

Praise for *A Room Swept White* and Sophie Hannah

‘Intriguing, unnerving and engrossing . . . Hannah has timing down to an art. What she has created in *A Room Swept White* is more than a murder mystery. It is the most adept of psychological thrillers, in which – as with Hannah’s other novels – the psychosis lying just below the surface of the human personality is exposed . . . A remarkable novel, and an adventure to read . . . Undoubtedly a first-class whodunit that will keep you reading long into the night’
Scotsman

‘So convincing – and so unsettling. Hannah takes domestic scenarios, adds disquieting touches and turns up the suspense until you’re checking under the bed for murders’
Independent

‘Brilliantly pacy and penetrating’
Daily Mirror

‘Sophie Hannah has quickly established herself as a doyenne of the “home horror” school of psychological tension, taking domestic situations and wringing from them dark, gothic thrills . . . Combining probability theory, poetry and murder, this is a densely plotted suspenser with a coded puzzle that would grace a Golden Age mystery’
Financial Times

‘Enthralling complex . . . A multi-stranded narrative that grips’
Sunday Times

‘No one writes twisted, suspenseful novels quite like Sophie Hannah . . . unpredictable, unputdownable and unlike anything else you’ve read before’
Liane Moriarty, author of *The Husband’s Secret*

‘The queen of the ingenious plot twist’
Good Housekeeping

Also by Sophie Hannah

Little Face
Hurting Distance
The Point of Rescue
The Other Half Lives
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
a room swept white



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For Anne Grey, who introduced me to, among many other
invaluable pieces of wisdom, the motto 'Take nothing
personally, even if it's got your name on it'. This dedication
is the exception to that generally sound rule.



Ray Hines

Transcript of Interview 1, 12 February 2009

(First part of interview – five or so minutes – not taped. RH only allowed me to start recording once I stopped asking about the specifics of her case. I turned the conversation to HY thinking she would talk more freely.)

RH: I met Helen Yardley once, that's all. What do you want me to say about her? I thought you wanted to talk about me.

LN: I do, very much. You don't seem to, though.
(Pause)

LN: I don't want you to say anything in particular about Helen. I'm not trying to—

RH: I met her once. A few days before her appeal. Everyone wanted her to get out. Not only the women. All the staff too. None of them believed she was guilty. That was down to you.

LN: I was only a small part of the effort. There were—

RH: You were the public face and the loudest voice. I was told you'd get me out. By my lawyers, by nearly everyone I met inside. And you did. Thanks to you, and because of the timing, I had it relatively easy, in Durham and in Geddham Hall, give or take a few minor run-ins with idiots.

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LN: The timing?

RH: Public opinion was turning by the time I was convicted. Your hard work was having an effect. If my case had come to court a year later than it did, I'd have been acquitted.

LN: Like Sarah, you mean?

(Pause)

RH: I wasn't thinking of Sarah Jaggard, no.

LN: She stood trial in 2005. A year after you. She was acquitted.

RH: I wasn't thinking of her. I was thinking of myself, in the hypothetical situation of my trial taking place a year later.

(Pause)

LN: What? Why are you smiling?

RH: The group identity is important to you. As it is to Helen Yardley.

LN: Go on.

RH: Us. The women you campaigned for. You say 'Helen' and 'Sarah' as if they're my friends. I know nothing about either of them. And what little I do know tells me we have nothing in common, apart from the obvious. Helen Yardley's husband stood by her throughout, never once doubted her innocence. That's one thing we don't have in common.

LN: Have you had any contact with Angus since getting out?

(Long pause)

LN: It must be difficult for you to talk about. Shall we go back to Helen and Sarah? They don't know you any better than you know them, and yet, from speaking to both of them, I can tell you that they feel a strong

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affinity with you. Because of what you call ‘the obvious’.
(Pause)

LN: Ray, you’re unique. Your tragedy is something that only happened to you. I know that. I’m not trying to chip away at your right to be an individual. I hope you understand that. I’m simply saying that—

RH: Sarah Jaggard was acquitted. She was accused of killing one child, not her own. There’s even less common ground between me and her than there is between me and Helen Yardley.

(Pause)

LN: Ray, you know, I’d understand completely if you said you’d had moments when you hated both Helen and Sarah. *They* would understand it.

RH: Why would I hate two women I don’t know?

LN: Sarah was acquitted. All right, she had to endure a trial, but she got a ‘not guilty’ verdict. That’s the verdict you should have got. Meanwhile you were stuck inside, wondering if you’d ever get out. If you resented her – even if you wished in your darkest moments that her verdict had gone the other way – it’d be only natural. And Helen – you said it yourself, everyone knew she wasn’t guilty. Her appeal was coming up just as you landed at Geddham Hall. When you heard she was going home, and you knew you weren’t, you might well have hated her, wanted her appeal to fail. No one would blame you.

RH: I’m glad you’re recording this. I’d like to say very clearly, for the official record, that I felt none of these feelings you’re attributing to me.

LN: I’m not—

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RH: I didn't resent Sarah Jaggard's acquittal. I didn't want Helen Yardley's appeal to fail. Not for a fraction of a second did I want either of those things. Let's be absolutely clear on that. I would never wish for anybody to be convicted of a crime they hadn't committed. I would never want anyone to lose their appeal if they hadn't done what they'd been convicted of doing.

(Pause)

RH: I knew the appeal had gone her way when I heard cheers coming from everywhere at once. All the girls had been glued to the TVs, waiting. The screws too.

LN: Not you?

RH: I didn't need to watch it. I knew Helen Yardley would be going home. Was it her that put the idea in your head that I was jealous of her?

