

Praise for *The Carrier*

‘Do not think you have worked out where the plot is going and how it is going to end. Hannah is masterly at leading the reader down the wrong path and here she excels once again.’

Sunday Express

‘Another massively intriguing premise from Hannah, with plot threads that spin out in all kinds of unusual and surprising directions . . . A hugely confident, beautifully written and bold mystery . . . Another gripping triumph.’ *Heat*

‘This poet and crime writer again confirms in this, her eighth novel, her fluent writing skills, taste for complicated layers and deft hand with character, not to mention a knack for producing compelling openings. It is a mature work – full of confidence and intrigue.’ *Daily Mail*

‘A tale of the power that weakness and passivity can have over strength and action, and how theories of love and duty can lead us astray . . . Intriguing.’ *Guardian*

‘A leading writer of psychological suspense . . . her books are so distinctive that they deserve to be placed in a separate sub-genre of their own . . . as ever, Hannah excels.’ *Spectator*

‘It is brilliantly constructed, and it had me, screaming, on the edge of my chair’ *Reader’s Digest*

‘Such is the author’s command of the narrative, we . . . find ourselves glued to the page . . . Compelling.’

Daily Express

‘Highly original . . . Hannah has once again ripped up the industry-standard “A to Z of writing a Whodunnit” and audaciously charted her own course . . . to produce a novel that is a classy, compulsive and chilling literary triumph.’

Irish Independent

‘Another gripping puzzle of a novel from one of Britain’s best crime writers’ *Image Magazine*

Praise for Sophie Hannah

‘For those who demand emotional intelligence and literary verve from their thrillers, Sophie Hannah is the writer of choice.’ *Guardian*

‘One of the great unmissables of this genre – intelligent, classy and with a wonderfully Gothic imagination.’ *The Times*

‘Sophie Hannah has a poet’s eye, and she creates characters and settings of closely observed complexity in her psychological mysteries.’ *Daily Telegraph*

‘[A] challenging storyteller and anything but predictable . . . I felt quite bereft on reaching the final page.’ *Irish Independent*

‘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’
Financial Times

‘Hannah takes domestic scenarios, adds disquieting touches and turns up the suspense until you’re checking under the bed for murders’ *Independent*

‘Stunningly clever and compelling’ *Heat*

‘Hannah excels at dissecting human behaviour, and the way she describes little acts of cruelty can send real chills down the spine.’ *Psychologies*

‘The queen of the ingenious plot twist’ *Good Housekeeping*

‘It’s a given that nothing will be as it seems in the latest psychological thriller from Sophie Hannah, who marries complex plots with crisp, conversational prose’ *Marie Claire*

‘[Hannah] has outdone herself with *Kind of Cruel* . . .

Her trademark precision-layered structure creates a multi-dimensional maze that holds at its centre a revelation which is truly hair-raising, even by Hannah’s standards.’

Independent on Sunday

‘An exploration of memory and the way trauma lives on in the present. Cool, calculating and utterly chilling, *Kind of Cruel* is another compulsive book from Hannah, to be gulped down with all the lights on and someone to grab when the sense of menace grows too great.’ *Observer*

‘An audacious puzzle of a novel that is impossible to second guess . . . *Kind of Cruel* is exactly the intelligent, reflective and stunningly written novel that has “literary” critics swooning and judging panels lining up to reward . . . one hell of a journey.’

Sunday Express

‘[An] assured psychological thriller of murderous domestic deceit.’ *Financial Times* on *Lasting Damage*

‘Confidence oozes from every taut chapter; intelligence shines, the mystery deepens. Hannah’s relish of every delicious twist and tweak is one of the very few things that are clear in this cryptic game of hide and seek.’ *Scotsman* on *Lasting Damage*

‘Taut, ingenious’ *Sunday Express* on *A Room Swept White*

‘Enthrallingly complex . . . A multi-stranded narrative that grips’ *The Sunday Times* on *A Room Swept White*

‘Beautifully written and precision-engineered to unsettle’
Guardian on *The Other Half Lives*

‘This utterly gripping thriller should establish her as one of the great unmissables of this genre – intelligent, classy and with a wonderfully Gothic imagination’
The Times on *The Other Half Lives*

Praise for *The Carrier* and Sophie Hannah

‘This poet and crime writer again confirms in this, her eighth novel, her fluent writing skills, taste for complicated layers and deft hand with character, not to mention a knack for producing compelling openings. It is a mature work – full of confidence and intrigue’ *Daily Mail*

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‘Hannah takes domestic scenarios, adds disquieting touches and turns up the suspense until you’re checking under the bed for murderers’ *Independent*

Also by Sophie Hannah

Little Face
Hurting Distance
The Point of Rescue
The Other Half Lives
A Room Swept White
Lasting Damage
Kind of Cruel
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
the carrier



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For Peter Straus, my lovely agent
who has magic powers

POLICE EXHIBIT 1431B/SK – TRANSCRIPT OF HANDWRITTEN
LETTER FROM KERRY JOSE TO FRANCINE BREARY DATED 14
DECEMBER 2010

Why are you still here, Francine?

