



*Also by Sophie Hannah*

Little Face  
Hurting Distance  
The Point of Rescue



SOPHIE  
HANNAH

the other  
half lives

  
HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

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For Jane Fielder





*Thursday 13 December 2007*

I didn't want to go first.

Three seconds ago – four – I had said, 'All right.' Now Aidan was watching me. Waiting. I bit back the words *Why me? You suggested it – why don't you start?* To ask would have made him think I didn't trust him, and I didn't want to sully the moment by saying something petty.

The air around us felt charged, taut with anticipation. Energy radiated from our clammy, clasped hands. 'It doesn't have to be everything,' Aidan whispered. 'Just . . . as much as we can . . .' Unable to finish the sentence, he decided he already had. 'As much as we can,' he said again, stressing the last word. His warm breath settled on my skin every few seconds, like a tide of air that kept sucking out, then blowing back in. We hadn't moved from our spot at the foot of the bed, in front of the mirror, but it seemed, suddenly, as though everything was speeding up. Our faces gleamed with sweat, as if we'd run for miles, when in fact all our movements – through the hotel's revolving glass door, towards reception, into and out of the lift, along the narrow spotlit corridor to the closed door with a gold '436' on it – had been slow and deliberate, a thousand heartbeats to the footstep. We both knew something was waiting for us inside the room, something that could only be put off for so long.

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‘As much as we can,’ I echoed Aidan’s words. ‘And then no questions.’

He nodded. I saw his eyes shining in the dimness of the unlit room and knew how much it meant to him that I’d said yes. My fear was still there, sitting hunched inside me, but now I felt better able to manage it. I’d secured a concession: no questions. I was in control, I told myself.

‘I did something stupid. More than stupid. Wrong.’ My voice sounded too loud, so I lowered it. ‘To two people.’ Saying their names would have been impossible. I didn’t try. Even in my thoughts I cannot name them. I make do with ‘Him’ and ‘Her’.

I knew then that I was capable of giving Aidan no more than the bare bones, though every word of the whole of it glowed in my mind. Nobody would believe how often I tell myself the story, one unbearable detail after another. Like picking at a scab, except it’s not. It’s more like taking a sharp fingernail and gouging out raw, runny pink flesh from a spot I’ve never left alone long enough for a scab to form.

*I did something wrong.* I keep hoping I’ll find a new way to start, at the same time as knowing there isn’t one. None of it would have happened if I’d been blameless.

‘It was a long time ago. I was punished.’ My head throbbed, as if a small, hard machine was rotating inside my brain. ‘Excessively. I never . . . I still haven’t got over it. The unfairness of it and . . . what happened to me. I thought I could escape by moving away, but . . .’ I shrugged, trying to affect an equanimity I did not feel.

‘The worst things stow away in the hold, follow you wherever you go,’ said Aidan.

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His kindness made it harder. I shook my hands free from his and sat down on the edge of the bed. The room we'd booked was awful: it had the tall, narrow proportions of a telephone box, and there were green and blue checks everywhere – the curtains, the bedspread, the chairs – with a grid of red lines separating each square from its neighbours. When I stared at the pattern, it warped in front of my eyes. I didn't need to see all the other rooms in the Drummond Hotel to know they were identical. There were three pictures, one above the television and two on the hollow wall that separated the bedroom from the bathroom; three insipid landscapes that begged to be ignored, with colours that were as close to colourless as it was possible to get. Outside, through the thick, rectangular slab of multi-layered glass that made up one side of the room, London was a restless yellow-streaked grey that I knew would keep me awake all night. I wanted to be in the pitch black, blind and unseen.

Why was I bothering with this pretence of a confession? What was the point of telling the only version of events that I could bear to utter out loud – an abstract shadow, a template that could have applied to any number of stories?

'I'm sorry,' I told Aidan. 'It's not that I don't want you to know, it's just . . . I can't say it. I can't say the words.' A lie. I didn't want him to know; I had wanted to please him by agreeing that we should tell one another, but that wasn't the same thing. If I'd wanted him to know, I could have promised to show him the file under my bed at home: the trial transcript, the letters, the newspaper clippings.

'I'm sorry I've told you so little,' I said. I needed to cry. The tears were there; I could feel them inside me, blocking my throat and chest, but I couldn't squeeze them out.



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Aidan knelt down in front of me, rested his arms on my knees and looked at me hard, so that I couldn't look away. 'It isn't so little,' he said. 'It's a lot. To me, it's a lot.' That was when I realised that he wouldn't go back on the deal we'd made. He wasn't going to ask me any questions. My body sagged, limp with relief.

I showed no sign of wanting to say more. Aidan must have assumed I'd reached the end of the non-story I had not quite told him. He kissed me and said, 'Whatever you did, it makes no difference to how I feel about you. I'm really proud of you. It'll be easy from now on.' I tried to pull him up onto the bed. I wasn't sure what the 'it' was that he thought would be easy; he might have meant making love for the first time, or the rest of our life together, all of it. I had left my last life behind, and now I had a new one with Aidan. Part of me – a big, loud, insistent part – couldn't believe it.

