

# RUTH WARE

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
**THE WOMAN IN CABIN 10**  
AND **THE TURN OF THE KEY**

# THE FIRST

A NOVEL

# CHAPTER

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THE  
IT  
GIRL

RUTH WARE



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*To Meriel, the best kind of best friend*

# BEFORE

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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

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“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, stickering 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.

# BEFORE

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The parking spaces on Pelham Street were overflowing, so Hannah's mother paused on a double yellow line on the High Street while Hannah scrambled out with the larger of her cases and her mother's promise to come and find her when she'd parked the car.

As Hannah stood there, watching the beat-up Mini drive away, she had the strangest feeling—as though, in stepping out of the car, she had sloughed off her old identity like a second skin, leaving a sharper, fresher, less worn version of herself to face the world—a version prickling with newness. As she turned around to gaze up at the crest above the carved stone arch, she felt the cool October wind lift her hair and brush against the back of her neck, and she shivered with a heady mix of nerves and excitement.

This was it. The culmination of all her hopes, dreams, and meticulously plotted revision strategies. One of the oldest and most prestigious of colleges in one of the oldest and most prestigious centers of learning in all the world—Oxford University's famous Pelham College. And now, her new home for the next three years.

The huge oak door in front of her was open, unlike on the day she had come for her interview, when she'd had to knock at the medieval grilled door-within-a-door, waiting for the porter to peer out at her like something out of Monty Python. Now she dragged her case through the arched passage, past the Porters' Lodge, to a table under a gazebo where older students were handing out folders of information and directing freshers.

"Hi," Hannah said as she drew closer, her case grinding on the graveled path. "Hi, my name's Hannah Jones. Can you tell me where I should go?"

“Of course!” the girl behind the table said brightly. She had long, shiny blond hair, and her accent was crisp as cut glass. “Welcome to Pelham! So, you’ll need to get your keys and accommodation details from the Porters’ Lodge first of all.” She pointed back at the arch Hannah had just passed through. “Have you got your Bod card yet? You’ll need that for pretty much everything from paying for meals through to checking out library books.”

Hannah shook her head.

“No, but I’ve registered for it.”

“So, you pick it up from Cloisters II, but you can do that anytime today. You probably want to drop your case off first. Oh, and don’t forget the Freshers’ Fair, and the new joiners’ Meet and Greet!” She held out a sheaf of flyers, and Hannah took them awkwardly, holding the slippery papers under her free arm.

“Thanks,” Hannah said. And then, because there didn’t seem to be much else to say, she turned and dragged her case back the way she had come, to the Porters’ Lodge.

She hadn’t been inside the lodge on the day of her interview—the porter had come out to let her in—and now she saw that it was a little wood-paneled room almost like a post office, with two windows overlooking the quad and the arched entrance passageway, a counter, and rows and rows of pigeonholes neatly marked with names. The thought that one of them was presumably hers gave her a curious feeling. A kind of... belonging?

She bumped her case up the steps and waited as the porter dealt with the boy in front of her, or rather, with his parents. The boy’s mother had a lot of questions about Wi-Fi access and shower arrangements, but at last they were done, and Hannah found herself standing at the counter, wishing her own mother would hurry up and park the car. She felt she could use the backup.

“Um, hi,” she said. Her stomach was fluttering with nerves, but she tried to keep her voice steady. She was an adult now. A Pelham College student. She was here by right with nothing to feel nervous about. “My name is Hannah. Hannah Jones. Can you tell me where I should go?”

“Hannah Jones...” The porter was a round, jocular-looking man with a fluffy white beard and the air of an off-duty Father Christmas. He perched a set of spectacles on his nose and began peering down a long, printed list of names.

“Hannah Jones... Hannah Jones... Ah, yes, here we are. You’re in New Quad, staircase seven, room five. That’s a set, that is. Very nice.”

A set? Hannah wasn’t sure if she was supposed to know what that meant, but the porter was still talking, and her opportunity for asking had passed.

“Now, you’ll want to head through that arch there.” He pointed through the mullioned window at a tall arch on the other side of the square of velvety grass. “Turn left through the Fellows’ Garden—mind you don’t tread on the grass—past the Master’s lodgings, and staircase seven is the opposite side of New Quad. Here’s a map. Free of charge for you, my dear.”

He slapped a shiny folded leaflet onto the wooden countertop.

“Thanks,” Hannah said. She picked up the plan, put it into her jeans pocket, and then remembered. “Oh, my mother might turn up soon. She had to park the car. Could you tell her where I’ve gone if she comes in here?”

“Hannah Jones’s mum,” the man said ruminatively. “That I can do. John,” he called over his shoulder to a man sorting post behind him, “if I’m on my lunch, if Hannah Jones’s mum comes, she’s in seven, five, New Quad.”

“Right you are,” the man standing behind him said. Then he turned and looked at Hannah. He was a big man, probably six foot, and younger than his colleague, with dark hair and a face that looked both pale and sweaty, even though he wasn’t doing anything remotely physical. His voice was oddly out of proportion with the rest of him—high and reedy—and the contrast made Hannah want to laugh nervously.