I've always believed that people can will their own deaths. If our minds can make us wake up exactly a minute before our alarm clocks are due to go off, they must be capable of stopping our breath. Think about it: brain and breath are more powerfully linked than brain and bedside table. A heart begged to stop by a mind that won't take no for an answer – what chance does it stand? That's what I've always thought, anyway.

And I can't believe you want to stick around. Even if you do, it won't be up to you for much longer. Someone will kill you. Soon. Every day I change my mind about who it will be. I don't feel the need to try and stop them, only to tell you. By giving you the chance to take yourself away, out of reach, I am being fair to everybody.

Let me admit it: I am trying to talk you into dying because I'm scared you'll recover. How can the impossible feel possible? It must mean I'm still afraid of you.

Tim isn't. Do you know what he asked me once, years ago? He and I were in your kitchen at Heron Close. Those white napkin rings that always reminded me of neck braces were on the table. You'd got them out of the drawer, and the brown napkins with ducks around the border, and slammed them down without saying anything; Tim

was supposed to do the rest, whether or not he deemed it important for napkins to be inserted into rings only to be taken out again fifteen minutes later. Dan had gone out to collect the Chinese takeaway and you'd marched off to the bottom of the garden to sulk. Tim had ordered something healthy and beansprouty that we all knew he'd hate, and you'd accused him of choosing it for the wrong reason: to please you. I remember blinking back tears as I laid the table, after I'd clumsily grabbed the bundle of cutlery from his hands. There was nothing I could do to rescue him from you, but I could spare him the effort of putting the forks and knives out, and I was determined to. Little things were all Tim would let us do for him in those days, so Dan and I did them, as many of them as possible, putting all the effort and care into them that we could. Even so, I couldn't touch those wretched napkin rings.

When I was sure I wasn't going to cry, I turned and saw a familiar look on Tim's face, the one that means 'There's something I'd like you to know, but I'm not prepared to say it, so I'm going to mess with your head instead.' You won't be able to imagine this expression unless you've seen it, and I'm certain you never have. Tim gave up trying to communicate with you within a week of marrying you. 'What?' I asked him.

'I wonder about you, Kerry,' he said. He meant for me to hear the pantomime suspicion in his voice. I knew he suspected me of nothing, and guessed that he was trying to find a camouflaged way to talk about himself, as he often did. I asked him what he wondered, and he said loudly, as if to an audience stretching back several rows in a large hall, 'Imagine Francine dead.' Three words that planted an instant ache of longing in my chest. I so much wanted you not to be there any more, Francine, but we were stuck with you. Before your stroke, I thought you'd probably live till you were a hundred and twenty.

'Would you still be scared of her?' Tim asked. Anyone listening who didn't know him well would have thought he was teasing me and

enjoying it. 'I think you would. Even if you knew she was dead and never coming back.'

'You say it as if there's an alternative,' I pointed out. 'Dead and coming back.'

'Would you still hear her voice in your head, saying all the things she'd say if she were alive? Would you be any freer of her than you are now? If you couldn't see her, would you imagine she must be somewhere else, watching you?'

'Tim, don't be daft,' I said. 'You're the least superstitious person I know.'

'But we're talking about you,' he said in a tone of polished innocence, again drawing attention to his act.

'No. I wouldn't be scared of anyone who was dead.'

'If you'd be equally afraid of her dead, then killing her would achieve nothing,' Tim went on as if I hadn't spoken. 'Apart from probably a prison sentence.' He took four wine glasses with chunky opaque green glass stems out of a cupboard. I'd always hated them, too, for their slime-at-the-bottom-of-your-drink effect.