I wasn't nervous about the sex, not any more. Aidan's idea had worked, though not in the way he'd hoped it would. I'd confided a little, and now I was desperate to do anything but talk. I wanted physical contact as a way of warding off words.

'Wait,' Aidan said. He stood up. It was his turn. I didn't want to know. How can the things someone has done in the past make no difference to the way you feel about them in the present? I knew too much about the worst human beings can do to one another to be able to give Aidan the reassurance he had given me.

'Years ago, I killed someone.' There was no emphasis, no tone to his voice; it was as if he was reading from an autocue, each word appearing on its own and out of context on a screen in front of him.

I had a terrible thought: *a man. Please let it be a man.*

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‘I killed a woman,’ Aidan said, in response to my unasked question. His eyes were flooded. He sniffed, blinked.

I felt my body begin to fill up with a new sharp sadness, one I was sure I wouldn’t be able to stand for more than a few seconds. I was desperate, angry, disbelieving, but not frightened.

Not until Aidan said, ‘Her name was Mary. Mary Trelease.’



I

*Friday 29 Feb 2008*

Here she is. I see her face in profile and only for a second as her car passes me, but I'm sure it's her. Detective Sergeant Charlotte Zailer. If she drives past the part of the car park that's reserved for visitors, I'll know I'm right.

She does. I watch her silver Audi slow down and stop in one of the spaces marked 'Police Parking Only'. I reach into my coat pockets, allowing my red-cold hands to rest in the fleecy warmth for a few seconds, then pull out the article from the *Rawndesley and Spilling Telegraph*. As Charlotte Zailer gets out of her car, unaware of my presence, I unfold it and look at the picture again. The same high cheekbones, the same narrow but full mouth, the same small, bony chin. It's definitely her, though her hair is longer now, shoulder-length, and today she isn't wearing glasses. She isn't crying, either. In the small black and white picture, there are tears on her cheeks. I wonder why she didn't wipe them away, knowing the press were there with their cameras. Perhaps someone had told her it would go down better with the public if she looked distraught.

She hitches her brown leather bag over her shoulder and starts to walk towards the looming red-brick building that casts a long, square shadow over the car park: Spilling Police Station. I instruct myself to follow her, but my legs don't

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move. Shivering, I huddle beside my car. The winter sun warming my face makes my body feel colder by contrast.

There is no connection between the building in front of me and the only other police station I have been inside – this is what I must tell myself. They are simply two buildings, in the way that cinemas and restaurants are also buildings, and I am never stiff with fear when I walk past Spilling Picture House or the Bay Tree Bistro.

Detective Sergeant Zailer is moving slowly towards the entrance: double glass doors with a sign saying ‘Reception’ above them. She fumbles in her handbag. It’s the sort I like least – long and squashy, with a silly number of zips, buckles and protruding side pockets. She pulls out a packet of Marlboro Lights, throws it back in, then pulls out her mobile phone and stops for a moment, jabbing the keys with her long-nailed thumb. I could easily catch her up.

*Go. Move. I stay where I am.*

This time is nothing like last time, I tell myself. This time I am here by choice.

*If you can call it that.*

I am here because the only alternative would be to go back to Mary’s house.

Frustrated, I clamp my mouth shut to stop my teeth chattering. All my books advocate the technique of repeating encouraging mantras in your head. *Useless*. You can issue yourself with sensible instructions endlessly, but making those words take root in your mind and govern how you truly feel is another matter. Why do so many people believe that words have an innate authority?

A lie I told as a teenager pushes to the front of my mind. I pretended I’d said something similar to my father about the

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Bible, boasted to my friends about the terrible row it caused. 'It's only words, Dad. Someone, or maybe lots of people, sat down thousands of years ago and made it up, the whole lot. They wrote a book. Like Jackie Collins.' The lie was easy to tell because those words were always in my head, though I lacked the courage ever to speak them aloud. My school friends knew Jackie Collins was my favourite writer; they had no idea that I hid her books under my bed inside empty sanitary-towel packets.

Disgust finally gets me moving: the realisation that I'm thinking about my father in order to dishearten myself, offering myself an excuse to give up. Charlotte Zailer is heading towards the doors, about to disappear inside. I start to run towards her. Something has found its way into my shoe and it's hurting my foot. I'm going to be too late; by the time I reach reception, she'll be in an office somewhere, making a coffee, starting her day's work. 'Wait!' I yell. 'Please, wait!'

She stops, turns. She has been unbuttoning her coat on her way up the steps, and I see she's wearing a uniform. Doubt stills me, like an invisible blow to the legs, then I lurch forward again, staggering. Detective sergeants don't wear uniforms. What if it isn't her?

She is walking towards me. She must think I'm drunk, swaying all over the car park. 'Are you after me?' she calls out.

Other people are looking at me too, those getting into and out of their cars; they heard me shout, heard the desperation in my voice. My worst nightmare, to be seen by everybody. Strangers. I can't speak. I'm confused, hot and cold at the same time, in different parts of my body. I can't work out any more if I want this woman to be Charlotte Zailer or not.

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She draws level with me. 'Are you all right?' she asks.