“Well, thanks,” she said, and turned to go. She was almost at the door when the second man called after her, his voice abrupt and slightly accusatory.

“Hold your horses, young lady!”

Hannah turned back, feeling her heart quicken as if she’d done something wrong.

The man came out from behind the counter, moving ponderously, and then stopped in front of her. There was something in his hand, and now he held it out to her, dangling whatever it was like a trophy.

It was a set of keys.

“Oh.” Hannah felt foolish. She gave a short laugh. “Thanks.”

She held out her hand, but for a moment, the man didn't let go. He just stood there, the keys dangling above her palm. Then he opened his grip and let them fall, and she shoved them into her pocket and turned away.

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**VII, SAID THE WRITING PAINTED** above the stairwell, and Hannah, looking down at the plan in her hand, and then up at the stone steps in front of her, had to assume this was the right place. She cast a glance over her shoulder—not so much because she doubted the map, but more for the pleasure of taking it all in: the pristine green square of manicured lawn, the honey-colored stone, the mullioned windows. With the sun shining and puffs of white autumnal clouds in the sky, the view had an almost unreal beauty, and Hannah had the strangest feeling that she had stepped inside the pages of one of the books in her suitcase—*Brideshead Revisited*, maybe. *Gaudy Night*. *His Dark Materials*. A storybook world.

She was smiling as she pulled her case beneath the archway into staircase 7, but bumping the case up the stairs wasn't easy, and her smile had faded by the first landing. By the time she reached the second she was hot, breathless, and the fairy-tale feeling was wearing off fast.

4—H. CLAYTON read a neat little notice on the left-hand door, and opposite 3—P. BURNES-WALLACE. The middle door was ajar, and as Hannah stood there, catching her breath, it opened to reveal a very small kitchen containing two boys, one bent over an electric hob, the other holding a cup of tea and staring at her with an expression that was probably only curious but came across more than a little hostile.

“H-hi,” Hannah said, rather diffidently, but the boy only gave her a nod and edged past to the door marked P. BURNES-WALLACE. What had the porter said? Room 5? One more floor still to go, then.

Gritting her teeth, Hannah yanked her case up the last flight onto the top floor, where two doors stood opposite each other—one ajar. 6—DR. MYERS said the one to her right, which was shut. The open one was, by process of elimination, presumably her own, and Hannah stepped inside.

“Heeey...” The girl sprawled across the sofa barely looked up from her phone as Hannah entered. She was wearing a short broderie-anglaise dress that revealed long tanned legs hooked over the arm of the couch, one sandal hanging from pedicured toes. She appeared to be scrolling through some kind of photo app on her phone. “You must be Hannah.”

“I... am?” Hannah said uncertainly, her voice rising at the end of the sentence in a way that made her words sound like a question, even though they weren’t. She looked around the room. It seemed to be a sitting room, but with piles of the fanciest luggage Hannah had ever seen, stacked up by the doorway. There were hat boxes, hanging bags, a huge Selfridges tote filled with velvet cushions, and what looked like a real Louis Vuitton trunk with a giant brass lock. The pile dwarfed her own modest luggage—even when you took into account the suitcase her mother would be bringing up from the car. “Who are you?”

“April.” The girl put down her phone and stood up. She was middle height and slim, with cropped honey-blond hair that hugged the shape of her skull and finely arched eyebrows that gave her a look somewhere between amusement and disdain. There was something otherworldly about her—some indefinable quality Hannah could not put her finger on. She felt almost as if she had seen her somewhere before... or watched her in a film. She had the kind of beauty that hurt your eyes if you looked at her for too long, but made it hard to tear your gaze away. It was, Hannah realized, as if a different kind of light were shining on her than on the rest of the room.

“April Clarke-Cliveden,” the girl added helpfully when Hannah did not immediately reply, as if that name should mean something.

“But I thought—” Hannah said, and then broke off, turning uncertainly back to the door to check the name tag. Sure enough, there it was: 5—H. JONES. And then, below that, A. CLARKE-CLIVEDEN.

Hannah frowned.

“Are we... roommates?”

It seemed unlikely. One of the points stressed in the Pelham College brochure had been the fact that there was virtually no shared accommodation. No double rooms. Not even any flats until the second year. A lot of shared bathrooms, sure,

unless you were in the modern wing, but as far as sleeping went, the prospectus had made it sound like everyone had their own space.

“Kinda,” April said. She gave a yawn like a cat and stretched luxuriantly. “I mean, not a bedroom—there’s no way I’d have accepted that. Just a sitting room.” She waved her hand around the modest space, making Hannah feel like she, April, was the gracious hostess, and Hannah the interloper. The thought gave Hannah a prickle of annoyance, but she pushed it down and looked around the room. Aside from April’s stack of luggage, the furnishings were sparse and institutional—a rather worn sofa, a coffee table, and a sideboard—but it was clean and bright, with a beautiful stone fireplace. “Nice to have somewhere to hang out, right? Your room’s through there.” She nodded at a door to the right of the window. “Mine’s the door opposite. I’m afraid I picked the bigger one. First come, first served, and all that.”