'I've never understood why anyone thinks it's interesting to speculate about the difference between murderers and the rest of us.' Tim pulled a bottle of white wine out of the fridge. 'Who cares what makes one person willing and able to kill and another not? The answer's obvious: degrees of suffering, and where you are on the bravery-cowardice spectrum. There's nothing more to it. The only distinction worth investigating is the one between those of us whose presence in the world, however lacklustre and chaotic, doesn't crush the spirit in others to extinction, and those about whom that can't be said, however kind we might want to be. Every murder victim is someone who has inspired at least one person to wish them out of existence. And we're supposed to sympathise when they meet a bad end.' He made a dismissive noise.

I laughed at his outrageousness, then felt guilty for falling for it. Tim is never better at cheering me up than when he sees no hope of consolation for himself; I'm supposed to feel happier, and imagine that he's following the same emotional trajectory. 'You're saying all murder victims are asking for it?' I willingly rose to the bait. If he wants to discuss something, however ridiculous, even now, I debate with him until he decides he's had enough. Dan does too. It's one of the many million odd forms love can take. I doubt you'd understand.

'You're assuming, wrongly, that the victim of a murder is always the person who's been killed and not the killer.' Tim poured himself a glass of wine. He didn't offer me one. 'To cause someone so much inconvenience that they're willing to risk their liberty and sacrifice what's left of their humanity to remove you from the face of the earth ought to be regarded as a more serious crime than taking a gun or a blunt instrument and ending a life, all other things being equal.'

By inconvenience, he meant pain. 'You're biased,' I said. I knew Dan might be back any second with the food, and I wanted to say something more direct than I'd normally have risked. I decided that, in starting this extraordinary conversation, Tim had given me his tacit permission. 'If you think of Francine as a spirit-crusher, if the only reason you haven't killed her is that you'd be more scared of her dead than alive . . .' I said.

'I don't know where you've got all that from.' Tim grinned. 'Hearing things again?' We both understood why he was smiling: I had received his message and would not forget it. He knew it was safe with me. It took me years of knowing Tim to work out that change is never what he's after; all he wants is to stow the important information with someone he can trust.

'You can leave her more easily than you think,' I told him, craving change – the enormous, irreversible kind – more than enough for both of us. 'There doesn't have to be a confrontation. You don't

need to tell her you're going, or have any contact with her after you've left. Dan and I can help you. Let Francine keep this house. Come and live with us.'

'You can't help,' Tim said firmly. He paused, long enough for me to understand – or misunderstand, as I knew he'd insist if I made an issue of it – before adding, 'Because I don't need help. I'm fine.'

I overheard him talking to you yesterday, Francine. He wasn't weighing his every word, planning several conversational moves ahead. He was just talking, telling you another Gaby story. It involved an airport, of course. Gaby seems to live in airports, when she's not in mid-air. I don't know how she can stand it – it would drive me insane. This particular story was about the time the scanning machine at Madrid-Barajas ate one of her shoes, and Tim was enjoying telling it. It sounded as if he was saying whatever came to mind without censoring himself at all. Nothing contrived, no element of performance. Very un-Tim. As I eavesdropped, I realised that any fear he once had is long gone. What I can't work out is: does that mean he's likely to kill you, or that he needs you to live forever?

I

Thursday 10 March 2011

The young woman next to me is more upset than I am. Not only me; she is more upset than everyone else in the airport put together, and she wants us all to know it. Behind me, people are grumbling and saying, ‘Oh, *no*,’ but no one else is weeping apart from this girl, or shaking with fury. She is able to harangue the Fly4You official and cry copiously at the same time. I’m impressed that she seems not to need to interrupt her diatribe, ever, to gulp incoherently in the way that sobbing people normally do. Also, unlike regular folk, she appears not to know the difference between a travel delay and bereavement.

I don’t feel sorry for her. I might if her reaction were less extreme. I feel sorriest for people who insist they are absolutely fine, even while their organs are being consumed at great speed by a flesh-eating bug. This probably says something bad about me.

I am not upset at all. If I don’t get home tonight, I’ll get there tomorrow. That will be soon enough.

‘Answer my question!’ the girl yells at the poor mild-mannered German man who has the misfortune to be posted at boarding gate B56. ‘Where’s the plane *now*? Is it still here? Is it down there?’ She points to the concertina-walled temporary air-bridge that opens behind him, the one that, five minutes ago, we were all hoping to walk along and find our plane at the end of. ‘It’s down there, isn’t it?’ she demands. Her face is unlined, blemish-free and weirdly flat; a vicious rag doll. She looks about eighteen, if that. ‘Listen, *mate*, there’s hundreds of us and only one of you. We could push past you and all get on the plane, a load of angry Brits, and refuse to get off till someone flies us home! I wouldn’t

mess with a load of angry Brits if I were you!’ She pulls off her black leather jacket as if preparing for a physical fight. The word ‘FATHER’ is tattooed on her right upper arm in large capital letters, blue ink. She’s wearing tight black jeans, a bullet belt, and lots of straps on her shoulders from a white bra, a pink camisole and a red sleeveless top.