I step back. The thing in my shoe presses into the skin between my little toe and the next one as I put my weight on my left foot. 'Are you Detective Sergeant Charlotte Zailer?'

'I was,' she says, still smiling but more guardedly. 'Now I'm just plain sergeant. Do we know each other?'

I shake my head.

'But you know who I am.'

I have rehearsed what I will say to her countless times, but not once did I think about what she might say to me.

'What's your name?'

'Ruth Bussey.' I steel myself for signs of recognition, but there are none.

'Right. Well, Ruth, I'm part of the community policing team for Spilling now. Do you live in Spilling?'

'Yes.'

'This isn't a community matter, is it? You wanted to speak to a detective?'

I can't let her pass me on to someone else. My hand closes around the piece of newspaper in my pocket. 'No, I want to talk to you. It won't take long.'

She looks at her watch. 'What's it about? Why me in particular? I'd still like to know how you knew who I was.'

'It's . . . my boyfriend,' I say in a monotone. It won't be any easier to get the words out once we're inside. If I tell her why I'm here, she'll stop asking how I knew her name. 'He thinks he killed somebody, but he's wrong.'

Charlotte Zailer looks me up and down. 'Wrong?' She sighs. 'Okay, now you've got my attention. Look, come inside and we'll have a chat.'

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As we walk, I move my foot around inside my shoe, trying to dislodge whatever's digging into the pad of soft skin beneath my toes. It won't budge. I can feel a sticky wetness: blood. *Ignore it, block it out.* I follow Sergeant Zailer into the reception area where there are more people – some in uniform, others in blue Aertex tops with the words 'Police Staff' printed on them. There's a lot of blue here: the herringbone carpet on the floor, two suede-effect sofas forming a right angle in one corner. A long counter of pale, varnished pine with a semi-circular end protrudes from one wall like a breakfast bar jutting out into the middle of a kitchen.

Sergeant Zailer stops to speak to a middle-aged man with a pot belly, a dimpled chin and fluffy grey hair. He calls her Charlie, not Charlotte. I press down on my coat pocket with my right hand and listen to the faint rustle of the newspaper, trying to remind myself of the connection between us – between me and Charlie – but I have never felt lonelier in my life, and only the pain charging up from my foot through all the nerves in my body stops me from running away.

After what I've told her, she would run after me. How could she not? She'd chase me and she'd catch me.

'Come on,' she says to me when she's finished talking to the grey-haired man. I limp after her. It's a relief once we're alone, in a corridor with uncovered brick walls that looks much older than the reception area. There is a background noise of running water; I look around, but its source isn't obvious. Along the walls on both sides, against the brick, are pictures at eye level. On my right is a series of framed posters – domestic violence, needle exchanges, building safer communities. Opposite these are framed black and white etchings of different streets in Spilling. They're atmospheric in a jagged



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sort of way, conveying the narrow, claustrophobic feel of the interlocking roads in the oldest part of town, the uneven house- and shop-fronts, the streets with their slippery cobbles. I feel a pang of sympathy for the artist, knowing that his or her exhibition is displayed here purely for its local relevance; no one values these pictures in their own right, as works of art.

‘Are you all right?’ Charlie Zailer asks me, waiting for me to catch up. ‘You’re limping.’

‘I sprained my ankle yesterday,’ I say, feeling a flush spread across my face.

‘Did you?’ She turns and stands in front of me, forcing me to stop. ‘Sprained ankles generally swell to twice their size. Yours doesn’t look swollen. It looks to me as if it’s your foot that’s sore. Has someone hurt you, Ruth? You seem very far from all right to me. Has your boyfriend hurt you, maybe?’

‘Aidan?’ I think about the way he kisses the straight line of pink scar tissue that starts below my ribcage and runs down over my stomach. He’s never asked what caused it, neither on that first night in London nor since.

He is incapable of harming anybody. I know he is.

‘Aidan?’ Charlie Zailer repeats. ‘Is that your boyfriend’s name?’

I nod.

‘Has Aidan hurt you?’ She folds her arms, blocking the corridor so that I can’t pass her. I don’t know where we’re going anyway; I have no choice but to wait.

‘No. I’ve got a . . . a bad blister on my foot, that’s all. It hurts when my shoe rubs against it.’

‘Why not say so, then? Why pretend a blister’s a sprained ankle?’

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I can't understand why I'm out of breath. I clench my teeth, against the pain in my foot and against her attitude. Knowing what she's been through, I expected her to be kind. Understanding.

'Here's what we're going to do,' she says in a loud, clear voice, as if she's talking to a small child. 'I'll settle you in one of our reception rooms, sort us out with some tea, see if I can find a plaster for your foot . . .'

'I don't need a plaster,' I say. New beads of sweat prickle my upper lip. 'It's fine, honestly. You don't need to—'

' . . . And then we'll talk about your boyfriend. Aidan.' She starts to walk again. I have to half run to keep up with her. Is it a test? The pain is constant now; I picture a wide, weeping gash beneath my toes, with whatever caused it embedded in the wound, pushing its way deeper in with every step. The effort I'm making not to think about it is like a tight thread in my mind, winding tighter and tighter. My eyes ache to close. I'm aware of the sound of my breathing, of the air rushing out of my lungs and having to be dragged back in.