She gave a wink that showed a deep, soft dimple in one cheek.

“Fair enough,” Hannah said. There was no point in arguing the fact. By the looks of it, the girl had already unpacked. Instead she lugged her suitcase across the rug, the wheels rucking it into ridges, towards the door April had indicated.

After April’s remarks, she was expecting something small, poky even, but it was larger than her room at home, with another carved stone fireplace and a mullioned window with leaded glass, casting diamond-patterned light onto the polished oak boards.

“Wow, this is pretty cool,” she said, and then wanted to kick herself for sounding so transparently impressed in the face of April’s sophistication.

Still, she could admit it privately to herself: it *was* pretty cool. How many students had this room seen over the four hundred years since it was built? Had they gone on to be peers and politicians, Nobel Prize winners and authors? It was dizzying, like looking down the wrong end of a telescope, only instead of looking outward, at the end of the line she could see herself, infinitely small.

“Yeah, it’s okay, isn’t it?” April said. She came and stood in the doorway, one hand against the doorjamb, the other resting on her jutting hip. With the low evening light streaming through the thin material of her white dress, silhouetting her shape and turning her pixie hair into a white halo, she looked like an image off a film poster.



“What’s yours like?” Hannah asked, and April shrugged.

“Pretty similar. Want to come and have a look?”

“Sure.”

Hannah set down her case and followed April across the living room to the opposite door.

Inside, her first impression was that it was *not* pretty similar at all. Aside from the fact that it was slightly larger, the only things that were the same were the metal bedstead and the fireplace. Every other stick of furniture was different—from the kilim rugs, to the fancy ergonomic desk chair, to the richly upholstered loveseat in the corner.

A tall, burly man in a suit was unpacking clothes into a tall wardrobe. He didn’t look up as they entered.

“Hi,” Hannah said politely. She put on her best meet-the-parents voice. “You must be April’s dad. I’m Hannah.”

April gave a shout of laughter at that.

“Ha! You must be kidding. This is Harry. He works for my parents.”

“Pleased to meet you,” the man said over his shoulder. Then he slid the last drawer shut and turned around. “I think that’s it, April. Anything else I can help with?”

“No, that’s fine. Thank you, Harry.”

“I’ll take the boxes, want me to leave the trunk?”

“No, don’t worry. I won’t have anywhere to store it.”

“Sure,” Harry said. “Have fun. There’s a little goodbye present from your dad on the windowsill. Nice to meet you, Hannah,” he said, then turned, picked up a pile of empty bags and boxes by the door, and left. The door swung shut, and April kicked off her shoes and threw herself onto the newly made bed, sinking deep into the soft feathered duvet.

“So this is it. Real life.”

“Real life,” Hannah echoed. It wasn’t true, though. Sitting here, in a centuries-old center of learning, surrounded by April’s rich, beautiful things, breathing in the strange heavy scent of some expensive perfume, she had never felt more unreal. She wondered what her mum—presumably still circling Oxford looking for a parking space—would make of all this.

“Better see what he’s left me, I guess,” April said. “The box isn’t Tiffany’s, which is a bad start.”

She swung her legs off the bed and went to the window, where a tall gift box stood on the stone sill. A card was poking out of a gap at the top of the box.

“‘Start your Oxford life the right way. Love, Daddy.’ Well, he signed it himself at least. One up from my birthday card, which was in his secretary’s writing.”

Digging her nails into the lid, she pried it open and then began to laugh.

“Oh God, just when I think he barely knows my middle name, he proves me wrong.” She held up a bottle of champagne and two glasses. “Drink, Hannah Jones?”

“Um, sure,” Hannah said. In truth, she didn’t really like champagne—the few times she’d had it, at weddings and her mum’s fiftieth, it had given her a headache. But there was no way she was going to refuse such a perfect moment. Maybe Dodsworth Hannah didn’t like champagne. But Pelham College Hannah was different.

She watched as April popped the cork with a practiced expertise and poured out two foaming glasses.

“Well, it’s not chilled, but it’s Dom Pérignon at least,” April said, handing over a flute. “What shall we drink to? How about... to Oxford.” She held out her glass.

“To Oxford,” Hannah echoed. She clinked her glass against April’s and then put it to her lips. The warm, fizzing champagne frothed in her mouth, the bubbles expanding on her tongue and the alcohol tickling at the back of her nose and throat. She began to feel a little light-headed—though whether that was the champagne, or the fact that they had driven through lunch, or just... *this*, she could not have said. “And to Pelham.”

“And to us,” April said. She threw back her head and drained the glass in four long gulps. Then she refilled, looked at Hannah, and smiled, a wide, wicked smile that shot that deep, beguiling dimple into each soft cheek. “Yes, here’s to us, Hannah Jones. I think we’re going to have a pretty majestic time here, don’t you?”