LN: No. Helen's only ever spoken of you in the most positive—

RH: I didn't meet her by accident, the one time I met her. She came to find me. She wanted to speak to me before her appeal, in case she didn't come back to Geddhham. She said what you've just said, that it would be natural for me to envy and resent her if she walked free, and she wouldn't blame me for doing so, but she wanted me to know that my time would come: I'd appeal too, and I'd win. I'd get out. She mentioned your name. Said you'd helped her and you were equally determined to help me. I didn't doubt her on that. No one could doubt your commitment, no one who's heard of you – and who hasn't, by now?

(Pause)

LN: So perhaps Helen is your friend, after all.

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- RH: If a friend is someone who wishes you well, then I suppose she is. She's part of JIPAC, she campaigned for my release. I don't understand it, really. She was out, free. Why didn't she just get on with the rest of her life?
- LN: Is that what you would have done?
- RH: It's what I'm trying to do. There's nothing left of my old life, but I'd like to try and start a new one.
- LN: Of course Helen wants to get on with her life. But, having been the victim of a terrible injustice, and knowing you were in the same boat, you and many others . . . Dorne Llewellyn is still in prison.
- RH: Look, I don't want to talk about anyone else, all right? I don't want to be part of your gang of miscarriage-of-justice victims. I'm alone, which isn't that bad once you get used to it, and if I ever choose not to be alone, I want it to be my choice. I don't want to think about other women. It's better for me if I don't. You've got your cause – don't try to make it mine.
(Pause)
- RH: I don't want to rain on your parade, but justice and injustice? They don't exist.
(Pause)
- RH: Well, they don't, do they? They patently don't.
- LN: I believe very strongly that both do exist. I try to prevent one and bring about the other. I've made it my life's work.
- RH: Justice is a nice idea and nothing more. We invented it – human beings – because we'd like it to exist, but the fact is that it doesn't. Look . . . For the benefit of the Dictaphone, I'm holding a coaster in mid-air. What will happen if I let go of it?

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LN: It'll fall to the floor.

(Sound of coaster dropping on rug)

RH: Because of gravity. We believe gravity exists; we're right about that. I could pick up that coaster, and that one, and that one, and let go of them, and they'd all fall to the ground. But what if only one fell and the rest floated at eye-level, or scooted up to the ceiling? What if you saw that happen now? Would you still believe in gravity, if it only *sometimes* made things fall down?

LN: I see what you're trying to say, but—

RH: Occasionally, good things happen to good people. And bad things happen to bad people. But it's chance – pure random coincidence. As it is when it happens the other way round – bad things to good people.

LN: But that's what I call injustice – when the system treats good people as if they were bad.

RH: Justice doesn't exist any more than Santa Claus does.

LN: Ray, we have a whole legal system devoted to . . .

RH: . . . seeing that justice is done. I know. And when I was a child, I sat on the knee of a man in a red and white suit with a long white beard, and he gave me a present. But it was a fantasy. A fantasy that makes people feel better. Except it doesn't – it makes them feel worse when the illusion is shattered. That's why I try to think of myself as someone who's had appallingly bad luck, not as the victim of a miscarriage of justice. Why should I torment myself by believing there's this amazing force for good at work in the world, but that it failed me, or ignored me? No thanks. And people? They don't commit unjust acts in the service of an opposing evil force. They blunder along to the best of their abilities, doing their

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best – which, mostly, is not good enough – or in some cases not even doing their best, and their behaviour has repercussions for other people, and . . . The point I'm trying to make is, life is chaotic and indiscriminate. Things just happen, and not for any reason.

(Pause)

RH: You'd be better off ditching justice and concentrating on truth instead.

LN: You believe in truth?

RH: Absolutely. The truth always exists, even while people are believing the lie. The truth is that I didn't murder my babies. I loved them, more than you can possibly imagine, and never harmed either of them in any way.

LN: I know that, Ray. And now everyone else does too.

RH: The truth is that Helen and Paul Yardley are people who will pour all their time and energy into helping strangers, and maybe Sarah Jaggard and her husband – I can't remember his name . . .

LN: Glen.

RH: Maybe they're that sort too. But I'm not. And it doesn't matter, because you've got them to help you make your programme. You don't need me around to mess it up by saying what I inconveniently think.

LN: You won't mess anything up. The opposite. Your story's—

RH: My story will muddy your waters. I'm a drug addict who either lied in court or lied before I got to court – take your pick. Your average middle-England viewer's going to feel all buoyed up with self-righteous indignation after hearing about Helen Yardley – the respectable, happily married childminder, adored by her

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charges and their parents, by everyone who knew her – and then you'll move on to me and lose your advantage. A lot of people still think I did it.

LN: Which is why it's all the more important for you to be part of the programme and tell the truth: that you didn't lie, in court or out of it. That you were traumatised and your memory let you down, as people's memories tend to when they're under a massive emotional strain. Tell the truth in this context, Ray – in the context of my film – and people will believe you. I promise you, they will.

RH: I can't do this. I can't get sucked in. Turn that thing off.

LN: But Ray . . .

RH: Turn it off.

www.telegraph.co.uk, Wednesday 7 October 2009, 0922 GMT
report by Rahila Yunis

Wrongly Convicted Mother Found Dead at Home

Helen Yardley, the Culver Valley childminder wrongly convicted of murdering her two baby sons, was found dead on Monday at her home in Spilling. Mrs Yardley, 38, was found by her husband Paul, a roofer aged 40, when he returned from work early in the evening. The death is being treated as 'suspicious'. Superintendent Roger Barrow of Culver Valley Police said: 'Our inquiries are ongoing, and the investigation is still at an early stage, but Mrs Yardley's family and the public can be assured that we are putting every possible resource into this. Helen and Paul Yardley have already endured intolerable anguish. It is vital that we handle this tragedy discreetly and efficiently.'

