Praise for *Hurting Distance* and Sophie Hannah

'A superbly creepy, twisty thriller about
obsessive love, psychological torture, and the
darkest chambers of the human heart'
The Times

'Another superbly creepy foray into the genre. Her plots
are brilliant – I couldn't see through this one at all'
Guardian

'What makes this novel work so well is that more than one
character has a bit of a screw loose – even the detectives on the
case are grappling with some crippling personal issues – and it
takes the full ride of the novel to find out who is playing whom'
Time Out

'Cleverly done . . . Another success for this inventive writer'
Sunday Telegraph

'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

'There is an admirable, complicated cleverness
about her stories . . . Think Agatha Christie at her
best but updated to a time of Twitter and online
dating in both its glory and ignominy'
Independent on Sunday

'Sophie Hannah is the new British queen
of the psychological thriller'
Heat

'When it comes to ingenious plots that twist and turn like a
fairground rollercoaster, few writers can match Sophie Hannah'
Daily Express

Also by Sophie Hannah

Little Face
The Point of Rescue
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.

SOPHIE HANNAH

hurting distance

First published in Great Britain in 2007 by Hodder & Stoughton

An Hachette UK company

This edition published 2015

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A CIP catalogue record for this title
is available from the British Library

B format paperback ISBN 978 0 340 84034 4

Typeset in Sabon by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable
and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable
forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to
conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

For Lisanne with love

From: *NJ <nj239@hotmail.com>*
To: *Speak Out and Survive*
<survivorsstories@speakoutandsurvive.org.uk>
Subject: *This is not my story*
Date: *Mon, 18 May 2003 13:28:07 +0100*

This is not my story. I'm not sure I want to share that, or my feelings, with strangers, on a website. It would seem phoney, somehow – phoney and attention-seeking. This is just something I want to say, and your website gives no address for submitting letters.

Did you ever stop to wonder, when you were thinking of a name for your organisation, whether speaking out is always the best thing to do? Once you tell somebody something, it makes it more real. Why take what you wish had never happened and make it happen again and again in the minds of everyone you know? I will never tell anybody my so-called story, which means there will be no justice, no punishment for those who deserve it. Sometimes that thought is pretty hard to take. Still, it's a small price to pay for not having to spend the rest of my life being thought of as a victim.

Sorry, a survivor. Though that word makes me feel uneasy. At no point did anybody try to kill me. It makes sense to talk about survivors in the context of a plane crash or a nuclear explosion: situations in which it might be expected that everyone involved would die.

But in most cases rape is not a life-threatening event, so the sense of rare achievement that the word 'survivor' conveys seems patronising – a sort of false consolation.

When I first logged on to your site, I hoped that something I read there would make me feel better, but the opposite has happened. Why do so many of your correspondents use the same cloying vocabulary: thriving, telling and healing, smiling through tears, rising from the ashes, etc.? It reminds me of the lyrics of a bad heavy-metal album. Nobody says that they do not ever expect to get over what happened to them.

This will sound terrible, but I am actually jealous of many of the people whose stories are posted on your site: the ones with insensitive, demanding boyfriends, the ones who drank too much on first dates. At least they can make sense of their ordeals. My attacker was someone I had never seen before and have not seen since, someone who kidnapped me in broad daylight and knew every detail about me: my name, my job, where I lived. I don't know how he knew. I don't know why he chose me, where he took me or who all the other people were. I will not go into any more detail than that. Perhaps if I did, you'd understand why I feel so strongly about what I'm going to say next.

On the 'What Is Rape?' page of your site, you list a number of definitions, the last of which is 'any sexually intimidating behaviour'. You go on to say, 'No physical contact needs to have taken place – sometimes an inappropriate look or comment is enough to make a woman feel violated.' When I read that, I wanted to hit whoever wrote it.

I know you'll disapprove of this letter and me and everything I've said, but I'm sending it anyway. I think it's important to point out that not all rape victims have the same mindset, vocabulary and attitudes.

N.J.