I follow Charlie Zailer round a corner and we are in another corridor, colder than the last, with windows all along one side. No pictures here, only a row of framed certificates, all with some sort of official-looking stamp on them, but they're high up on the wall and we're going too fast for me to read the writing.

I stop when I see a pale green door ahead. I've done this before: walked down a long passageway towards a closed door. *Green. Dark green.*

'Ruth?' Sergeant Zailer is calling me, snapping her fingers in the air. 'You look as if you're in shock. What's wrong? Is it your foot?'

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‘Nothing. Nothing’s wrong.’

‘Are you asthmatic? Have you got an inhaler?’

Asthmatic? I don’t know what she’s talking about. ‘I’m all right,’ I tell her.

‘Well, come on, then.’ When I don’t move, she doubles back on herself, takes my arm and, with one hand on my back, steers me down the corridor, saying something about tea and coffee that sounds more complicated than a simple either-or offer. I mumble, ‘Thanks,’ hoping it’s the right answer. She unlocks the green door, directs me to a chair, tells me to wait. I don’t want her to leave me alone but I’m unwilling to ask her not to, knowing how pathetic I’d sound.

The room contains two chairs apart from the one I’m sitting on, a waste-paper basket and a table with a white-flowered cyclamen on it. The plant is too big for its pot. It must have been for some time, yet someone has been watering it regularly, or else its foliage wouldn’t look so lush. What fool would water a plant day after day and not realise it needed re-potting?

*Green.* The door of our room at the Drummond Hotel in London was green. One night of my life, one night out of thirty-eight years, but part of me is still there, trapped in the night that Aidan told me. Part of me never left that hotel.

All my books say there’s no point wasting your energy on ‘if only’s. They offer no advice about what to do if you’re hooked on them. There are no patches available in chemists’ shops that an ‘if only’ addict can stick on her arm to help break the destructive habit.

If only Aidan and I hadn’t gone to London last December, the nightmare I’m living now would never have started.

\* \* \*

*The Other Half Lives*

‘My boyfriend told me he killed a woman, but he didn’t.’

‘I need the woman’s name, and details of where we can find her,’ says Sergeant Zailer, ready to write down whatever I say. When I don’t answer immediately, she says, ‘Ruth, if Aidan’s beaten somebody up so badly that—’

‘No! He hasn’t touched her.’ I have to make her understand. ‘She’s fine. Nobody’s hurt. I . . . He hasn’t been anywhere near her, I’m sure he hasn’t.’

‘Nobody’s hurt?’ Charlie Zailer looks stumped.

‘No.’

‘You’re certain?’

‘Yes.’

She thinks for a few moments, then smiles at me. ‘All right. Let’s come back to your boyfriend and this woman later,’ she says. ‘I’m going to take a few basic details first, if that’s okay.’ Suddenly, she has an entirely different manner; she is no longer impatient, suspicious. She’s ditched her too-loud patronising voice and is acting as if we’re friends; we might be at a pub quiz, on the same team – she’s writing down the answers. ‘Name? Ruth Bussey, right? B-U-S-S-E-Y?’

‘Yes.’

‘Middle name?’

Does she really want to know? Is she joking? ‘Zinta.’

She laughs. ‘Really?’

‘My mother’s Latvian.’

‘It’s a great name,’ she says. ‘I’ve always wanted a more interesting middle name. Mine’s Elizabeth. And your address?’

‘Blantyre Lodge, Blantyre Park, Spil—’

‘You live in the park?’

‘In the lodge house, just inside the park gates.’

*Sophie Hannah*

‘That funny little house with the black and white top?’  
*Timber-panelled gables.* I don’t correct her. I nod.

‘I see that house every day on my drive to work. That’s yours?’

‘I rent it. I don’t own it.’

‘One thing I’ve always wondered: how do you get those red leaves to grow down the roof like that, like a fringe? Did you plant something in the chimney? I mean, I can understand a plant growing up the side of a house, but . . .’

‘Why does any of this matter?’ I blurt out. ‘I’m only the tenant. I didn’t plant anything anywhere.’

‘Who’s your landlord?’

‘The council.’ I sigh, recognising the need to be patient, however impossible that might seem. If I try to speed things up, she will make sure to slow them down. Her cheery determination is like a restraint around me, pinning me in my chair for as long as she wants me there.

‘How long have you lived there, Ruth?’

‘Nearly four years.’

‘And no trouble paying your rent on time during those years?’

Another odd question. There must be a reason for it. ‘No.’

‘Not tempted to buy a place? Get on the property ladder?’

‘I . . .’ *This is ludicrous.* ‘I’m not ready to . . .’

‘Commit to home-ownership? Put down roots?’ Charlie Zailer suggests, still smiling. ‘Fair enough. I felt that way for a long time.’ She taps her pen against the hard cover of her notebook. ‘What was your address before Blantyre Lodge?’

‘I . . . Could I have a drink, please?’

‘Tea’s on the way. Where did you live before Blantyre Lodge?’

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With my eyes fixed on the table in front of me, I recite my old address: '84 Pople Street, Lincoln.'