Mrs Yardley was convicted in November 1996 of the murders of her sons Morgan, in 1992, and Rowan, in 1995. The boys died aged 14 weeks and 16 weeks. Mrs Yardley was found guilty by a majority verdict of 11 to one and given two life sentences. In June 1996, while at home on bail awaiting trial, Mrs Yardley gave birth to a daughter, Paige, who was placed with a foster family and subsequently adopted. Interviewed in October 1997 on the day that he heard the family court's decision, Paul Yardley said: 'To say that Helen and I are devastated is an understatement. Having lost two babies to cot death, we have now lost our precious daughter to a system that persecutes grieving families by stealing their

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children. Who are these monsters that decide to tear up the lives of innocent, law-abiding people? They don't care about us, or about the truth.'

In 2004, the Criminal Cases Review Commission, which reviews possible miscarriages of justice, referred Mrs Yardley's case to the appeal court after campaigners raised doubts about the integrity of Dr Judith Duffy, one of the expert witnesses at the trial. In February 2005, Mrs Yardley was released after three judges in the court of appeal quashed her convictions. She had always maintained her innocence. Her husband had stood by her throughout her ordeal, working '20 hours a day, every day', according to a source close to the family, to clear his wife's name. He was helped by relatives, friends, and many parents whose children Mrs Yardley had looked after.

Journalist and writer Gaynor Mundy, 43, who collaborated with Mrs Yardley on her 2007 memoir *Nothing But Love*, said: 'Everyone who knew Helen knew she was innocent. She was a kind, gentle, sweet person who could never harm anyone.'

TV producer and journalist Laurie Nattrass played a major role in the campaign to free Mrs Yardley. Last night he said: 'I can't put into words the sadness and anger I feel. Helen might have died yesterday, but her life was taken from her 13 years ago, when she was found guilty of crimes she didn't commit, the murders of her two beloved sons. Dissatisfied with the torture it had already inflicted, the state then robbed Helen of her future by kidnapping – and there's no other word for it – her only surviving child.'

Nattrass, 45, Creative Director of Binary Star, a Soho-based media company, has won many awards for his documentaries about miscarriages of justice. He said, 'For the past seven

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years, 90 per cent of my time has been spent campaigning for women like Helen, trying to find out what went so dreadfully wrong in so many cases.'

Mr Natrass first met Mrs Yardley when he visited her in Gedddham Hall women's prison in Cambridgeshire in 2002. Together they set up the pressure group JIPAC (Justice for Innocent Parents and Carers), formerly JIM. Mr Natrass said: 'Originally we called it "Justice for Innocent Mothers", but it soon became clear that fathers and babysitters were being wrongly charged and convicted too. Helen and I wanted to help anyone whose life had been ruined in this way. Something needed to be done. It was unacceptable that innocent people were being blamed whenever there was an unexplained child death. Helen was as passionate about this as I am. She worked relentlessly to help other victims of injustice, both from prison and once she got out. Sarah Jaggard and Ray Hines, among others, have Helen to thank for their freedom. Her good work will live on.'

In July 2005, Wolverhampton hairdresser Sarah Jaggard, 30, was found not guilty of the manslaughter of Beatrice Furniss, the daughter of a friend, who died aged six months while in Mrs Jaggard's care. Mr Natrass said: 'Sarah's acquittal was the indicator I'd been waiting for that the public were starting to see reason. No longer were they willing to let vindictive police and lawyers and corrupt doctors lead them on a witch-hunt.'

Yesterday, Mrs Jaggard said: 'I can't believe Helen's dead. I will never forget what she did for me, how she fought for me and stuck by me. Even in prison, not knowing if and when she'd get out, she took the time to write letters supporting me to anyone who would listen. My heart aches for Paul and the family.'

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Rachel Hines, a 42-year-old physiotherapist from Notting Hill, London, had her convictions overturned in the court of appeal after serving four years for the murders of her baby son and daughter. Julian Lance, Mrs Hines' solicitor, said: 'If it wasn't for Helen Yardley and JIPAC, we wouldn't have been granted leave to appeal. We were lacking key information. JIPAC found it for us. Helen's death is a devastating blow to everyone who knew her, and a huge loss.' Mrs Hines was unavailable for comment.

Dr Judith Duffy, 54, a paediatric forensic pathologist from Ealing, London, gave evidence for the prosecution at the trials of Mrs Yardley, Mrs Jaggard and Mrs Hines. She is currently under investigation by the GMC, pending a hearing next month for misconduct. Laurie Natrass said: 'Judith Duffy has caused unimaginable suffering to dozens if not hundreds of families, and she must be stopped. I hope she'll be removed from the list of home office pathologists and struck off the medical register.' Mr Natrass is currently making a documentary about the miscarriages of justice for which he believes Dr Duffy to be responsible.

Part I



I

Wednesday 7 October 2009

I am looking at numbers when Laurie phones, numbers that mean nothing to me. My first thought, when I pulled the card out of the envelope and saw four rows of single figures, was of Sudoku, a game I've never played and am not likely to, since I hate all things mathematical. Why would someone send me a Sudoku puzzle? Easy: they wouldn't. Then what is this?

'Fliss?' Laurie says, his mouth too close to the phone. When I don't answer immediately, he hisses my name again. He sounds like a deranged heavy-breather – that's how I know it's urgent. When it isn't, he holds the phone too far away and sounds like a robot at the far end of a tunnel.

'Hi, Laurie.' Using the strange card to push my hair back from my face, I turn and look out of the window to my left. Through the condensation that no amount of towel-wiping seems to cure, across the tiny courtyard and through the window on the other side, I can see him clearly, hunched over his desk, eyes hidden behind a curtain of messy blond hair.