2006

Part I

1

Monday 3 April

I could explain, if you were here to listen. I am breaking my promise to you, the only one you ever asked me to make. I'm sure you remember. There was nothing casual about your voice when you said, 'I want you to promise me something.'

'What?' I asked, propping myself up on one elbow, burning my skin on the yellow nylon sheet in my eagerness to be upright, attentive. I was desperate to please you. You ask for so little, and I'm always looking for small, subtle ways to give you more. 'Anything!' I said, laughing, deliberately extravagant. A promise is the same as a vow, and I wanted there to be vows between us, binding us.

My exuberance made you smile, but not for long. You're so grave when we're in bed together. You think it's a tragedy that you'll soon have to leave and that is how you always look: like a man preparing for calamity. I usually cry after you've gone (no, I've never told you, because I'm damned if I'm going to encourage your mournful streak), but while we're together in our room I'm as high as if I were on strong, mind-altering drugs. It seems impossible that we will ever be apart, that the moment will end. And in some ways it doesn't. When I go home, when I'm making pasta in my kitchen or chiselling Roman numerals in my workshop, I'm not there really. I'm still in room eleven at the Travel-tel, with its hard, synthetic, rust-coloured carpet that feels

like the bristles of a toothbrush under your feet and its pushed-together twin beds with mattresses that aren't mattresses at all but thick, orange foam mats, the sort that used to cover the floor of the gymnasium at my secondary school.

Our room. I knew for sure that I loved you, that it wasn't just infatuation or physical attraction, when I heard you say to the receptionist, 'No, it has to be room eleven, same as last time. We need the same room every time.' Need, not want. Everything is urgent for you; nothing is casual. You never sprawl on the faded, bobbly sofa, or take your shoes off and put your feet up. You sit upright, fully clothed, until we're about to get into bed.

Later, when we were alone, you said, 'I'm worried it's going to be sordid, meeting in a shitty motel. At least if we stick to one room, it'll feel more homely.' Then you spent the next fifteen minutes apologising because you couldn't afford to take me somewhere grander. Even then (how long had we known each other? Three weeks?) I knew better than to offer to share the cost.

I remember nearly everything you've said to me over the past year. Maybe if I could bring to mind the right phrase, the crucial line, it would lead me straight to you. I do not really believe this, but I keep going through it all in my mind, just in case.

'Well?' I prodded your shoulder with my finger. 'Here I am, a naked woman offering to promise you anything, and you're ignoring me?'

'This isn't a joke, Naomi.'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

You like to do everything slowly, even speaking. It makes you angry if you're rushed. I don't think I've ever made you laugh, or even seen you laugh properly, though you often

talk about laughing – in the pub with Sean and Tony. 'I laughed till I cried,' you say. 'I laughed till the tears were pouring down my face.'

You turned to me and asked, 'Do you know where I live?'

I blushed. Damn, I'd been rumbled. You'd spotted that I was obsessed with you, collecting any fact or detail I could get my hands on. All week I had been chanting your address in my head, sometimes even saying it or singing it aloud while I was working.

'You saw me writing it down last time, didn't you? On that form for the receptionist. I noticed you looking.'

'Three Chapel Lane, Spilling. Sorry. Would you rather I didn't know?'

'In a way,' you said. 'Because this has to be completely safe. I've told you that.' You sat up then too, and put on your glasses. 'I don't want it to end. I want it to last for a long time, for as long as I last. It has to be a hundred per cent safe, completely separate from the rest of my life.'

I understood at once, and nodded. 'But . . . now the Traveltel receptionist knows your address too,' I said. 'What if they send a bill or something?'

'Why would they? I always pay when I leave.'

Does it make it easier, having an administrative ritual to complete before you go, a small ceremony that takes place on the boundary of our life and your other life? I wish I had an equivalent task to perform before leaving. I always stay the night (though I allow you to think it's only sometimes, not every time) and march briskly out of the Traveltel the next morning, barely stopping to smile at the receptionist. It feels too informal, somehow, too quick and easy.

