d explain why she was all smiles once you’d been hurt – she realised she’d turned her revenge fantasy into reality and regretted it.’

Esther is an enthusiastic imaginer of scenarios. She is wasted at Rawndesley University; she ought to be a film director. Over the years she has been certain that her boss the Imbecile is: gay, a Jehovah’s Witness, in love with her, a Scientologist, a freemason, bulimic and a member of the BNP. Usually I find her flights of fancy entertaining, but tonight I want seriousness and sense. I’m exhausted. I’m worried about summoning the energy to climb out of this bath.

‘Rawndesley was heaving today,’ I say. ‘Someone could easily have knocked into me by mistake.’

‘I suppose so,’ Esther grudgingly admits.

‘Oh, God. I can’t believe I called Pam an ugly gremlin. I

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might even have called her evil. I think I did. I'll have to ring her and apologise.'

'Don't bother. She'll never forgive you, not in a million years.' Esther chuckles. 'Did you really call her that? I'm having trouble imagining it. You're so prim and proper.'

'Am I?' I say wearily. There are things about me that Esther doesn't know. Well, one thing. She once warned me not to tell her anything that really needs to stay secret: 'If it's a good story, I won't be able to resist telling everyone.' I had the impression she was using the word 'everyone' in its fullest sense.

'So you don't think I need to . . . tell the police or anything?'

Esther squawks with laughter. 'Yeah, right. What are they going to do, appeal for witnesses? I can see the headline now: "The Notorious Bus-pushing Incident of 2007".'

'I haven't even told Nick.'

'God, don't tell him!' Esther snorts, as if I've suggested telling my window cleaner: someone entirely irrelevant. 'By the way, that story about the neighbour and the agonizing back-ache? Complete crap. The woman's got six-month-old twins, right?'

'Yeah.'

'So, she's been breast-feeding like the clappers and her tits have gone all droopy. She wants to swap them for new, perky ones. The medical gubbins is strictly for emotional blackmail purposes, a way of forcing her husband to part with the cash.'

I hear Nick yelling my name. I ignore him, but he keeps calling me. Normally he gives up almost immediately. 'I'd better go,' I tell Esther. 'Nick wants me. It sounds urgent.'

'Nick? Urgent?'

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‘Unlikely but true. Look, I’ll ring you back.’

‘No, take me with you,’ Esther orders. ‘You know how nosy I am. I want to hear what’s going on in real time.’

I make a rude face at the phone, then balance it on the side of the bath as I wrap a towel round myself. Too late, I realise it’s white and might end up with smears of red on it. I know we’re out of Vanish, so that’s two new items for my list: buy more stain-remover, wash blood out of towel.

I take the phone up to the lounge. Nick is still sitting beside the mounds of shepherd’s pie on the carpet, still watching BBC News 24. ‘Have you seen this?’ he says, pointing at a photograph of a woman and a young girl on the screen. A mother and daughter. Across the bottom of the picture there’s a caption that tells me their names. They are dead; the caption says that too. I try to take it in: the words and the photograph together. The meaning. ‘It’s been all over the news for days,’ said Nick. ‘I keep forgetting to tell you. Not often Spilling makes the national headlines.’

Through a fuzzy layer of shock, I become aware of several things. The woman looks like me. It’s frightening how similar we look. She has the same thick, long, wavy dark brown hair, so brown it’s almost black. Mine feels like wire-wool when it gets too dry, and I bet hers does too. Did. Her face is long and oval-shaped like mine, her eyes big and brown with dark lashes. Her nose is smaller than mine and her mouth slightly wider, and she’s prettier than I am, but still, the overall effect . . .

Nick doesn’t need to explain why he wanted me to see her. He says, ‘They lived about ten minutes from here – I even know the house.’

‘What’s going on?’ Esther’s voice startles me. I wasn’t aware I had the phone pressed to my ear. I can’t answer

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her. I am too busy staring at the words on the screen: ‘Geraldine and Lucy Bretherick deaths: police suspect mother killed herself after killing her daughter.’

Geraldine Bretherick. No, it can’t be her. And yet I know it must be. A daughter called Lucy. Also dead. *Oh, God, oh, God.* How many Geraldine Brethericks can there be who live in Spilling and have daughters called Lucy? *Geraldine Bretherick.* I nearly pretended it was my name today after my accident, when I didn’t have the guts to tell the women helping me that I’d rather be left alone.

‘Are you okay?’ Nick asks. ‘You look a bit odd.’