His glasses have slipped down his nose, and his tie, which he's taken off, is laid out in front of him like a newspaper. I stick out my tongue at him and make an even ruder gesture with my fingers, knowing I'm completely safe. In the two years I've worked with Laurie, I've never seen him glance out of his window, not even when I stood in his office, pointed

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across the courtyard and said, 'That's my desk there, with the hand cream on it, and the photo frames, and the plant.' Human beings like to have such accessories, I restrained myself from adding.

Laurie never has anything on his desk apart from his computer, his BlackBerry and his work – scattered papers and files, tiny Dictaphone tapes – and the discarded ties that drape themselves over every surface in his room like flat, multi-coloured snakes. He has a thick neck that's seriously tie-intolerant. I don't know why he bothers putting them on at all; they're always off within seconds of his arriving at the office. By the side of his desk there's a large globe with a metal dome base. He spins it when he's thinking hard about something, or when he's angry, or excited. On his office walls, up among the evidence of how successful and clever and humane he is – certificates, photographs of him receiving awards, looking as if he's just graduated from a finishing school for heavy-featured hulks, his grade-A gracious smile fixed to his face – there are posters of planets, individual and group portraits: Jupiter on its own, Jupiter from a different angle with Saturn next to it. There's also a three-dimensional model of the solar system on one of his shelves, and four or five large books with tatty covers about outer space. I asked Tamsin once if she had any idea why he was so interested in astronomy. She chuckled and said, 'Maybe he feels lonely in our galaxy.'

I know every detail of Laurie's office by heart; he is for ever summoning me, asking me questions to which I couldn't possibly know the answers. Sometimes, by the time I arrive, he's forgotten what he wanted me for. He has been into my office twice, once by accident when he was looking for Tamsin.

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'I need you in here now,' he says. 'What are you doing? Are you busy?'

Move your head ninety degrees to the right and you'll see what I'm doing, you weirdo. I'm sitting here staring at you, in all your weirdness.

I have an inspired idea. The numbers on the card I'm holding make no sense to me. Laurie makes no sense to me. 'Did you send me these numbers?' I ask him.

'What numbers?'

'Sixteen numbers on a card. Four rows of four.'

'What numbers?' he asks more abruptly than last time.

Does he want me to recite them? 'Two, one, four, nine . . .'

'I didn't send you any numbers.'

As so often when I'm talking to Laurie, I'm stumped. He has a habit of saying one thing while leaving you with exactly the opposite impression. This is why, even though he's said he didn't send me any numbers, I have the sense that if I'd said, 'Three, six, eight, seven' instead of 'Two, one, four, nine', he might have said, 'Oh, yeah, that was me.'

'Bin it, whatever it is, and get in here, soon as you can.' He cuts me off before I have a chance to reply.

I swing my chair from side to side and watch him. At this point, surely, anyone halfway normal would glance across the courtyard to see if I was obeying orders, which I'm not: I'm not binning the card, I'm not leaping to my feet. All of which Laurie would see if he turned his head in my direction, but he doesn't. Instead, he pulls at the open collar of his shirt as if he can't breathe, and stares at his closed office door, waiting for me to walk through it. That's what he wants to happen, and so he expects it to happen.

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I can't take my eyes off him, though on the physical evidence alone, I really should be able to. As Tamsin once said, it's all too easy to imagine him with a bolt through his neck. Laurie's attractiveness has little to do with his looks and everything to do with his being a legend in human form. Imagine touching a legend. Imagine . . .

I sigh, stand up, and bump into Tamsin on my way out of my office. She's wearing a black polo-neck, a tiny white corduroy skirt, black tights and knee-high white boots. If something isn't either white or black, Tamsin won't wear it. She once wore a blue patterned dress to work, and felt insecure all day. The experiment was never repeated. 'Laurie wants you,' she tells me, looking nervous. 'Now, he says. And Raffi wants me. I don't like the atmosphere today. There's something not right.'

I hadn't noticed. There are a lot of things I don't notice when I'm in the office these days, and only one thing that I do.

'I reckon it's something to do with Helen Yardley's death,' says Tamsin. 'I think she was murdered. No one's told me anything, but two detectives came to see Laurie this morning. CID, not your regular bobbies.'

'Murdered?' Automatically, I feel guilty, then angry with myself. I didn't kill her. She's nothing to do with me; her death's nothing to do with me.

I met her once, a few months ago. I spoke to her briefly, made her a coffee. She'd come in to see Laurie and he'd done his usual trick of vanishing without trace, having confused Monday with Wednesday, or May with June – I can't remember why he wasn't there when he ought to have been. It's an uncomfortable thought, that a woman I met and spoke

to might have been murdered. At the time I thought it was strange to meet somebody who'd been in prison for murder, especially someone who looked and seemed so friendly and normal. 'She's just a woman called Helen,' I thought, and for some reason it made me feel so awful that I had to leave the office immediately. I cried all the way home.

Please let her death have nothing to do with why Laurie's summoned me.

'Do you know anything about Sudoku?' I call after Tamsin.

She turns. 'As much as I want to. Why?'

'Does it involve numbers laid out in a square?'

'Yeah, it's like a crossword puzzle grid, except with numbers instead of letters. I think, anyway. Or maybe it's an empty grid and you fill in the numbers. Ask someone who's got swirly patterned carpets and a house that smells of air-freshener.' She waves and heads for Raffi's office, shouting over her shoulder, 'And a doll with a skirt to cover up the spare loo roll.'

Maya leans out of her office, holding the door frame with both hands as if hoping to block the strong smell of smoke with her body. 'You know those knitted-doll bog-roll holders are highly collectable?' she says. For the first time since I've known her, she doesn't smile, try to hug or pat me or call me 'honey'. I wonder if I've done something to offend her. Maya is Binary Star's MD, though she prefers 'head honcho' – that's her nickname for herself, always delivered with a giggle. In fact, she's only third in the pecking order. Laurie, as Creative Director, is the supreme power in the organisation, closely followed by Raffi, the Financial Director. The two of them control Maya by stealth, allowing her to believe she's in charge.

