

**THE  
IT  
GIRL**

**RUTH WARE**



**SCOUT PRESS**

**New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi**

Do not quote for publication until verified with finished book at the publication date. This advance uncorrected reader's proof is the property of Simon & Schuster. It is being loaned for promotional purposes and review by the recipient and may not be used for any other purpose or transferred to any third party. Simon & Schuster reserves the right to cancel the loan and recall possession of the proof at any time. Any duplication, sale or distribution to the public is a violation of law.



Scout Press  
An Imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 by Ruth Ware

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information, address Scout Press Subsidiary Rights Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

First Scout Press hardcover edition July 2022

SCOUT PRESS and colophon are registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949 or [business@simonandschuster.com](mailto:business@simonandschuster.com).

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your live event. For more information or to book an event, contact the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049 or visit our website at [www.simonspeakers.com](http://www.simonspeakers.com).

Interior design by Jaime Putorti

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-9821-5526-1  
ISBN 978-1-9821-5528-5 (ebook)

## BEFORE

---

Afterwards, it was the door she would remember. *It was open,* she kept saying to the police. *I should have known something was wrong.*

She could have retraced every step of the walk back from the hall: the gravel crunching beneath her feet of the path across Old Quad, under the Cherwell Arch, then the illegal shortcut through the darkness of the Fellows' Garden, her feet light on the dew-soaked forbidden lawn. Oxford didn't need KEEP OFF THE GRASS signs; that lawn had been the preserve of dons and fellows for more than two hundred years without needing to remind undergraduates of the fact.

Next, past the Master's lodgings and along the path that skirted round the New Quad (close on four hundred years old, but still a hundred years younger than the Old Quad).

Then up staircase VII, four flights of worn stone steps, right up to the top, where she and April slept, on the left-hand side of the landing, opposite Dr. Myers's rooms.

Dr. Myers's door was closed, as it always was. But the other door, her door, was open. That was the last thing she remembered. She should have known something was wrong.

But she suspected nothing at all.

She knew what happened next only from what the others told her. Her screams. Hugh following her up the stairs, two at a time. April's limp body sprawled across the hearth rug in front of the fire, almost theatrically, in the photos she was shown afterwards.

But she could not remember it herself. It was as if her brain had blocked it out, shut down, like a memory glitch on a computer: *file corrupted*—and no amount of patient questioning from the police ever brought her closer to that actual moment of recognition.

Only sometimes, in the middle of the night, she wakes up with a picture in front of her eyes, a picture different from the grainy Polaroids of the police photographer, with their careful evidence markers and harsh floodlit lighting. In this picture the lamps are dim, and April's cheeks are still flushed with the last glimpse of life. And she sees herself running across the room, tripping over the rug to fall on her knees beside April's body, and then she hears the screams.

She is never sure if that picture is a memory or a nightmare—or perhaps a mix of both.

But whatever the truth, April is gone.

## AFTER

---

“Seventeen pounds, ninety-eight pence,” Hannah says to the woman standing in front of her, who nods without really paying attention and pushes her credit card across the counter. “Contactless okay?”

The woman doesn’t answer immediately; she’s trying to get her four-year-old to stop playing with the erasers in the stationery display, but when Hannah repeats the question she says, “Oh, sure.”

Hannah holds the card against the machine until it beeps, and then hands the books across the counter along with the receipt. *The Gruffalo*, *The New Baby*, and *There’s a House Inside My Mummy*. Baby brother or sister on the way? She catches the eye of the little girl playing with the stationery and gives her a conspiratorial smile. The girl stops in her tracks, and then all of a sudden, she smiles back. Hannah wants to ask her her name, but is aware that might be overstepping the line.

Instead she turns back to the customer.

“Would you like a bag? Or we have these gorgeous totes for two pounds.” She gestures behind the counter at the stack of canvas bags, each stenciled with the pretty Tall Tales logo—a teetering stack of books spelling out the shop’s name.

“No thanks,” the woman says shortly. She stuffs the books into

her shoulder bag, and grabbing her daughter's hand, she pulls her out of the shop. A penguin-shaped eraser tumbles to the floor as they go. "Stop it," Hannah hears her say as they pass through the Victorian glass doors, setting the bell jangling. "I have had just about enough of you today."