‘Sally, what’s going on?’ demands the voice at my ear. ‘Did Nick just say you look odd? Why, what do you look like?’

I force myself to speak, to tell Esther that everything is fine but I have to go – the kids need attention. People who don’t have children never challenge that excuse; they shut up quicker than a squeamish chauvinist at the mention of ‘women’s troubles’. Unless they’re Esther. I cut her off mid-protest and take the battery out of the phone so that she can’t ring back.

‘Sally, don’t . . . Why did you do that? I’m waiting for a call about cycling on Saturday.’

‘Ssh!’ I hiss, staring at the television, trying to focus on the voiceover, what it’s saying: that Mark Bretherick, Geraldine’s husband and Lucy’s father, found the bodies on his return from a business trip. That he is not a suspect.

Nick turns back to the screen. He thinks I’m eager to watch this because it’s the sort of news I ‘like’, because it’s domestic and not political, because the dead woman is a mother who looks as if she might be my twin, and lives near us. And the dead girl . . . I check the caption again, trying to use as many

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facts as I can get my hands on to beat down the horrible haze that's fogging up my brain. Maybe I got it wrong, maybe the shock . . . but no, it definitely says 'deaths'. Lucy Bretherick is dead too.

The girl in the photograph looks nothing like Zoe, and I can't explain the relief I feel. Lucy has long dark hair like her mother's, and she's wearing it in two fat plaits, one with a kink in it, so that it turns halfway down and points back towards her neck. Her two hair bobbles have white discs with smiling faces on them. Her grin reveals a row of straight, white, slightly prominent teeth. Geraldine is also smiling in the photograph, and has her arm draped over Lucy's shoulder. One, two, three, four smiles – two on the faces and two on the bobbles. I feel sick.

Geraldine. Lucy. In my head, I've been on first-name terms with these people for a little over a year, even though they have never heard of me. Even though we've never met.

The voiceover is talking about other murder-suicide cases. About parents who take their children's lives and their own. 'Little girl was only six,' says Nick. 'Doesn't bear thinking about, does it? Mother must have been fucked in the head. Sal, put the battery back in the phone, will you? Can you imagine how that child's dad must feel?'

I blink and look away. If I'm not careful, I will start to cry. I can feel the pressure at the back of my eyes, in my nose. If I do, it won't occur to Nick that I have never before been reduced to tears by a news report. Usually if children are involved I shudder and order him to change channels. It's easy to put horror to one side if one isn't personally involved.

At last the picture disappears. I couldn't take my eyes off it and I'm pleased it's gone. I don't want to see those faces again, knowing what happened. I nearly ask Nick if any of the news

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reports he's seen have explained why – why did Geraldine Bretherick do this? Do the police know? But I don't ask; I can't cope with any more information at the moment. I'm still reeling, trying to make it part of what I know about the world that Mark Bretherick's wife and daughter are dead.

Oh, Mark, I'm so sorry. I want to say these words aloud but of course I can't.

When I next focus my attention on the screen, three men and a woman are talking in a studio. One man keeps using the phrase 'family annihilation'. 'Who are these people?' I ask Nick. Their faces are solemn, but I can tell they're enjoying the discussion.

'The woman's our MP. The bald guy's some pompous wanker sociologist who's helping the police. He's written a book about people who kill their families – he's been on telly every night since it happened. The guy with glasses is a shrink.'

'Are . . . are the police sure? The mother did it?'

'It said before they're still investigating, but they reckon it's a murder by the mother followed by suicide.'

I watch the bald sociologist's pale lips as he speaks. He is saying that female 'family annihilators' – he makes quote marks in the air – have been much less common than male ones until now, but that he is certain there will be more in due course, more women who kill their children and themselves. Across his chest, a caption appears: 'Professor Keith Harbard, University College London, Author of *Homewreckers: Extreme Killing Within the Family*'. He is talking more than anyone else; the other speakers try and fail to interrupt his flow. I wonder what he would classify as a moderate killing.

The woman sitting beside him, my MP, accuses him of scare-mongering, says he has no business making such grim

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predictions on the basis of no evidence. Does he know how counter-intuitive it is for a mother to kill her own offspring? This case, she says, if indeed it does turn out to be murder-suicide, is a freak occurrence, will always be a freak occurrence.

‘Mothers do kill their own kids, though.’ Nick joins in the debate. ‘What about that baby that was thrown off a ninth-floor balcony?’