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‘What’s that?’ She nods at the card in my hand.

I look at it again, read it digit by digit for about the twentieth time.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | 1 | 4 | 9 |
| 7 | 8 | 0 | 3 |
| 4 | 0 | 9 | 8 |
| 0 | 6 | 2 | 0 |

A grid, Tamsin said. There’s no grid here, so it can’t be a Sudoku puzzle, though the layout is grid-like. It’s as if the lines have been removed once the numbers were filled in.

‘Your guess is as good as mine,’ I tell Maya. I don’t bother to show her the card. She’s always gushingly friendly, particularly to lower-ranking Binary Star employees like me, but she has no interest in anyone but herself. She asks all the right questions – loudly, so that everyone hears how much she cares – but if you take the trouble to reply, she blinks at you blank-eyed, as if you’ve bored her into an upright coma. And I can tell from her frequent glances over her shoulder that she’s eager to get back to her burning cigarette, probably the tenth of the thirty she’ll get through today.

Sometimes when Laurie walks past her office, he shouts, ‘Lung cancer!’ The rest of us pretend to believe Maya’s story about having given up years ago. Legend has it that she once burst into tears and tried to pretend it wasn’t smoke billowing from her office but steam from a particularly hot cup of tea. None of us has ever actually seen her with a cigarette in her hand.

‘I’ve worked out how she does it,’ Tamsin said the other day. ‘She keeps the cig and the ashtray in the bottom drawer of her desk. When she wants a drag, she sticks her *whole*

head in the drawer . . .’ Seeing that I wasn’t taking her theory seriously, she said, ‘What? The lowest drawer’s twice the size of the other two – you could easily fit a human head in there. I dare you to sneak into her office and—’

‘Yeah, right,’ I cut her off. ‘I’m really going to commit career suicide by ransacking the MD’s desk.’

‘You’d totally get away with it,’ said Tamsin. ‘You’re her baby, remember? Maya’s got an underling fetish. She’s going to love you whatever you do.’

Once, without irony and in my presence, Maya referred to me as ‘the baby of the Binary Star family’. That was when I started to worry that she didn’t take me seriously as a producer. Now I know she doesn’t. ‘Who *cares*?’ Tamsin groans whenever I mention it. ‘Being taken seriously is seriously overrated.’

Maya quickly loses interest in me and withdraws into her smoky lair without so much as a ‘Bye, sugar!’ Suits me fine; I never asked to be the object of her frustrated maternal urges. I hurry down the corridor to Laurie’s office. I knock and walk in simultaneously, and catch him whizzing his model globe round on its axis with his right foot. He stops and blinks at me, as if he’s struggling to remember who I am. In his head, he’s probably already had whatever conversation he wanted to have with me, I’ve agreed to whatever he wanted me to agree to, and done it, and maybe I’ve even retired or died – maybe Laurie’s mind has transported him so far into the future that he no longer knows me. His brain works faster than most people’s.

‘Tamsin says Helen Yardley was murdered.’ *Nice one, Fliss. Bring up the thing you least want to talk about, why don’t you?*

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‘Someone shot her,’ Laurie says expressionlessly. He starts to manipulate the globe with his foot again, kicking it so that it goes faster.

‘I’m really sorry,’ I say. ‘It must make it even harder . . . Than if she’d died naturally, I mean. To cope with.’ As I’m speaking, I realise I have no idea how to pitch my condolences, towards what sort of loss. Laurie spoke to Helen Yardley every day, often more than once a day. I know how much JIPAC means to him but I’ve no idea whether he cared about Helen personally, whether he’s mourning her as a fellow campaigner or as something more than that.

‘She didn’t die naturally. She was thirty-eight.’ The anger in his eyes still hasn’t reached his voice. He sounds as if he’s reciting lines he’s memorised. ‘Whoever murdered her – he’s only partly responsible. A whole string of people killed her, Judith Duffy for one.’

I don’t know what to say, so I put the card down on his desk. ‘Someone sent me this. It came this morning in a matching envelope. No explanatory letter or note, no indication of who it’s from.’

‘The envelope also had numbers on it?’ Miraculously, Laurie seems interested.

‘No . . .?’

‘You said “matching”?’

‘It looked expensive – cream-coloured and sort of ribbed, like the card. It was addressed to “Fliss Benson”, so it must be from someone who knows me.’

‘Why must it?’ Laurie demands.

‘They’d have written “Felicity” otherwise.’

He squints at me. ‘Is your name Felicity?’

It’s the name that goes on the credit sequence of every

programme I produce, the name Laurie will have seen on my CV and covering letter when I applied to Binary Star for a job. Seen and then forgotten. On a good day, Laurie makes me feel invisible; on a bad day, nonexistent.

I do what I always do when I'm in his office and there's a possibility that I might get upset: I stare at the miniature solar system on his shelf and list the planets. *Mercury, Earth, Venus, Mars . . .*

Laurie picks up the card and mutters something inaudible as he aims it across his office at the bin in the far corner. It whizzes past my ear, narrowly missing me. 'It's junk,' he says. 'Some kind of marketing teaser, waste of a tree.'

'But it's handwritten,' I say.

'Forget it,' Laurie barks. 'I need to talk to you about something important.' Then, as if noticing me for the first time, he grins and says, 'You're going to love me in a minute.'

I nearly drop to my knees in shock. Never before has he used the word 'love' in my presence. I can say that with absolute certainty. Tamsin and I have speculated about whether he's heard of it, felt it – whether he recognises its existence.