Hannah watches them disappear up the street, the little girl wailing now, hanging from her mother's grip, and her hand goes to her belly. Just the shape of it is reassuring—hard and round and strangely alien, like she's swallowed a football.

The books in the parenting section use food metaphors. A peanut. A plum. A lemon. *This is like The Very Hungry Caterpillar of parenting*, Will said, mystified, when he read the first trimester chapter. This week's was a mango, if she remembers right. Or maybe a pomegranate. Will brought her an avocado when she got to sixteen weeks, as a kind of jokey present to mark the milestone, bringing it up to her in bed, cut in half with a spoon. Hannah only stared down at it, feeling the morning sickness that was supposed to have stopped coil and roll in her gut, and then she pushed the plate away and ran to the loo.

"I'm sorry," she told Will when she got back. "It was a lovely thought—it was just—"

She couldn't finish. Even thinking about it made her feel nauseous. It wasn't just the smooth oiliness of it against her tongue, it was something else—something more visceral. The idea of eating her own baby.

"Coffee?" Robyn's voice cuts through her thoughts, and Hannah turns to where her colleague is standing at the other end of the counter.

"Sorry?"

"I said, d'you want a coffee? Or are you still off it?"

"No, no, I'm back on, I'm just trying not to overdo it. Maybe a decaf, if that's okay?"

Robyn nods and disappears up the other end of the shop, into the glorified cupboard they call the "staff room," and almost exactly

as she goes out of sight, Hannah's phone vibrates in the back pocket of her jeans.

She keeps it on silent at work. Cathy, the owner of Tall Tales, is nice, and checking phones isn't forbidden, but it's distracting to have it going off during story time or while she's helping a customer.

Now, though, the shop is empty, and she pulls it out to see who's calling.

It's her mother.

Hannah frowns. This isn't usual. Jill isn't one for random calls—they speak about once a week, usually on Sunday mornings after her mother comes back from her swim at the lake. Jill rarely calls midweek, and never during the working day.

Hannah picks up.

"Hannah," her mum says straightaway, without preamble. "Can you talk?"

"Well, I'm at work, so I'll have to go if a customer comes in, but I can chat quickly. Has something happened?"

"Yes. No, I mean—"

Her mother stops. Hannah feels alarm begin to creep over her. Her efficient, prepossessed mother, never lost for words—what can have happened?

"Are you okay? It's not—you're not . . . ill?"

"No!" She hears the short, relieved bark of laughter that accompanies the word, but there is still that odd tension underneath. "No, nothing like that. It's just that . . . well, I take it you haven't seen the news?"

"What news? I've been at work all day."

"News about . . . John Neville."

Hannah's stomach drops.

The sickness has been slowly getting better for the last few weeks. Now, with a lurch, the nausea is back. She clamps her mouth shut, breathing hard through her nose, holding on to the shop counter with her free hand as if it can anchor her.

"I'm sorry," her mother says into the silence. "I didn't want to ambush you at work, but it just came up on my Google Alerts, and I was worried someone from Pelham would call you, or you'd get doorstepped by the *Mail*. I thought . . ." Hannah hears her swallow. "I thought it would be better having it come from me."

"What?" Hannah's jaw is clenched as if that can stop the sickness, and she swallows back the water suddenly pooling behind her teeth. "Have *what* come from you?"

"He's dead."

"Oh." It's the strangest feeling. A rush of relief, and then a kind of hollowness. "How?"

"Heart attack in prison." Jill's voice is gentle, as if she is trying to soften the news.

"Oh," Hannah says again. She gropes her way to the stool behind the counter, the one they use for quiet periods, sticking the books. She puts her hand over her stomach, as if protecting herself from a blow that's already landed. The words do not come. The only thing she can do is repeat herself. "Oh."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes. Sure." Hannah's voice sounds flat in her own ears, and as if it's coming from a long way off. "Yes, why wouldn't I be?"

"Well . . ." She can tell her mother is choosing her words carefully. "It's a big thing. A milestone."

A milestone. Maybe it's that word, coming out of her mother's mouth, just after she was recalling her conversation with Will, but suddenly she cannot do this anymore. She fights the urge to sob, to run, to leave the shop in the middle of her shift.

"I'm sorry," she mutters into the phone. "I'm really sorry, Mum, I've got to—"

She can't think what to say.

"I've got a customer," she manages at last.

She hangs up. The silence of the empty shop closes around her.