'There's no paperwork to send,' you said. 'Anyway, Juliet doesn't even open her own post, let alone mine.' I

noticed a slight vibration in your lower jaw, a tightening around your mouth. It always happens when you mention Juliet. I am collecting details about her, too, though I wish I weren't. Many of them involve a 'let alone': she doesn't know how to turn on a computer, let alone use the Internet. She never answers the phone, let alone rings anyone herself.

She sounds like a freak, I have wanted to say so often, and stopped myself. I shouldn't allow my envy of her to make me cruel.

You kissed me lightly before saying, 'You mustn't ever come to the house, or ring me there. If Juliet saw you, if she found out in that way, it'd break her.' I love the way you use words. Your speech is more poetic, grander than mine. Everything I say is heavy with mundane detail. You were staring past me, and I turned, half expecting, from your expression, to see a misty grey-and-purple mountain range wreathed in white cloud instead of a beige plastic kettle labelled 'Rawndesley East Services Traveltel', one that regularly contributes little granules of limescale to our hot drinks.

What are you staring at now? Where *are* you?

I wanted to ask for more details. What did you mean, about Juliet breaking? Would she collapse, sobbing, on the floor, lose her memory, become violent? People can break in a range of ways, and I have never been able to work out if you are frightened of your wife or frightened for her. But your tone was solemn and I knew you had more to say. I didn't want to interrupt you.

'It's not just that,' you muttered, scrunching up the diamond-patterned coverlet in your hands. 'It's her. I can't bear the thought of you seeing her.'

'Why?' I felt it would be tactless to tell you that you had nothing to worry about on that score. Did you imagine I

was curious, desperate to know who you were married to? Even now, I have a horror of seeing Juliet. I wish I didn't know her name. I would like to keep her as unreal as possible in my mind. Ideally, I would know her only as 'she' and there would be less for my jealousy to latch on to. But I could hardly have said that, could I, when we first met? 'Don't tell me your wife's name, because I think I might be in love with you and I can't stand to know anything about her.'

I doubt you could imagine the anguish I've felt, climbing into bed every night this past year and thinking: Juliet will be lying next to Robert in their bed at this moment. It isn't the thought of her sleeping beside you that makes my face twist in pain and my insides clench, it's the idea that she regards it as ordinary, routine. I don't torment myself with the image of the two of you kissing or making love; instead, I imagine Juliet on her side of the bed, reading a book – something boring about a member of the Royal Family or how to look after houseplants – and barely looking up when you come into the room. She doesn't notice you undressing, getting into bed beside her. Do you wear pyjamas? I can't picture it, somehow. Anyway, whatever you wear, Juliet is used to it, after years of marriage. This is not special for her; it's just another boring, unremarkable night at home. There is nothing she particularly wants or needs to say to you. She is perfectly able to concentrate on the details of Prince Andrew and Fergie's divorce or how to pot a cactus. When her eyelids start to droop, she tosses her book down on the floor and turns on her side, away from you, without even saying goodnight.

I want the opportunity to take you for granted. Although I never would.

'Why don't you want me to see her, Robert?' I asked,

because you seemed to be stuck in a thought, trapped somewhere in your head. You had that look you always get: a frown, your lower jaw jutting out. 'Is there something . . . wrong with her?' If I'd been someone else, I might have added, 'Are you ashamed of her?' but for the past three years I have been unable to use the word 'ashamed'. You won't understand this, because of what I haven't told you. There are things I too like to keep separate.

'Juliet's not had an easy life,' you said. Your tone was defensive, as if I'd insulted her. 'I want you to think of me as I am when I'm with you, here. Not in that house, with her. I hate that fucking house! When we get married, I'll buy us somewhere new.' I remember giggling when you said this, because I'd recently seen a film in which a husband takes his new wife to see the house he has designed and built for her. It is huge and beautiful and has a big red bow wrapped round it. When he removes his hands from her eyes and says, 'Surprise!' the wife storms off in a huff; she is angry that he hasn't consulted her, has presented her with a fait accompli.