It’s all I can do to stop myself from screaming at him to shut up. At all of them. None of them knows anything about this. *I don’t know anything about it. Except . . .*

I say nothing. Nick has never been suspicious of me and he must never be. I shiver as I imagine something terrible happening to my own family. Not as terrible as this, what’s on the news, but bad enough: Nick leaving me, taking the kids every other weekend, introducing them to his new wife. No. That can’t happen. I must behave as if my connection with this story is the same as Nick’s: we are both concerned strangers with no personal knowledge of the Brethericks.

Suddenly the discussion is over, and there is a man on the screen, with an older man and woman on either side of him. All three of them are crying. The man in the middle is speaking into a microphone at a press conference. ‘Are they relatives?’ I ask Nick. Mark would be too upset to talk about the deaths of his wife and daughter. These people must be close friends, perhaps his parents and brother. I know he has a brother. There’s no family resemblance, though. This man has dark brown hair with streaks of grey in it, sallow skin. His eyes are blue, with heavy lids, and his nose is large and long, his lips thin. He is unusual-looking but not unattractive. Perhaps these are Geraldine’s relatives.

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'I loved Geraldine and Lucy with all my heart,' says the younger of the two men, 'and I will always love them, even now they're gone.'

Why didn't Mark tell me his wife was the image of me? Did he think it would make me angry? Make me feel used?

'Poor sod,' says Nick.

The man at the microphone is sobbing now. The older man and woman are holding him up. 'Who is he?' I ask. 'What's his name?'

Nick looks at me strangely. 'That's the madwoman's husband,' he says.

I am about to tell him he's wrong – this man is not Mark Bretherick, looks nothing like him – when I remember that I am not supposed to know this. The official story, the one Mark and I drafted together, is that we never met. I remember us laughing about this, Mark saying, 'Although obviously I won't go round *saying* I've never met or heard of a woman called Sally Thorning, because that'd be a bit of a giveaway!'

The madwoman's husband. Nick is laid-back about day-to-day life, but I've never met anyone more black and white about anything that qualifies as an important issue. He wouldn't understand at all if I told him, and who could blame him?

I say quietly, 'I don't think that's the husband, is it?' Impartial, uninvolved.

'Of course it's the husband. Who do you think he is, the milkman?'

As Nick speaks, another caption appears, black letters on a strip of blue that cuts the weeping man with the long nose and heavy-lidded eyes in half. My mouth opens as I read the words: 'Mark Bretherick, husband of Geraldine and father of Lucy'.

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Except that he isn't. He can't be. I know, because I spent a week with Mark Bretherick last year. How many can there be in Spilling, with wives called Geraldine and daughters called Lucy?

'Where do they live?' I ask Nick in a stretched voice. 'You said you knew the house.'

'Corn Mill House – you know, that massive dobber mansion near Spilling Velvets. I cycle past it all the time.'

I feel faint, as if every drop of blood in my body has rushed to my head and filled it, pushed out all the air.

I remember the story, almost word for word. I have a good memory for words, and names. *It didn't even used to be a corn mill. There was a corn mill nearby, and the people who owned it before us were pretentious gits, basically. And Geraldine loves the name. She won't let me get rid of it, and believe me, I've tried.*

Who said that to me?

I spent a week with Mark Bretherick last year, and the man I'm looking at is not him.

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Police Exhibit Ref: VN8723

Case Ref: VN87

OIC: Sergeant Samuel Kombothekra

**GERALDINE BRETHERICK'S DIARY, EXTRACT 1 OF 9
(taken from hard disk of Toshiba laptop computer at Corn
Mill House, Castle Park, Spilling, RY29 0LE)**

18 April 2006, 10.45 p.m.

I don't know whose fault it is, but my daughter now believes in monsters. They are never mentioned in our house, so she must have picked it up at school, like God (about whom she'd heard so little at home that for the first few months she called him Gart – Mark found this hilarious) and her obsession with the colour pink. Education, even the fraudulent (sorry, creative) Montessori variety that we pay through the nose for, is no more than a process of brainwashing – it does the opposite of train children to think for themselves. Anyway, Lucy's terrified of monsters now, and insists on sleeping with a night light on and her bedroom door open.