‘The plane is being rerouted to Cologne,’ the German Fly4You man tells her patiently, for the third time. A name badge is pinned to his maroon uniform: Bodo Neudorf. I would find it hard to speak harshly to anyone named Bodo, though I wouldn’t expect others to share this particular scruple. ‘The weather is too dangerous,’ he says. ‘There is nothing that I can do. I am sorry.’ A reason-based appeal. In his shoes, I’d probably try the same tactic – not because it will work, but because if you possess rationality and are in the habit of using it regularly, you’re probably something of a fan and likely to over-value its potential usefulness, even when dealing with somebody who finds it more helpful to accuse innocent people of hiding aeroplanes from her.

‘You keep saying it’s *being* rerouted! That means you haven’t sent it anywhere yet, right?’ She wipes her wet cheeks – an action violent enough to be mistaken for hitting herself in the face – and whirls round to address the crowd behind us. ‘He hasn’t sent it away at all,’ she says, the vibration of her outraged voice winning the sound war at boarding gate B56, drowning out the constant electronic pinging noises that announce the imminent announcements of the openings of gates for other flights, ones more fortunate than ours. ‘How can he have sent it away? Five minutes ago we were all sitting here ready to board. You can’t send a plane off to anywhere that quickly! I say we don’t let him send it away. We’re here, the plane *must* be here, and we all want to go home. We don’t care about the sodding weather! Who’s up for it?’

I’d like to turn round and see if everybody’s finding her one-woman show as embarrassingly compulsive as I am, but I don’t want our fellow non-passengers to imagine that she and I are together simply because we’re standing side by side. Better to make it

obvious that she's nothing to do with me. I smile encouragingly at Bodo Neudorf. He replies with a curtailed smile of his own, as if to say, 'I appreciate the gesture of support, but you would be foolish to imagine that anything you might do could compensate for the presence of the monstrosity beside you.'

Fortunately, Bodo doesn't seem unduly alarmed by her threats. He has probably noticed that many of the people booked onto Flight 1221 are extremely well-behaved choirgirls between the approximate ages of eight and twelve, still wearing their chorister cassocks after their concert in Dortmund earlier today. I know this because their choirmaster and the five or six parent chaperones were reminiscing proudly, while we waited to board, about how well the girls sang something called 'Angeli Archangeli'. They didn't sound like the sort of people who would be quick to knock a German airport employee to the ground in a mass stampede, or insist on exposing their talented offspring to dangerous storm conditions for the sake of getting home when they expected to.

Bodo picks up a small black device that is attached to the departure gate desk by a length of coiled black wire, and speaks into it, having first pressed the button that makes the pinging noise that must precede all airport speech. 'This is an announcement for all passengers for Flight 1221 to Combingham, England. That is Fly4You Flight 1221 to Combingham, England. Your plane is being rerouted to Cologne airport and will depart from there. Please proceed to the baggage reclaim area to collect your bags, and then go to wait outside the airport, immediately outside the Departures Hall. We are trying to make the arrangement that coaches will collect you and take you to Cologne airport. Please make your way to the collection point outside the Departures Hall as soon as possible.'

To my right, a smartly dressed woman with postbox-red hair and an American accent says, 'We don't need to hurry, people. These are hypothetical coaches: the slowest kind.'

'How long on the coach from here to Cologne?' a man calls out.

'I have no details yet about the timetable of the coaches,' Bodo Neudorf announces. His voice is lost in the spreading ripple of groans.

I'm glad I can miss out on the visit to Baggage Reclaim. The thought of everyone else traipsing down there to pick up the luggage they waited in a shuffling, zig-zagging, rope-corralled queue to check in not much more than an hour ago makes me feel exhausted. It's 8 p.m. I was supposed to be landing in Combingham at 8.30 English time, and going home for a long soak in a hot bubble bath with a chilled glass of Muscat. I woke up at five this morning to catch the 0700 from Combingham to Dusseldorf. I'm not a morning person, and resent any day that requires me to wake up earlier than 7 a.m.; this one has already gone on too long.