I love it when you make decisions for me. I want you to feel proprietorial towards me. I want things because you want them. Except Juliet. You say you don't want her, but you're not yet ready to leave. It's not if, it's when, you say. But not yet. I find that hard to understand.

I stroked your arm. I cannot and never have been able to touch you without feeling faint and tingly, and I felt guilty then because I was supposed to be having a serious conversation, not thinking about sex. 'I promise I'll keep my distance,' I said, knowing you need to be in control, cannot bear to feel events slipping away from you. If we are ever married – *when* we are married – I will call you a control freak affectionately and you will laugh. 'Don't worry.' I

held up my hand. 'Scout's honour. I won't suddenly turn up at your house.'

Yet here I am, parked directly opposite. You tell me, though: what choice do I have? If you are here, I will apologise and explain how worried I've been, and I know you'll forgive me. If you are here, maybe I won't care if you forgive me or not; at least I'll know you're all right. It's been more than three days, Robert. I'm starting to go slowly crazy.

When I turned into your road, the first thing I saw was your red lorry, parked right at the bottom on the grass verge, beyond the few houses and before the road narrows to become a country path. I felt a surge in my chest, as if someone had given me a shot of helium, when I read your name on the side of the van. (You're always telling me not to call it a van, aren't you? You wouldn't accept 'Red Van Man' as a nickname, though I tried several times.) Robert Haworth, in big black letters. I adore your name.

The lorry is the same size it's always been, but it looks enormous here, at an angle on the grassy slope, crammed in between the houses and the fields; there is barely enough space for it. My first thought was that this isn't a very convenient place for a lorry driver to live. It must be a nightmare, reversing out on to the main road.

My second thought is that it's Monday. Your lorry shouldn't be here. You should be out in it, on a job. I am getting really worried now, too worried to be intimidated – by the sight of your house, yours and *hers*, Juliet's – into scurrying home to pretend everything is probably okay.

I knew your house was number three, and I suppose I imagined that the numbers would go up to twenty or thirty

as they do on most streets, but yours is the third and last house. The first two are opposite one another, nearer to the main road and the Old Chapel Brasserie on the corner. Your house stands alone further down, towards the fields at the end of the lane, and all I can see of it from the road is a bit of slate roof and a long, rectangular slab of beige stone wall, broken up only by a small square window on the top right-hand side: a bathroom, perhaps, or a box room.

I have learned something new about you. You chose to buy the sort of house I'd never buy, one where the back is front-facing and the front is concealed, not visible to passers-by. It gives an unwelcoming impression. I know it's for the sake of privacy, and it makes sense to have the front overlooking the best views, but I've always found houses like yours disconcerting all the same, as if they have rudely turned their backs on the world. Yvon agrees; I know, because we drive past another back-turned house on our regular route to the supermarket. 'Houses like that are for recluses who live on their hermity own and say, "Bah, humbug," a lot,' Yvon said the first time we passed it.

I know what she'd say about 3 Chapel Lane if she were here: 'It looks like the house of someone who might say, "You mustn't ever come to the house." As indeed it is!' I used to talk to you about Yvon, but I stopped after you frowned and said she sounded sarcastic and chippy. That was the only time something you said really upset me. I told you she was my best friend and had been since school. And, yes, she is sarcastic, but only in a good way, only in a way that cheers you up, somehow. She's blunt and irreverent and she firmly believes we should all poke fun at everything, even bad things. Even agonising love for a married man you can't have; Yvon thinks that, especially, is

something we ought to poke fun at, and half the time her levity is the only thing that keeps me sane.

When you saw that I was hurt by your criticism of her, you kissed me and said, 'I'll tell you something I read in a book once that's made life easier for me ever since: we do as much harm to ourselves and others when we take offence as when we give offence. Do you see what I'm saying?' I nodded, although I wasn't sure I did.