You're going to love me in a minute. I assume he's not using the word 'love' in the physical sense. I imagine us having sex on his desk, Laurie utterly oblivious to the large window through which everyone whose office is on the other side of the courtyard can see us, me anxious about the lack of privacy but too scared of upsetting him to protest . . . *No. Stop this nonsense.* I shut down the thought before it takes hold, afraid I might laugh or scream, and be called upon to explain myself.

'How do you fancy being rich?' Laurie asks me.

* * *

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Part of the reason I find talking to Laurie so exhausting is that I never know the right answer. There's always a right one and a wrong one – he's very black and white – but he gives you no clues and he's disturbingly unpredictable about everything apart from what he calls 'the cot-death mothers witch-hunt'. On that, his views are fixed, but on nothing else. It must be something to do with his brilliant, original mind, and it makes life hellishly hard for anyone who's secretly trying to please him by second-guessing what he'd like them to say while at the same time wanting to look as if they're just being themselves, acting with a hundred per cent integrity and to hell with what anyone else might think. Actually, that's unlikely to be a significant constituency of people, come to think of it. It's probably just me.

'I'd like to be well-off,' I say eventually. 'I don't know about rich. There's only so much money I'd need – a lot more than I've got now, but less than . . . you know . . .' I'm talking rubbish because I'm unprepared. I've never given it a second's thought. I live in a dark, low-ceilinged one-bedroom basement flat in Kilburn, underneath people who have sound-amplifying wooden floors in every room because to lay a carpet anywhere would threaten their upper-middle-class identity, and who seem to spend most evenings jumping around their living room on pogo-sticks, if the noise they make is anything to go by. I have no outside space whatsoever, though I have an excellent view of the pogo-jumpers' immaculate lawn and assortment of rose-bushes, and I can't afford the damp-proofing my flat has urgently needed since I bought it four years ago. Funnily enough, wealth isn't something I dwell on.

'I suppose I'd like to be rich-*ish*,' I say. 'As long as I wasn't getting my money from anything dodgy, like people-

smuggling.’ I play back my answer in my head, hoping it made me sound ambitious but principled.

‘What if you could do my job and earn what I earn?’ Laurie asks.

‘I couldn’t do what you—’

‘You can. You will. I’m leaving the company. From Monday, you’re me: Creative Director and Executive Producer. I’m on a hundred and forty a year here. From Monday, that’s what you’ll be on.’

‘*What?* Laurie, I—’

‘Maybe not officially from Monday, so you might have to wait for the pay-rise, but effectively from Monday . . .’

‘Laurie, slow down!’ I’ve never shouted an order at him before. ‘Sorry,’ I mumble. In my shock, I forgot for a second who he is and who I am. Laurie Natrass doesn’t get yelled at by the likes of me. *From Monday, you’re me*. It must be a joke. Or he’s confused. Someone as confusing as he is could easily be confused. ‘This makes no sense,’ I say. Me, Creative Director of Binary Star? I’m the lowest paid producer in the company. Tamsin, as Laurie’s research assistant, earns significantly more than I do. I make programmes that no one but me has any respect for, about warring neighbours and malfunctioning gastric bands – subjects that interest not only me but also millions of viewers, which is why I don’t care that I’m regarded by my colleagues as the light relief amid all the purveyors of earnest political documentaries. Raffi refers to my work as ‘fluff stuff’.

This has got to be a joke. A trap. Am I supposed to say, ‘Ooh, yes, please,’ then look like an idiot when Laurie falls about laughing? ‘What’s going on?’ I snap.

He sighs heavily. ‘I’m going to Hammerhead. They’ve made

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me an offer I can't refuse, a bit like the offer I'm making you. Not that it's about the money. It's time I moved on.'

'But . . . you can't leave,' I say, feeling hollow at the thought. 'What about the film?' He wouldn't go without finishing it; there's no way on earth. Even someone as hard to fathom as Laurie leaves the odd clue here and there as to what makes him tick. Unless the clues I've picked up have been planted by someone determined to mislead me – and it's hard to see how that could happen, since most of them came from Laurie's own mouth – then what makes him tick at a rate of a hundred and twenty seconds to the minute rather than the usual sixty is the film he's making about three cot-death murder cases: Helen Yardley, Sarah Jaggard and Rachel Hines.

Everyone at Binary Star calls it 'the film', as if it's the only one the company need concern itself with, the only one we're making or are ever likely to make. Laurie's been working on it since the dawn of time. He insists that it has to be perfect, and keeps changing his mind about the best way to structure it. It's going to be two hours long, and the BBC has told Laurie he can take his pick of the slots, which is unheard of. Or rather, it's unheard of for everyone but Laurie Natrass, who is a deity in the world of television. If he wanted to make a five-hour film that knocked out both the *News at Six* and the *News at Ten*, the BBC higher-ups would probably lick his boots and say, 'Yes, Master.'

'You're going to make the film,' he tells me with the confidence of someone who has visited the future and knows what happens in it. 'I've emailed everyone involved to say you're taking over from me.'

No. He can't do this.

'I've given them your contact details, work and home . . .'

I want nothing to do with it. I *can't* have anything to do with it. I open my mouth to protest, then remember that Laurie doesn't know my . . . well, it's something no one here knows. I refuse to think of it as a secret and I won't allow myself to feel guilty. I've done nothing wrong. This cannot be a punishment.

'You'll have Maya and Raffi's full support.' Laurie stands up, walks over to the tower of box files by the wall. 'All the information you need's in these. Don't bother moving them to your office. From Monday, this'll be your office.'

'Laurie . . .'

'You'll work on the film and nothing else. Don't let anything get in your way, least of all the filth. I'll be at Hammerhead, but I'll make myself available to you whenever . . .'

'Laurie, stop! The filth? You mean the police? Tamsin said you spoke to them this morning . . .'