'Oh, this is a fucking joke!' Psycho Rag Doll pipes up. 'You have got to be shitting me!' If Bodo imagined that by amplifying his voice and projecting it electronically he could intimidate his nemesis into silent obedience, he was mistaken. 'I'm not going to collect any suitcases!'

A thin bald man in a grey suit steps forward and says, 'In that case, you're likely to arrive home without your bag. And everything in it.' Inwardly, I cheer; Flight 1221 has its first quiet hero. He has a newspaper tucked under his arm. He grips its corner with his other hand, expecting retaliation.

'Keep out of it, you!' Rag Doll yells in his face. 'Look at you: thinking you're better than me! I haven't even got a suitcase – that's how much you know!' She turns her attention back to Bodo. 'What, so you're going to unload everyone's cases off the plane? How does that make sense? You tell me how that makes sense. That's just . . . I'm sorry for swearing, but that's just fucking plain stupid!'

'Or,' I find myself saying to her, because I can't let the bald hero stand alone and no one else seems to be rushing to his aid, 'you're the one who's stupid. If you haven't checked in a bag, then of course you're not going to collect any suitcases. Why would you?'

She stares at me. Tears are still pouring down her face.

‘Also, if the plane was here now and could safely fly to Cologne airport, we could fly there *on* it, couldn’t we?’ I say. ‘Or even fly home, which is what we’d all ideally like to do.’ *Shit*. Why did I open my mouth? It’s not my job, or even Bodo Neudorf’s, to correct her flawed thinking. The bald man has wandered away with his newspaper and left me to it. *Ungrateful git*. ‘Because of the weather, our plane can’t fly *into* Dusseldorf,’ I continue with my mission to spread peace and understanding. ‘It’s never been here, it isn’t here now, and your suitcase, if you had one, wouldn’t be on it, and wouldn’t need to be taken off it. The plane is somewhere in the sky.’ I point upwards. ‘It was heading for Dusseldorf, and now it’s changed course and is heading for Cologne.’

‘No-o,’ she says unsteadily, looking me up and down with a kind of shocked disgust, as if she’s horrified to find herself having to address me. ‘That’s not right. We were all sitting there.’ She waves an arm towards the curved orange plastic seats on their rows of black metal stalks. ‘It said to go to the gate. It only says that when the plane’s there ready for boarding.’

‘Normally that’s true, but not tonight,’ I tell her briskly. I can almost see the cogs going round behind her eyes as her mental machinery struggles to connect one thought to another. ‘When they told us to go to the gate, they still hoped the plane would be able to make it to Dusseldorf. Shortly after we all pitched up here, they realised that wouldn’t be possible.’ I glance at Bodo Neudorf, who half nods, half shrugs. Is he deferring to me? That’s insane. He’s supposed to know more about Fly4You’s behind-the-scenes operations than I do.

Angry Weeping Girl averts her eyes and shakes her head. I can hear her silent scorn: *Believe that if you want to*. Bodo is speaking into a walkie-talkie in German. Choirgirls nearby start to ask if they’ll get home tonight. Their parents tell them they don’t know. Three men in football shirts are discussing how much beer they might be able to drink between now and whenever we fly, speculating about whether Fly4You will settle the bar tab.

A worried grey-haired woman in her late fifties or early sixties tells her husband that she only has ten euros left. ‘What? Why?’ he says impatiently. ‘That’s not enough.’

‘Well, I didn’t think we’d need any more.’ She flaps around him, accepting responsibility, hoping for mercy.

‘You didn’t *think*?’ he demands angrily. ‘What about emergencies?’

I’ve used up all my interventional capacity, otherwise I might ask him if he’s ever heard of a cashpoint, and what he was planning to do if his wife spontaneously combusted and all the currency in her handbag went up in smoke. *What about that emergency, Bully-breath? Is your wife actually thirty-five, and does she only look sixty because she’s wasted the best years of her life on you?*

There’s nothing like an airport for making you lose faith in humanity. I walk away from the crowd, past a row of unmanned boarding gates, in no particular direction. I am sick of the sight of every single one of my fellow travellers, even the ones whose faces I haven’t noticed. Yes, even the nice choirgirls. I’m not looking forward to seeing any of them again – in the helpless, hopeful gaggle we will form outside the Departures Hall, where we will stand for hours in the rain and wind; across the aisle of the coach; slumped half asleep at various bars around Cologne airport.