'Also rented?'

'No. That house was mine.'

'So you'd put down roots in Lincoln. Why did you move?'

I open my mouth to lie, then remember what a hash I made of my last attempt at dishonesty: my fake sprained ankle. I rub the palms of my hands against my jeans, wiping off the sticky dampness. 'Why are you asking me all these questions? What does it matter why I moved? I'm here to talk about my boyfriend . . .'

The door opens. A tall, thin man who looks too young to have left school comes in holding two mugs of tea. Proper mugs that look like bone china, one with green stripes and one with brown. Mine is chipped at the top. 'Perfect timing.' Sergeant Zailer smiles at her colleague, then at me. He mouths something at her, pointing at her notebook. She says, 'Apparently nobody's hurt,' and gives him a look I can't decipher. 'Thanks, Robbie.' Once Robbie has left us alone, closing the door behind him, she says, 'Drink your tea and relax, Ruth. There's no hurry. I know you've got something you want to tell me, and we'll get there, I promise. The questions I'm asking – they're all standard. Nothing to worry about.'

In other words, there is no way I can avoid answering them. What a fool I was to imagine Charlie Zailer would be more sensitive than any other police officer. After what happened to her, she probably resolved to fill the space her feelings used to occupy with sheet metal. I tried to do the same thing myself for a long time; I understand the logic behind it.

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To my relief, she doesn't ask again why I left Lincoln. Instead, she wants to know if I have a job. I lean forward. Steam from my tea wets my face. Somehow it's comforting.

'I work for my boyfriend,' I tell her.

'What's his name?' She watches me carefully.

'You know his name.'

'Aidan?'

'Yes.'

'Surname?'

'Seed.'

'And what does Aidan do?'

'He's got his own picture-framing business, Seed Art Services.'

'Oh, I've seen the sign. You're by the river, aren't you? Near that pub, what's it called . . .?'

'Yes.'

'How long have you worked for Aidan?'

'Since last August.'

'Where did you work before that? When you first moved to Spilling?'

I tell myself this will be over soon. Even the worst things end eventually.

'I didn't, at first. Then I worked at the Spilling Gallery.'

'As a picture-framer?'

'No.' The word comes out like a cry of pain. It feels like a punishment, this long, drawn-out, pointless interrogation. 'I didn't know how to frame pictures then. My boss did the framing. I was a sales assistant – a receptionist, but I also sold pictures to customers. Aidan trained me properly, when I went to work for him.'

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‘So now you know how to frame pictures.’ Charlie Zailer sounds pleased with my achievement. ‘Did you work when you lived in Lincoln?’

‘I had my own business.’

She smiles encouragingly. ‘I’m not psychic.’

‘I had a garden design business. Green Haven Gardens,’ I say quickly, before she can ask me.

‘Quite a change, then – garden designer to picture-framer. Your boss at the Spilling Gallery, what was his name?’

‘Saul Hansard,’ I say weakly.

She puts down her notebook and pen. She watches me, the bony fingers of her right hand playing with the ring on her left. It’s a single diamond – a small one with gold claws around it, sticking up from the gold band it’s attached to. *She’s engaged*. I feel excluded from her private happiness, and know I have no right to. It’s a sign of how far back I’ve slipped since London.

The better you understand yourself, the easier it is to change, my books say.

‘So, you and Aidan Seed work together, framing pictures by the river. Ever been flooded?’ Sergeant Zailer asks brightly. ‘I know the pub has. Oh – the Star, that’s what it’s called. I’ve seen your sign – “Seed Art Services, Conservation Framing” – but I assumed you’d shut down. Whenever I look, there’s a sign in the window saying you’re closed.’

I stare at her. I can’t do this any more. I stand up, knocking my legs against the table, spilling tea. More from her mug than mine. ‘Aidan believes he killed a woman called Mary Trelease,’ I tell her again. ‘I know he didn’t.’

‘We’ll be getting to that in a moment,’ she says. ‘Sit down, Ruth. I asked you a question: Seed Art Services is still up and running, is it?’



*Sophie Hannah*

‘Yes, it is,’ I snap, feeling humiliated. ‘Aidan and I work there, six days a week, sometimes seven. The sign in the window says “Closed except for appointments and deliveries”. We’re too busy to have people dropping in with little odds and ends. If someone only wants one picture framed and they spend half an hour choosing the frame and the mount, we make a loss on that job.’

Charlie Zailer nods. ‘So, who are your customers, then?’

‘*Why?* For God’s sake, why does any of this matter? Local artists, museums and galleries, some corporate customers . . .’

‘And how long has Aidan been in business? His workshop’s been there for as long as—’

‘Six years,’ I cut her off. ‘Do you want to know where we both went to school? Our mothers’ maiden names?’

‘No. I’d like to know where Aidan lives, though. With you?’

‘As good as.’

‘Since when?’

‘Two, two and a half months.’ *Since our night in London.* ‘He’s also got his own flat, attached to the framing workshop. It’s more of a storeroom than a flat, really. It’s got a tiny kitchen in one corner that barely works. You can’t have the gas rings and the oven on at the same time.’ I stop, aware that I’ve told her more than I needed to.