'They wanted to know when I'd last seen Helen. If she had any enemies. "How about the entire fucking judicial system, not to mention you lot," I said.' Before I have a chance to remind him that Helen's murder convictions were overturned in the court of appeal by that same judicial system, he says, 'They asked about the film. I told them you'd be exec-ing it as of Monday.'

'You told them before you asked me?' My voice comes out as a high-pitched squeak. My stomach twists, sending prickles of nausea up to my throat. For a few seconds, I daren't open my mouth. 'You emailed everyone and told them I'm . . . When? When did you do that? Who's everyone?' I dig my fingernails into the palms of my hands, feeling horribly out of control. This wasn't supposed to happen; it's all wrong.

Laurie taps the top box file. 'All the names and contacts

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you need are in here. I haven't got time to go through it all with you, but most of it's self-explanatory. Any more detectives come sniffing around, you're making a documentary about a doctor determined to pervert the course of justice, and three women whose lives she did her best to destroy. Nothing to do with the investigation into Helen's death. They can't stop you.'

'The police don't want the film to be made?' Everything Laurie says makes me feel worse. Even more than usual.

'They haven't said that yet, but they will. They'll trot out some guff about you compromising their—'

'But I haven't . . . Laurie, I don't want your job! I don't want to make your film.' To clarify, I add, 'I'm saying no.' There, that's better. Perfectly in control.

'No?' He stands back and examines me: a rebellious specimen. Previously compliant, though, he'll be thinking, so what can have gone wrong? He laughs. 'You're turning down a salary that's more than three times what you're on now, and a career-launching promotion? Are you stupid?'

He can't force me—it's impossible. There are some things one can physically force a person to do. Making a documentary is not one of them. Focusing on this helps me to stay calm. 'I've never exec-ed anything before,' I say. 'I'd be completely out of my depth. Don't you want to cooperate with the police, help them find out what happened to Helen?'

'Culver Valley CID couldn't find tennis balls at fucking Wimbledon.'

'I don't understand,' I say. 'If you're going to Hammerhead, why isn't the film going with you?'

'The BBC commissioned Binary Star, not me personally.' Laurie shrugs. 'That's the price I pay for leaving. I lose it.' He

leans forward. 'The only way I don't lose it is if I give it to you, and work with you when I can behind the scenes. I need your help here, Fliss. You'd get all the credit, you'd get the salary ...'

'Why me? Tamsin's the one who's been working on it with you. The woman's a walking miscarriage-of-justice encyclopaedia – there's not a detail she doesn't know. Why aren't you trying to force this promotion on her?'

It occurs to me that Laurie's been patronising me. *How do you fancy being rich?* He's always moaning that he can barely afford the mortgage on his four-storey townhouse in Kensington. Laurie comes from a seriously wealthy family. I'd bet everything I've got – which is considerably less than he's got – that he regards his salary at Binary Star as acceptable, nothing more. The offer Hammerhead made him, the one he couldn't refuse, obviously knocked a hundred and forty grand a year into a cocked hat. But of course a hundred and forty a year would be wealth beyond the wildest dreams of a peasant like me ... I stop in my tracks and realise that, if that is what Laurie's thinking, he's entirely correct, so perhaps it's unfair of me to quibble.

'Tamsin's a research assistant, not a producer,' he says. 'Look, you didn't hear this from me, okay?'

At first I think he's referring to what he's already told me, about the promotion I don't want. Then I realise he's waiting for me to agree before telling me something else. I nod.

'Tamsin's being made redundant. Raffi's talking to her now.'

'*What?* You're joking. Tell me you're joking.'

Laurie shakes his head.

'They can't get rid of her! They can't just ...'

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‘It’s industry-wide. Everyone’s tightening their belts, making cuts where they can.’

‘Who made the decision? Was there a vote?’ I can’t believe Binary Star would keep me and lose Tamsin. She’s got loads more experience than I have, and unlike me, she isn’t constantly pestering Raffi for a dehumidifier for her office.

‘Sit down,’ says Laurie impatiently. ‘You’re making me nervous. Tamsin’s the obvious choice for redundancy. She’s earning too much to be value for money in the current economic climate. Raffi says we can get a new graduate researcher for half the price, and he’s right.’

‘This is so out of order,’ I blurt out.

‘How about you stop worrying about Tamsin and show me some gratitude?’

‘What?’ Was that the great crusader for justice who said that to me?

‘You think Maya wants to pay you what she’s paying me?’ Laurie chuckles. ‘I talked her through her options. I said, “If there’s a line in the budget for me, then there’s a line in the budget for Fliss.” She knows there’s no film without my cooperation, not for Binary Star. Ray Hines, Sarah and Glen Jaggard, Paul Yardley, all the solicitors and barristers, the MPs and doctors I’ve got eating out of the palm of my hand – one word from me and they walk. Whole project falls apart. All I need to do is bide my time, then sign a new contract with the BBC as MD of Hammerhead.’

‘You *blackmailed* Maya into agreeing to promote me?’ So that’s why she was less gushy than usual when I passed her in the corridor. ‘Well, I’m sorry, but there’s no way I’m—’

‘I want this documentary made!’ Laurie raises his voice to a level some might describe as shouting. ‘I’m trying to do the

right thing here, for everyone! Binary Star gets to keep the film, you get a package that's appealing enough to make you get off your arse and do the work . . .'

'And what do you get?' I feel unsteady on my feet. I'd like to sit down, but I won't, not after Laurie ordered me to. *Not when he's just made a snide remark about my arse.*

'I get your full cooperation,' he says, so quietly that I wonder if I imagined his outburst a few seconds earlier. 'Unofficially I'll still run the show, but my involvement will be strictly between you and me.'

'I see,' I say in a tight voice. 'You're not only blackmailing Maya, you're blackmailing me, too.'