On the other hand. It’s a delayed plane, not a bereavement. I fly a lot. This sort of thing happens all the time. I’ve heard the words ‘We are sorry to announce . . .’ as often as I’ve seen the flecked grey heavy-duty linoleum flooring at Combingham airport, with its flecked blue border at every edge, for contrast. I’ve stood beneath information screens and watched minor delays metastasise into cancellations as often as I’ve seen the small parallel lines that form the borderless squares that in turn make-up the pattern on a million sets of silver aeroplane steps; once I dreamed that the walls and ceiling of my bedroom were covered with textured aluminium tread.

The worst thing about a delay, always, is ringing Sean and

telling him that, yet again, I'm not going to be back when I said I would be. It's a call I can't face making. Although . . . in this instance, it might not be so bad. I might be able to make it not so bad.

I smile to myself as the idea blooms in my mind. Then I reach into my handbag – not looking, still walking – and close my hand around a rectangular plastic-wrapped box: the pregnancy test I've been carrying with me for the past ten days and never quite finding the right moment to do.

I often worry about my tendency to procrastinate, though I'm obviously putting off tackling the problem. I've never been like this about anything work-related, and I'm still not, but if it's something personal and important, I'll do my best to postpone it indefinitely. This could be why I don't weep in airports when my flights don't depart on time; delay is my natural rhythm.

Part of me is still not ready to face the test, though with every day that passes, the whole rigmarole of weeing on a plastic wand and awaiting its verdict starts to seem more and more pointless. I am so obviously pregnant. There's a weirdly sensitive patch of skin on the top of my head that never used to be there, and I'm more tired than I've ever been.

I glance at my watch, wondering if I've got time to do this, then tut at my own gullibility. The American woman was right. There are no physical real-life coaches on their way to rescue us. God knows when there will be. Bodo didn't have a clue what was going on; he fooled us all into assuming he was on top of the arrangements by being German. Which means I've got at least fifteen minutes to do the test and phone Sean while the rest of them are retrieving their luggage. Luckily, Sean is easily distracted, like a kid. When I tell him I won't be back tonight, he'll gear up to start complaining. When I tell him the pregnancy test was positive, he'll be so delighted that he won't care when I get back.

I stop at the nearest ladies' toilet and force myself to go in, repeating silent reassurances in my head: *This isn't scary. You*

already know the result. Seeing a small blue cross will change nothing.

I unwrap the box, take out the test, drop the instruction leaflet back in my bag. I've done this before – once, last year, when I knew I wasn't pregnant and took the test only because Sean wouldn't accept my gut instinct as good enough.

It's not a cross, it's a plus sign. Let's not call it a cross: bad for morale.

It doesn't take long before there's something to see. Already, a flash of blue. Oh, God. I can't do this. I only slightly want to have a baby. I think. I actually don't know at all. More blue: two lines, spreading out horizontally. No plus sign yet, but it's only a matter of time.

Sean will be pleased. That's what I should focus on. I'm the sort of person who doubts everything and can never be uncomplicatedly happy. Sean's reaction is more reliable than mine, and I know he'll be thrilled. Having a baby will be fine. If I didn't want to be pregnant, I'd have been secretly guzzling Mercilon for the past year, and I haven't.

What?

There is no blue cross in the wand's larger window. And nothing is getting any bluer. It's been more than five minutes since I did the test. I'm not an expert, but I have a strong sense that all the blueness that's going to happen has happened already.

I am not pregnant. I can't be.

An image flits through my mind: a tiny human figure, gold and featureless, punching the air in triumph. It's gone before I can examine it in detail.

Now I really don't want to speak to Sean. I have two disappointing pieces of news to deliver instead of one. The prospect of making the call is panicking me. If I have to do it at all, I need to get it over with. It seems hugely unfair that I can't deal with this problem by pretending I don't know anyone by the name of Sean Hamer and disappearing into a new life. That would be so much easier.

I leave the ladies' toilet and start to retrace my steps to the Departures Hall, pulling my BlackBerry out of my jacket pocket. Sean answers after one ring. 'Hi, babes,' he says. 'What time are you back?' When I'm away, he sits and watches TV in the evening with his phone next to him, so that he doesn't miss any of my calls or texts. I don't know if this is normal loving partner behaviour. I'd feel disloyal if I asked any of my friends, as if I was inviting them to slag Sean off.

'Sean, I'm not pregnant.'

Silence. Then, 'But you said you were. You said you didn't need to do a test – you knew.'

'You know what that means, don't you?'

'What?' He sounds hopeful.

'I'm an arrogant fool who can't be trusted. I really, really thought I was up the duff, but . . . obviously I was wrong. I must be feeling hormonal for some other reason.'