‘Most single men could live in a grimy bucket and not notice.’ Sergeant Zailer laughs. ‘So does he own or rent his . . . premises?’

‘He rents.’ I brush my hair away from my eyes. ‘Before you ask, yes, he also pays his rent on time.’

She folds her arms, smiles. ‘All right, Ruth. Thanks for your patience. Now, tell me about Aidan and Mary Trelease.’

*The Other Half Lives*

Unsure whether I've passed or failed whatever bizarre test she has just inflicted upon me, I try to compose myself and say clearly, 'He didn't kill her.'

'Let me clarify this point one more time: to your knowledge, nobody – neither Aidan nor anyone else – has hurt or killed Mary Trelease. Correct?'

I nod.

'She's unharmed?'

'Yes. You can check . . .'

'I will.'

' . . . you'll see I'm right.'

'Then why does Aidan think he killed her?'

I take a deep breath. 'I don't know. He won't tell me.'

Her eyebrows shoot up. 'Is this some sort of joke?'

'No. It's ruining both our lives.'

She slaps the palm of her left hand flat on the table. 'I need a bit of context here. Who is this Mary Trelease? What does she do? Where does she live? How old is she? How do you and Aidan know her?'

'She lives in Spilling. She's an artist. A painter. She . . . I don't know how old she is. I think maybe about my age. Thirty-eight, forty. Maybe older.' None of the answers I know are the answers we need. Charlie Zailer hasn't realised this yet, but she will. I'm terrified that, as soon as she does, she'll give up on me.

She looks the way I am sick of feeling: at a loss.

Eventually she says, 'Well, this is a new one. You're saying that Aidan – how long has he been your boyfriend, by the way?'

'Since last August.'

'Okay. So pretty much since you started working for him?'

*Sophie Hannah*

I nod.

‘Aidan believes he’s killed Mary Trelease, yet you know for a fact that she isn’t dead or even injured?’

‘That’s right.’ I flop back in my seat, grateful to be understood, finally.

Charlie Zailer’s eyes are narrow.

‘Forgive me if this seems like a stupid question, Ruth, but . . . have you told Aidan that Mary Trelease isn’t dead?’

‘Yes.’ I start to cry. I can’t help it. ‘I’ve told him over and over. I’ve told him until my throat’s sore and my voice is gone.’

‘And how does he respond?’

‘He shakes his head – he looks so *certain*. He says she can’t be alive, because he killed her.’

‘You’ve had this conversation many times?’

‘Hundreds. I’ve told him where she lives. He could go to her house and prove to himself that she’s still alive, but he won’t. He won’t go and see for himself, he won’t take my word for it – I’m getting desperate.’

Charlie Zailer taps her pen against the side of her face. ‘What you’re telling me is very odd, Ruth. Do you realise how odd it sounds?’

‘Of course I do! I’m not stupid.’

‘How do Aidan and Mary know each other?’

‘I . . . I don’t know.’

‘Brilliant,’ she mutters. ‘Are you sure Aidan isn’t having you on? He didn’t tell you on April Fool’s Day, did he?’ Seeing my expression, she straightens her face and says, ‘When did he tell you? Where were you, what was the situation? I’m sorry, Ruth, but this story is too way out for me.’

‘We were in London. It was last year, December the thirteenth.’

‘Any particular reason you were in London that night?’

‘We . . . we went to an art fair.’

She nods. ‘Carry on.’

‘We were in our hotel. It was late. We’d been out for dinner and got back about half past ten. We went straight up to our room and . . . that’s when he told me.’

‘Out of the blue? With no warning, just, “Oh, by the way, I’ve murdered someone”?’

‘He didn’t say murdered. He said killed. And, no, it wasn’t out of the blue. Aidan was upset. He said he didn’t think our relationship was going to work unless we . . . unless he confided in me, but he obviously didn’t want to. I could tell he was dreading it. I was too.’

‘Why?’ Charlie Zailer leans forward. ‘Most people don’t dread being confided in by their partners. Most women, especially, would be gagging to know. Did you have reason to believe Aidan might have committed a violent crime?’

‘No, I . . . no. None.’ *Most women.* She is talking about people for whom the word ‘secret’ means a tantalising prospect, not a source of anguish.

‘What exactly did Aidan say?’

I close my eyes. ‘He said, “Years ago, I killed someone. I killed a woman. Her name was Mary Trelease.”’

‘“Her name was Mary Trelease”?’ Sergeant Zailer looks puzzled. ‘So he said it as if she was someone you’d never heard of, then? He didn’t know you knew her?’

I should have anticipated this question. My mind starts to churn. ‘I don’t know her.’

‘*What?*’

‘I don’t know Mary Trelease.’

*Sophie Hannah*

‘Then . . . Again, Ruth, you’ll have to forgive me if I’m being slow here, but if you don’t know her, how did you know she was still alive when Aidan first said he’d killed her?’

She wouldn’t believe me if I told her. Still, I’d risk it if I thought I could say the words without bringing my first meeting with Mary to life again, as if it was happening now. Even thinking about telling the story makes me feel hot and panicky. I stare into my half-drunk tea, squirming, wishing she’d ask another question, but she doesn’t. She waits. When I can no longer bear the silence, I say, ‘Look, all you need to do is check that she’s alive. She lives at number 15 Megson Crescent . . .’