The first I knew of it was when I put her to bed yesterday at eight thirty, turned the light out as I always do and closed the door. I felt the usual sweeping relief all through my body (I don't think I could explain to anyone how important it is to me to be able to close that door) and I punched the air in triumph as I often do, though never if Mark is watching. I don't mean to do it, but my arm moves before my brain has time to stop it. I feel as if I've escaped from prison – all my dread disappears; even the certainty

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that it will return tomorrow can't stifle my joy. When Lucy goes to bed, my life and home are my own again and I can be myself, free, doing whatever I want to do without fear, thinking about whatever I want to think about for a few precious hours.

Until yesterday, that is. I closed the door, punched the air, but before I was able to take more than a couple of steps towards freedom, I heard a loud wailing noise. Her. I froze, trying to close my ears from the inside. But I wasn't mistaken, it wasn't a cat outside or a car coming up the lane, or bell-ringers at the church across the fields (though it's bliss when this happens the other way round: you hear a faint whine or some other high-pitched noise that you're certain is your child wanting attention, *more* attention, and then – oh, thank you, Gart! – it turns out to be only a car alarm, and you're saved). But I wasn't, because the source of the awful whining noises was my daughter.

I have a rule that I've made for myself, and that I stick to *come what may*: whatever I feel inside, however I feel like behaving towards Lucy, I do the opposite. So when she cried after I'd closed her door, I went back into her room, stroked her hair and said, 'What's the matter, love?' because what I really wanted to do was drag her out of her bed and shake her until her teeth fell out.

There must be parents who are so strict and terrifying that their children make sure never to annoy or inconvenience them. Those are the people I both envy and loathe. They must be cruel, vicious, intimidating ogres, and yet – lucky them – their children tiptoe round them trying not to be noticed. Whereas my daughter's not at all frightened of me, which is why she screamed after I closed her door, even

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though she was absolutely fine: bathed, fed, kissed, hugged, the blessed recipient of at least three bedtime stories.

I need her not to be around in the evenings. Evenings! Anyone would think I meant from six until midnight or something extravagant like that. But no, I settle for a mere two and a half hours between eight thirty and eleven. I am physically unable to stay up any later than that, because every minute of my day is so exhausting. I run around like a slave on speed, a fake smile plastered to my face, saying things I don't mean, never getting to eat, enthusing wildly over works of art that deserve to be chopped up and chucked in the bin. That's my typical day – lucky me. That's why the hours between half past eight and eleven must be inviolable, otherwise I will lose my sanity.

When Lucy told me she was scared of monsters getting her in the dark, I explained as reasonably and kindly as I could that there was no such thing as a monster. I kissed her again, closed the door again, and waited on the landing. The screams got louder. I did nothing, just listened for ten minutes or so. I did this partly for Lucy's sake – I knew there was a danger (*never underestimate the danger or something awful might happen*) of my smashing her head against the wall because I was so furious with her for taking up ten extra minutes, minutes that were mine, not hers. I cannot spare her any time apart from what I already give her, not even a second. I don't care if that sounds bad – it's the truth. It's important to tell the truth, isn't it, if only to yourself?

When I was certain I had my rage under control, I went back into her room and reassured her, again, that monsters weren't real. But, I said – ever the understanding, reasonable

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mummy – I would leave the landing light on. I closed the door, and this time I got halfway downstairs before she started screaming again. I went back up and asked her what was wrong. The room was still too dark, she said. She insisted that I leave the landing light on and her door open.

‘Lucy,’ I said in my best authoritative-but-kind voice, ‘you sleep with your door closed. Okay, love? You always have. If you want, I’ll open the curtains a bit so that some light comes in from outside.’

‘But it’ll get dark outside soon!’ she screamed. By this point she had worked herself up into hysterics. Her face was snot-streaked and red. My palms and the skin between my fingers started to itch, and I had to press my hands together to stop myself from punching her.

‘Even when it’s dark, some light will come in, I promise. Your eyes’ll adjust, and then the sky won’t look quite so black.’ How do you explain to a child the grey illumination of the night sky? Mark’s the intellectual in our family, the one worth listening to. (What does Mummy know about anything of any importance? Mummy has sold her soul. She contributes nothing worthwhile to society. That’s what Daddy thinks.)

‘I want my door open!’ Lucy howled. ‘Open! Open!’

‘Sorry, darling,’ I said. ‘I know you’re scared, but there’s really no need to be. Goodnight. See you in the morning.’ I walked over, pulled her curtains half open, left the room and closed the door.