'Don't take the word of one test,' Sean says. 'Check. Buy another one. Can you buy one at the airport?'

'I don't need to.' *Of course you can buy a pregnancy test at an airport.* I tell myself Sean doesn't know this because he's a man, not because he has no desire to venture beyond our living room, and spends every evening on the sofa watching sport on TV.

'If you're not pregnant, why are you so late?' he asks.

I'd like to blame the weather conditions at Dusseldorf airport, but I know that's not what he means. 'No idea.' I sigh. 'Speaking of late, my flight is too. The plane's been rerouted to Cologne – we're about to set off there on a coach. Allegedly. Hopefully I'll be back at some point tomorrow. Maybe very late tonight if we're lucky.'

'Right,' Sean says tightly. 'So, once again, my evening goes up in smoke.'

Be soothing. Don't argue with him. 'Shouldn't that be, once again *my* evening goes up in smoke? I'm the one who's probably going to spend tonight sleeping upright in the passport control

booth at Cologne airport.' I hate myself when I use sentences that begin, 'I'm the one who . . .', but I have a strong urge to point out that it is not Sean who is trapped in a large building full of electronic bleeping noises and strangers' echoing voices, about to be shunted off to another similar bleeping grey and white neon-lit building. Sean is not the one struggling with the sense that he is being slowly disassembled on a molecular level, that his whole being has become pixellated and won't attain proper personhood again until he next walks through his front door. If he were ever to find himself in that situation, and if I happened simultaneously to be sitting on the couch drinking beer and watching my favourite kind of TV, I like to think I'd show some sympathy.

And, pregnancy test notwithstanding, I'm still an arrogant fool who thinks she's right about everything. I've tried to be humbler, but, frankly, remembering you might be wrong is not easy when the person you're arguing with is Sean.

'*Hopefully* you'll be back tomorrow?' he says. In the few seconds since he last spoke, he has been shovelling Carlsberg-flavoured fuel into the furnace of his indignation. 'What, you mean it might be the day after?'

'This may come as news to you, Sean, but I'm not exactly a big cheese at Cologne airport. They don't have to run all their flight schedules past me. I'm a powerless passenger, just as I am at Dusseldorf airport. I've no idea when I'll be back.'

'Great,' he snaps. 'Will you bother to ring me when you do know?'

I resist the urge to crush my BlackBerry against the wall and reduce it to fine black powder. 'I suspect what'll happen is they'll tell us one thing, then another, then something different altogether,' I say patiently. 'Anything to keep us at bay while they desperately cobble together a plan for getting us home, and we stand outside the closed Duty Free shop, shaking its metal grille and begging to be allowed in before we die of boredom.' I haven't given up hope that Sean might notice I'm not enjoying myself this evening.

‘You don’t really want me to ring you every hour with an update, do you? Why don’t you look on Flight Tracker?’

‘So you don’t care enough to keep me updated, but I’m supposed to sit by the laptop, looking—’

‘No, you’re not *supposed* to do that. You can accept that I’ll be back soon, but that neither of us knows exactly when, and just deal with it like a grown-up.’

Sean mutters something under his breath.

‘What was that?’ I say, reluctant to let an infuriating statement go unheard and uncontested.

‘I said, who’s the carrier?’

I stop walking.

It’s a shock to hear the words spoken so casually. It makes me think of other words, ones that will always live in my head even if no one ever again speaks them aloud to me.

i carry your heart with me, i carry it in my heart . . .

I clear my throat. ‘Sorry, what did you say?’

‘For fuck’s sake, Gaby! Who. Is. The. Carrier?’

An image of Tim storms my mind: at the top of a ladder at The Proscenium, looking down at me, holding a book in his right hand, clutching the ladder with his left. He has just read me a poem. Not *i carry your heart*; a different poem. By a poet who died young and tragically, whose name I don’t remember, about . . .

My skin starts to tingle with the weirdness of coincidence. The poem was about a delayed train. I don’t remember any of it but the last two lines: ‘Our time, in the hands of others, and too brief for words’. Tim approved of it. ‘See?’ he said. ‘If a poet has something important to say, he says it as simply as he can.’ ‘Or she,’ I said petulantly. ‘Or she,’ Tim agreed. ‘But, rather like a poet, if an accountant has something important to say, he says it as simply as he can.’ Who but Tim would have thought of that response so quickly?

Tim Breary is The Carrier. But Sean can’t possibly mean that.