‘On the Winstanley estate?’

‘Yes, I . . . I think so.’ I can’t appear too certain, having claimed not to know her.

‘Megson Crescent is a contender for the title of roughest street in Spilling. Most of the ground-floor windows are boarded up.’ Sergeant Zailer raises an eyebrow. ‘Ms Trelease is a struggling artist, I take it? She can’t be making much money from her painting if that’s where she lives.’

I feel a hysterical laugh rising inside me. ‘She makes no money from it.’

‘Does she have a day job?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Don’t you?’ Charlie Zailer says smoothly, as if passing comment on the weather. ‘Do you think I don’t know when I’m being lied to, Ruth? Do you think I don’t meet liars every day? I do – liars of the highest grade. Shall I tell you about some of them?’

‘I’m not a liar. I *don’t* know Mary, and I hadn’t heard of her when Aidan told me . . . when he told me . . .’

‘When he told you that he’d killed her, years ago.’

‘That’s right.’ My words sound like someone else’s, as if they’re not coming from inside me but from somewhere far away.

‘You’re panicking, Ruth, and you’re spewing up lies faster than the magic porridge pot spewed up porridge. Remember that story from when you were a kid?’ Sergeant Zailer yawns, leans back in her chair. ‘Is it possible Aidan killed another woman with the same name?’ she says, as casually as if she were suggesting the answer to a crossword clue. ‘I know Trelease isn’t a common surname, but . . .’

‘No,’ I say, my voice cracking. ‘I could see the details were familiar to him when I told him. That she lives on Megson Crescent, that she’s an artist, forty-ish, with long black curly hair, silver streaks in it where she’s starting to go grey.’ *His face: the absolute recognition, the fear, in his eyes.* ‘It’s the same woman, the one he’s sure he killed. I’m not making this up! Why would I?’

‘Silver-grey hair and she’s only forty? Still, they say people with very dark hair go grey youngest.’ Charlie Zailer drums her fingers on the table, raises an eyebrow at me. ‘So, you’ve seen her, then? If you know what kind of hair she’s got, you must have seen her, even if you don’t know her personally.’

I say nothing.

‘Or perhaps you’ve seen a picture of her? No, I think you’ve seen her in the flesh. A picture wouldn’t have put your mind at rest. Aidan told you he’d killed her, and you needed to see her in person, see for yourself that she was still alive. Undeterred by the sheer unlikeliness of anyone pretending they’ve killed someone when they haven’t, you set out to find this dead woman and, lo and behold, she wasn’t dead at all. Is that how it happened?’

*Sophie Hannah*

The silence between us is unbearable. I try to pretend she isn't here, that I'm alone in the room.

'Curiouser and curiouser,' she mutters. 'Okay, here's a question you might be happier about answering: what are you doing here, apart from wasting my time?'

'What?'

'Why are you here? Aidan hasn't killed anyone – fine. Mary Trelease is alive – hooray. What do you want from me, exactly?'

Now I can talk freely. 'I want you to check that what I'm saying is true. If it is, you could . . . convince Aidan. I've tried and failed. You're the police – he'd listen to you.'

'If it's true? So you're not a hundred per cent sure Aidan didn't kill this woman who's alive. Make up your mind.'

'I'm as sure as I can be, but . . . what if the woman I think is Mary Trelease isn't? What if . . . I know it sounds insane, but what if she's some other woman who fits Mary's description, a relative or . . . or . . . ? *Or someone pretending.* I don't say it; it would make me sound paranoid. 'There are things the police can find out that I can't.'

Charlie Zailer sighs. 'The police *find things out* in the process of investigating crimes. Nothing's happened here, according to you. There's no crime to investigate. Correct?' She opens and closes her lips several times, making a popping noise. She appears to be thinking. Perhaps she's bored, daydreaming. After a few seconds, she says, 'From my point of view, there are three questions. One: did Aidan kill the woman you're talking about, the person you know as Mary Trelease?'

'He didn't. He can't have. She's alive.'

'All right. Then did he kill another person called or known by the name of Mary Trelease? And lastly, question number

three: did he kill or injure anyone? Is there a body somewhere, waiting to be found? Not that it'll still be a body by now, if the killing happened years ago.'

'Aidan couldn't hurt anybody. I know him.'

She puffs her cheeks full of air, then blows it out in one breath. 'If you're right, you should be consulting a shrink, not me.'

I shake my head. 'He's sane. I can tell from the way he reacts to other things, normal things. That's why this makes no sense.' It occurs to me that perhaps Sergeant Zailer asked me all those pointless questions about my job and my rent for the same reason: to test my reaction to ordinary enquiries. 'Have you heard of the Cotard delusion?' I ask her.

'No. I've heard of *The God Delusion*.'

'It's a mental illness, or a symptom of mental illness, usually associated with despair and an extreme lack of self-esteem. It's where you believe you're dead even though you're not.'

She grins. 'If I had that, I'd worry less about smoking fifteen fags a day.'