I never told you, but I repeated your aphorism to Yvon, though of course I didn't tell her the context. I pretended you'd made some other hurtful remark, one that was unconnected to her. 'How astonishingly convenient,' she said, giggling. 'So let's get this straight: you're as guilty when you love a tosser as when you *are* a tosser. Thank you, oh great enlightened one, for sharing that with us.'

I have worried endlessly about what will happen at our wedding, when we eventually get married. I can't imagine you and Yvon having a conversation that doesn't descend rapidly into silence on your part and uproarious ridicule on hers.

She phoned your house last night. I made her, begged her, ruined her evening until she agreed. It makes me feel slightly sick, the idea that she has heard your wife's voice. It's one step closer to something I don't want to face up to, the physical reality of Juliet in the world. She exists. If she didn't, you and I would already be living together. I would know where you were.

Juliet sounded as if she was lying. That's what Yvon said.

In front of the back of your house, there is a stone wall with a brown wooden gate set into it. Nowhere is there a number three; I am able to identify your house only by a process of elimination. I climb out of my car and stagger

slightly, as if my limbs are unused to movement. It is a windy, blustery day, but bright – almost spectacularly so. It makes me squint. I feel as if your street has been highlighted, nature's way of saying, 'This is where Robert lives.'

The gate is high, level with my shoulders. It opens with a creak and I slip on to your property. I find myself standing on a twig-strewn dirt path, staring at your garden. In one corner, there is an old bathtub with two bicycle wheels in it, beside a pile of flattened cardboard boxes. The grass is patchy. I can see many more weeds than plants. It's clear that there were once flowerbeds here, distinct from the scruffy lawn, but now everything is merging into a matted green-and-brown chaos. The sight makes me furious. With Juliet. You work every day, often seven days a week. You haven't got time to tend the garden, but she has. She hasn't had a job since she married you, and the two of you have no children. What does she do all day?

I head for the front door, passing the side of the house and another small, high window. Oh, God, I mustn't think of you trapped inside. But of course you can't be. You're a broad-shouldered, heavy, six-foot-two man. Juliet couldn't confine you anywhere. Unless . . . But I mustn't allow myself to start being ridiculous.

I have decided to be bold and efficient. I vowed to myself three years ago that I would never be scared of anything or anyone again. I will go straight to the front door, ring the bell and ask the questions that need to be asked. Your house, I realise once I get round the front, is a cottage, long and low. From the outside it looks as if nothing has been done to it for several decades. The door is a faded green, and all the windows are square and small, their panes divided into diamonds by lines of lead. You have one big

tree. Four straggly lengths of rope dangle from its thickest branch. Was there once a swing? The lawn here at the front slopes down, and beyond it, the view is the kind that landscape painters would fight over. At least four church towers are visible. Now I know what attracted you to the back-turned cottage. I can see right up the Culver Valley, with the river snaking its way along as far as Rawndesley. I wonder if I could see my house, if I had a pair of binoculars.

I cannot pass the window without looking in. I feel elated, suddenly. This rooms is yours, with your things inside it. I put my face close to the glass and cup my hands around my eyes. A lounge. Empty. It's funny – I've always imagined dark colours on the walls, copies of traditional paintings in heavy wooden frames: Gainsborough, Constable, that sort of thing. But your lounge walls are white, uneven, and the only picture is of an unkempt old man in a brown hat watching a young boy play the flute. A plain red rug covers most of the floor, and beneath it is the sort of cheap wood-laminate that looks nothing like wood.

The room is tidy, which is a surprise after the garden. There are lots of ornaments, too many, in neat rows. They cover every surface. Most of them are pottery houses. How odd; I can't imagine you living in a house full of such twee knick-knacks. Is it a collection? When I was a teenager, my mother tried to encourage me to collect some hideous pottery creatures that I think were called 'Whimsies'. No thanks, I told her. I was far more interested in amassing posters of George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley.