‘Are you asking which airline I’m flying with? Fly4You.’ *Who’s*

the carrier? Why would he choose to put it like that? There's no way he can know. If he did, he'd come straight out with it. Wouldn't he?

You're being paranoid.

'Flight number?' Sean asks.

'1221.'

'Got it. So . . . I guess I'll see you when I see you.'

'Uh-huh,' I say lightly, and press the 'end call' button. *Thank God that's over.*

I've sometimes wondered if the moving walkways in airports are there to fool us into believing the rest of the floor isn't moving backwards. I am still not where I need to be, and feel as if I've been walking for years, following the many signs directing me to Departures. Very soon, seeing the word won't be enough to keep my spirits up. I might start to cackle like a deranged witch-monster and crab-walk sideways in the opposite direction, for the sheer hell of it.

I turn a corner and walk into an arm with 'FATHER' tattooed on it. Its red-eyed owner has stopped crying. She's tearing into a box of cigarettes the size of a small suitcase.

'Sorry,' I mumble.

She backs away from me as if afraid I might hit her, stuffs the half-unwrapped Lambert & Butlers back into her shoulder bag and starts to move in the direction of the signs that point the way to further signs. The reassuring sensation of a cigarette between her fingers is less of a priority, it seems, than getting away from me.

Is it possible that my self-righteous dressing-down scared her? I decide to put it to the test by picking up my pace. It's not long before I'm level with her. She glances at me, speeds up. She's panting. This is ridiculous. 'You're running away from me?' I say, hoping it will help me to believe the unbelievable. 'What do you think I'm going to do to you?'

She stops, hunches her shoulders: braced for attack. She doesn't look at me, doesn't say anything.

I help her out. 'You can relax. I'm relatively harmless. I only had a go at you to stop you laying into Bodo.'

Her lips are moving. Whatever's emerging from them could be meant for me. This is how a member of an alien species would look if it were trying to communicate with a human being. I lean in closer to hear her.

'I have to get home tonight. I *have* to. I've never been out of the country on my own before. I just want to be home.' She looks up at me, her face white with fear and confusion. 'I think I'm having a panic attack,' she says.

You bloody fool, Gaby. You chased this girl. You initiated conversation. All she wanted was to avoid you – an arrangement that could have benefited you both – and you blew it.

'You wouldn't be able to speak if you were having a panic attack,' I tell her. 'You'd be hyperventilating.'

'I am! Listen to my breathing!' She grips my wrist, locking her fingers and thumb around it like a handcuff, pulling me towards her. I try to shake her off but she doesn't let go.

'You're out of breath from running,' I say, trying to keep my cool. How dare she grab hold of me as if I'm an object? I object. Strongly. 'You're also a heavy smoker. If you want to improve your lung capacity, you should jack it in.'

Anger flares in her eyes. 'Don't tell me what to do! You don't know how much I smoke. You don't know anything about me.'

She's still clutching my wrist. I laugh at her. What else can I do? Prise her fingers off one by one? If it comes to it, I might have to.

'Could you let go of me, please? The profits from the sale of the cigarettes in your bag alone will see Lambert & Butler comfortably through the next twelve global recessions.'

She screws up her forehead in an effort to work out what I mean.

'Too complicated for you? How about: your fingertips are yellow? Of course you're a heavy smoker.'

Finally, she releases me. 'You think you're so much better than

me, don't you?' she sneers: the same thing she said to the bald man with the newspaper. I wonder if it's an accusation she levels at everyone she meets. It's hard to imagine the person who might encounter her and be beset by agonies of inferiority.

'Um . . . yes, probably,' I say, in answer to her question. 'Look, I was trying to help – bitchily, I suppose – but, actually, you're right: I really couldn't give a toss whether you continue to breathe or not. I'm sorry if I offended you by making a joke you're too thick to understand . . .'

'That's right, you're so much better than I am! Little Miss Stuck-Up Bitch, you are! I saw you this morning – too up yourself to smile back when I smiled at you.'

Little Miss? I'm thirty-eight, for Christ's sake. She can't be more than eighteen. Also, what's she talking about? 'This morning?' I manage to say. Was she on my crack-of-dawn flight from Combingham?

'So much better than me,' she repeats bitterly. 'Course you are! I bet you'd never let an innocent man go to jail for murder!' Before I've had a chance to absorb her words, she bursts into tears and flings her body against mine. 'I can't handle much more of this,' she sobs, wetting the front of my shirt. 'I'm falling apart here.'

Before my brain produces all the reasons why I shouldn't, I've put my arms round her.

What the hell happens now?