I'm not interested in her jokes. 'As far as I know – and I've looked into it – there's no mutation of that syndrome, and no other syndrome that I could find, where sufferers believe they've killed people who are still living. I ruled out psychological explanations a while ago. I *don't* think Aidan's committed any violent crime. I know he hasn't, and wouldn't, but . . . I'm worried something's going to happen, something really bad.' I didn't know I was going to say this until the words are out. 'I'm frightened, but I don't know what of.'

Charlie Zailer looks at me for a long time. Eventually she says, 'What has Aidan told you about the details of what he



*Sophie Hannah*

did? What he says he did. When, why and where did he kill Mary Trelease, by his own account?’

‘I’ve already told you everything he told me: that he killed her, years ago.’

‘How many years?’

‘He didn’t say.’

‘How, why and where did he kill her?’

‘He didn’t tell me.’

‘What was their relationship? When and how did they first meet?’

‘I told you already, I don’t know!’

‘I thought Aidan wanted to confide in you. Did he change his mind halfway through? Ruth? What did he say, when you asked him for more details?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘You *didn’t*? Why not?’

‘I . . . I did ask him one question. I asked him if it was an accident.’ I can’t bear the memory. The way he looked at me, as if I’d stamped on his heart. *No questions*. He stuck to the deal we made; I broke it.

‘Right,’ says Sergeant Zailer. ‘Because you couldn’t believe he’d harm anyone deliberately. What did he say?’

‘Nothing. He just stared at me.’

‘And you didn’t ask him any more questions?’

‘No.’

‘Frankly, I find that impossible to believe. Anyone would ask. Why didn’t you?’

‘Are you going to help me or not?’ I say, mustering what’s left of my hope and energy.

‘How can I, when you’re withholding at least half the information you know is relevant, assuming you’re not making

all this up. A strange way to behave if you want my help.’ She straightens up in her chair. ‘Aidan made this confession to you on the thirteenth of December last year. Why did you wait until now, two and a half months later, before coming in?’

‘I hoped I’d be able to make him see sense,’ I say, knowing how feeble it sounds in spite of being true.

‘I see conspiracies everywhere, that’s my trouble,’ says Sergeant Zailer. ‘What I don’t know is, who’s on the receiving end of this one: you? Me? One colossal piss-take – that’s what this sounds like to me.’

I feel as if I might pass out. There’s a sharp pain between my shoulder-blades. I picture myself pressing a big red button: *stop*. I imagine my finger holding the button down – it’s supposed to make the bad thoughts go into retreat. Whichever book said it worked was lying.

Conspiracies: they’re what I fear most. I was wrong before. My nightmare didn’t start when I went to London with Aidan. It started earlier, much earlier. The list of possible starting points is endless: when Mary Trelease walked into my life, when I met Him and Her, when I came into the world as Godfrey and Inge Bussey’s daughter.

Sergeant Zailer holds up her hands. ‘Don’t worry – if there’s any chance a crime’s been committed, I’ll do whatever it takes to bottom that out,’ she says. Her words are no comfort. *Aidan and Mary Trelease, conspiring together against me*. If it’s true, I don’t want to know. I couldn’t bear it. Is that where he’s been, all the nights he hasn’t been with me?

I stand up, wincing as my weight lands on my injured foot. ‘I made a mistake coming here. I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be. Have a seat. If I’m going to take this forward, we need to sort out a proper statement . . .’

*Sophie Hannah*

‘No! I don’t want to make a statement. I’ve changed my mind.’

‘Ruth, calm down.’

‘I know the law. You can’t force me to be a witness. I haven’t done anything wrong. You can’t arrest me – that means I can leave.’

I limp to the door, open it, hurry down the corridor as fast as I can, which isn’t very fast. Sergeant Zailer soon catches me up. She strolls alongside me, saying nothing as we pass reception and head out into cold air that’s like a slap in the face. She whistles and examines her long fingernails, as if our walking side by side is a coincidence. Eventually she says, conversationally, ‘Do you know what’s happening tomorrow night, Ruth?’

‘No.’

‘It’s my engagement party. You wouldn’t . . . this whole thing wouldn’t by any chance be related to that, would it? You aren’t going to pop out of a cake tomorrow night and say “Surprise!”, are you? And if you are, it wouldn’t be anything to do with a certain Colin Sellers, would it?’

I stop, turn to face her. ‘I don’t know who or what you’re talking about. Forget everything I said, all right?’ And then I start to run, properly run, grinding the pain further into my foot, and she doesn’t follow me. She shouts after me that she’ll be in touch. I pull open my car door, feeling her eyes burning into my back.

She knows where I live; she won’t let this drop. But she isn’t coming after me now. For the moment, that’s all I care about. If I can just get away from her for a few moments, I’ll be okay.

*The Other Half Lives*

I lock the car doors as soon as I've turned on the engine. My tyres screech as I reverse too quickly, then I'm on the road and I can't see her any more. *Thank God.*

It's a few minutes before I realise I'm shaking from the cold. I haven't got my coat. I left it in the room at the police station, draped over the back of my chair. With the article about Charlie Zailer in the pocket.