I blame Juliet for turning your living room into a housing estate in miniature, just as I blame her for the laminate floor. Everything else in the room is acceptable: a navy-blue sofa and matching chair; wall lights, with semicircular cups of plaster around them so that you can't see the bulb; a wooden,

leather-topped footstool; a tape measure; a small stand-up calendar. Yours, yours, yours. I know it is a lunatic thought, but I find I identify with these inanimate objects. I feel exhilarated. Against one wall there is a glass-fronted cabinet containing more pottery houses, a row of tiny ones, the smallest in the room. Below these, a fat, honey-coloured candle that looks as if it has never been lit . . .

The change happens quickly and without warning. It's as if something has exploded in my brain. I back away from the window, stumbling and nearly falling, pulling at the neck of my shirt in case it's that that's restricting my breathing. With my other hand I shield my eyes. My whole body is shaking. I feel as if I might be sick if I can't suck in some air soon. I need oxygen, badly.

I wait for it to pass, but it gets worse. Dark dots burst and dissolve in front of my eyes. I hear myself moaning. I can't stay upright; it is too much effort. I fall down on to my hands and knees, panting, sweating. No more thoughts of you, or of Juliet. The grass feels unbearably cold. I have to stop touching it. I move my hands and slump forward. For a few seconds I just lie there, unable to understand what has sent my body into this state of emergency.

I don't know how long I spend paralysed and breathless, in this undignified position – seconds or minutes. I don't think it can be more than a few minutes. As soon as I feel able to move, I scramble to my feet and run towards the gate without looking back into the room. I couldn't turn my head in that direction if I tried. I don't know how I know this, but I do. The police. I must go to the police.

I dart round the side of the house, reaching out both my hands for the gate, desperate to get there as soon as I can. Something terrible, I think. I saw something terrible through the window, something so unimaginably terrifying

that I know I did not imagine it. Yet I can't for the life of me say what it was.

A voice stops me, a woman's voice. 'Naomi!' it calls out. 'Naomi Jenkins.' I gasp. There is something shocking about having my full name yelled at me.

I turn. I am on the other side of the house now. There is no danger that I will see your lounge window from here. I am far more frightened of that than I am of this woman, who I suppose must be your wife.

But she doesn't know my name. She doesn't know I exist. You keep your two lives completely separate.

She is walking towards me. 'Juliet,' I say, and her mouth twists, briefly, as if she is swallowing a bitter laugh. I examine her closely, just as I did the tape measure, the candle, the picture of the old man and the boy. She is something else that belongs to you. Without your income, how would she survive? She'd probably find another man to support her.

I feel drained, ineffectual, as I ask, 'How do you know who I am?'

How can this woman be Juliet? From everything you've told me about her, I have built up a picture of a timid, unworldly housewife, whereas the person I'm looking at has neatly braided blond hair and is wearing a black suit and sheer black tights. Her eyes are blazing as she walks slowly towards me, deliberately taking her time, trying to intimidate me. No, this can't be your wife, the one who doesn't answer the phone and can't turn on a computer. Why is she dressed so smartly?

The words rush into my head before I can stop them: for a funeral. Juliet is dressed for a funeral.

I take a step back. 'Where's Robert?' I shout. I have to try. I came here determined to find you.

'Was it you who phoned last night?' she says. Each word embeds itself in my brain, like an arrow fired at close range. I want to shy away from her voice, her face, everything about her. I can't bear it that I will now be able to picture scenes and conjure conversations between the two of you. I have lost forever that comforting shadowy gap in what I could imagine.

'How do you know my name?' I say, wincing as she comes closer. 'Have you done something to Robert?'

'I think we both do the same thing to Robert, don't we?' Her smile is smug. I have the sense that she might be enjoying herself. She is wholly in control.

'Where is he?' I say again.

She walks right up to me until our faces are only inches apart. 'You know what an agony aunt would say, don't you?'

I jerk my head back, away from her warm breath. Fumbling for the gate, I grab the bolt and pull it free. I can leave whenever I want to. What can she do to me?

'She'd say you're better off without him. Think of it as a favour from me that you don't deserve.' Barely raising her hand, she gives me a small wave, an almost imperceptible flutter of her fingers, before turning to go back to the house.

I can't look at where she's walking. I can't even think about it.