Laurie falls into his chair with a groan. 'I'm bribing you. At least be accurate.' He laughs. 'Fuck, did I read you wrong! I thought you were rational.'

I bite my lip, struggling to take in this latest revelation: that Laurie has an idea of what sort of person I am. It means he's spent time thinking about me, even if only a few seconds. It has to mean that.

'You deserve a chance,' he says in a bored voice, as if it's tiresome having to convince me. 'I decided to give you that chance.'

'You want control of the film even after you leave. You chose me because you thought I'd be easier than anyone else to manipulate.' I hope he's impressed by how calm I am. On the surface, at least. Not in a million years did I ever imagine that I would stand in Laurie Natrass's office and accuse him of bad things. What the hell am I doing? How many innocent citizens has he sprung from their jail cells while I've been whiling away my spare time leafing through *heat* magazine on the sofa, or shouting abuse at *Strictly Come Dancing*?

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What if I've completely misread the situation and I'm the one in the wrong?

Laurie leans back in his chair. Slowly, he shakes his head. 'Fine. You don't want to exec the documentary that's going to win every prize going? You don't want to be Creative Director? Then why don't you make Maya's day: tell her you want out of the deal, and watch her lose any respect for you that she ever had.'

'The *deal*?' I am bloody well not in the wrong here. 'You mean the deal I wasn't party to, the one that involves my life and career?'

'You'll never be offered anything again,' Laurie sneers. 'Not at Binary Star, not anywhere. How long do you think it'll be before you're standing behind Tamsin in the dole queue?'

Mercury, Earth, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, Uranus, Pluto.

'I don't feel comfortable getting a pay-rise of a hundred grand a year when my friend's losing her job,' I say as unemotionally as possible. 'Of course I'd like more money, but I also like being able to sleep at night.'

'You, lose sleep? Don't make me laugh!'

I take a deep breath and say, 'I don't know what you imagine you know about me, but you're wrong.' Then I feel like a scumbag for implying that I might have an active social conscience, when in fact all the sleep I've lost has either been love-related, or . . .

Or nothing. I can't let myself think about that now, or I'll start crying and blurt out the whole story to Laurie. How hideously embarrassing would that be?

How much would he hate me if he knew?

'Jesus,' he mutters. 'Look, I apologise, okay? I thought I was doing you a favour.'

What happens if I say yes? I could say yes. No, I couldn't. What the hell's wrong with me? I'm panicking, and upset about Tamsin, and it's affected my brain. The state I'm in, it's probably sensible to say as little as possible.

Laurie swings his chair round so that I can't see him. 'I told the board you were worth what I think you're worth,' he says flatly. 'They nearly shat themselves, but I made a good case and I talked them round. Do you know what that means?'

A good case? *Do what I say or I'll put the kibosh on the film* – that's his idea of a good case? He can't even be bothered to put a convincing gloss on it; that's how little he values me.

Without waiting for my response, he says, 'It means a hundred and forty a year is now officially what you're worth. Think of yourself as a share on the stock market. Your value's just gone up. If you tell Maya you don't want it, if you say, "Yes, please, I'd like a pay-rise but not *that* much, because I'm not *that* good, so can we please negotiate downwards?" – do that and you plummet to rock-bottom.' He spins round to face me. 'You're worthless,' he says emphatically, as if I might have missed the point.

That's it: my limit. I turn and walk out. Laurie doesn't call after me or follow me. What does he think I'm going to do? Take the promotion and the money? Resign? Lock myself in a toilet cubicle for a good cry? Does he feel at all guilty about what he's just done to me?

Why the hell do I care how he feels?

I march back to my office, slam the door, grab the damp towel from the top of the radiator and wipe away condensation until my arm aches. A few minutes later, the window is still sopping wet and now so is my jumper. All I've succeeded in doing is flicking the water all over myself.

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Why doesn't someone think to put an end to world drought by collecting condensation? My window alone could irrigate most of Africa. Why doesn't Bob Geldof sort it out? It must be Bob Geldof I'm angry with, since it can't be Laurie. I've got a typed document buried somewhere in my desk, instructing me, among other things, never to allow myself to get angry with Laurie.

I used to look at it all the time when Tamsin first gave it to me. I thought it was hilarious, more hilarious still when she told me she gave a copy to every woman who came to work at Binary Star. About a year ago, it started to lose its appeal for me, and I stuffed it in my desk, underneath the flower-patterned lining paper that someone who worked here before me put in all the drawers.

No point trying to kid myself that I can't remember which drawer it's in; I know exactly where it is, even if I've spent much of the last twelve months pretending it isn't there. I pull out the files and the drawer-liner, and there it is, face down. Steeling myself, I pick it up and turn it over.

It's headed, in capitals, 'TAMSIN'S SEVEN COMMANDMENTS', with a subheading in italics, '*To be borne in mind at all times in relation to Laurie Natrass*'.

The list reads as follows:

- 1) It's not you. It's him.
- 2) Have no expectations, or, alternatively, expect absolutely anything.
- 3) Accept what you can't change. Don't waste time getting angry or upset.
- 4) Bear in mind that it's only because he's a man that he's got a reputation for being 'brilliant but difficult'. If

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he were an equally talented woman who behaved in exactly the same way, he'd be ridiculed as a mental old bat instead of head-hunted for all the best jobs.

- 5) Beware of imagining that he has hidden depths. Assume his true self is the bit that you can see.
- 6) Don't be attracted by his power. Some people are powerful in a good way, enhancing the confidence of others and making them believe anything is possible. Not him. Get close to him and you'll find that, as his power seems to grow, yours rapidly diminishes. Look out for a feeling of helplessness and the growing conviction that you must be fairly rubbish.
- 7) Whatever you do, DO NOT FALL IN LOVE WITH HIM.

According to at least one of Tamsin's criteria, I have failed spectacularly.