Her screams intensified. Screams for which there was no cause; her room was no longer dark in any way. I sat cross-legged on the landing, fury ripping through my body. I couldn’t comfort Lucy any more because I couldn’t think

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of her as a scared child – the screams were too much like a weapon. I was her victim now and she was my torturer. She could ruin my evening, and she knew it. She can ruin my whole life if she wants to, whereas I can't ruin hers because a) Mark would stop me, and b) I love her. I don't want her to be unhappy. I don't want her to have a horrible mother, or to be abandoned, or to be beaten, so I'm trapped: she can make me suffer as much as she wants and I can't retaliate in kind. I have no control – that's what I hate more than anything.

The shrieks showed no sign of stopping. If I hadn't known better, I'd have thought Lucy was being burned alive in her bedroom, from the noise she was making. After a while she got out of bed and tried to open the door herself. I held on to the handle from the outside to keep it shut. Then she really started to panic. She isn't used to doors that won't open. I still couldn't feel anything but rage, though, and I knew I had to wait, so I sat there until Lucy's voice grew hoarse, until she was begging me to come back in, not to leave her alone. I don't know how long it was – maybe half an hour – before I started to feel sorrier for her than I felt for myself. I stood up, opened her door and went back into the room. She was in a heap on the floor and when she saw me she grabbed my ankles and started babbling, 'Thank you, Mummy, thank you, oh, thank you!'

I picked her up and sat her on my lap in the chair by her window. Sweat dripped from her forehead. I calmed her down and cuddled her, stroking her hair. Once she has made me angry, I can only be kind like this when she's reached the point of total despair and all the fight has gone out of her. Anything less and it's hard for me to see her as deserving of sympathy, this well-fed, beloved child who has

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everything a girl of her age could want – a secure home, an expensive education, nice clothes, every sort of toy, book and DVD, friends, foreign holidays – and who is *still*, in spite of it all, complaining and crying.

When Lucy is desperate, grateful and limp with the relief of having been forgiven, I find it easy to feel the way a mother should. I wish I could awaken this protective feeling in myself more easily. Once she was sick before I could bring myself to comfort her, and I vowed I'd never let it go that far again.

I patted her back and she soon fell asleep on my knee. I carried her over to her bed, laid her down and covered her with her quilt. Then I left the room and closed the door. I had won, though it had taken a while.

I didn't say anything to Mark about what had happened, and I was sure Lucy wouldn't either, but she did. 'Daddy,' she said at breakfast this morning, 'I'm scared of monsters, but Mummy wouldn't let me have the door open last night and I was frightened.' Her lip trembled. She stared at me, wide-eyed with resentment, and I realised that my tormentor, my torturer, is only a child, a naïve little girl. She is not as scared of me as I often fear she is, or as I am of myself, or as she should be. It's not her fault – she's only five.

Daddy sided with his precious daughter, of course, and now there is a new system: door open, suitable night light in place (not too bright but bright enough). I can't object without revealing my own irrationality. 'It makes no difference to us whether her door's open or closed,' Mark said when I tried to persuade him to change his mind. 'What does it matter?'

I said nothing. It matters because I need to close that door. This evening, instead of feeling that I had successfully

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shut Lucy away at half past eight, I tiptoed round the house imagining I could hear her breathing and snoring and turning over, rustling her covers. I felt her presence with every molecule of my body, invading territory that was rightfully mine.

Still, it's not that bad. As my terminally cheerful mother insists on telling me whenever I dare to complain, I'm luckier than most women: Lucy is a good girl most of the time, I have Michelle to help me, I don't know I'm born, it's hard work but it's all worth it, and everything is basically 'hunky-dory'. So why do I wake up every Saturday morning feeling as if I'm about to be suffocated for forty-eight hours, wondering if I'll survive until Monday?

Spoke to Cordy on the phone today and she told me Oonagh is also preoccupied with monsters. Cordy blames the children in Lucy and Oonagh's class who are from 'the other side of the tracks' (her expression, not mine). She said, 'I bet their thick parents have been stuffing their heads full of nonsense about fairies and devils, and they've passed it on to our kids.' She sounded quite cross about it. She says you pay through the nose to send your daughter to a private school where you trust she won't encounter any 'white trash', but then she does because some white trash types have lots of money. 'From setting up chains of tanning studios and pubic-waxing emporia,' she said bitterly. I didn't ask what 'emporium' were.

What else? Oh, yes, a man called William Markes is very probably going to ruin my life. But he hasn't yet, and I admit I'm not in the most positive state of mind at the moment. Let's wait and see.