

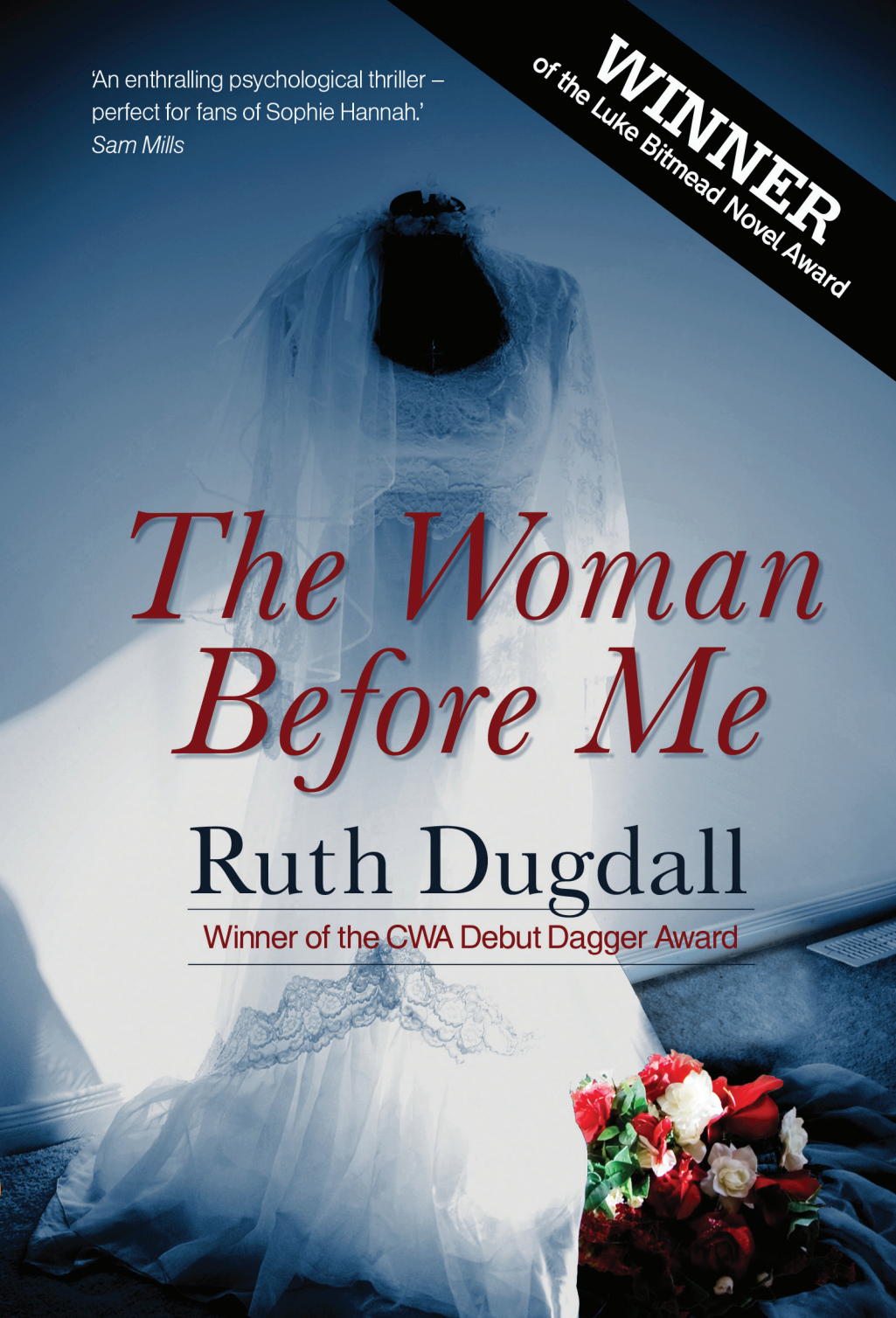
'An enthralling psychological thriller –
perfect for fans of Sophie Hannah.'
Sam Mills

WINNER
of the Luke Bitmead Novel Award

The Woman Before Me

Ruth Dugdall

Winner of the CWA Debut Dagger Award



BEFORE

1

Creeping across the threshold, I listen to the silence of the sleeping house. These middle hours, between three and four in the morning when deepest sleep can be reached, make the kitchen seem larger and emptier than in daylight. Different. Although the difference is me. This time I'm saying goodbye.

The fragrance of Emma is everywhere, the delicate tang of her green apple perfume. That small wooden box, holding an assortment of tea bags, on the shelf – I'll never again see her bend over it, her hair falling like a veil, sweeping it away as she dithers over her selection. And Luke. She told me I'll never see him again.

There's a large picture on the wall, a print of the Eiffel Tower, a place she visited on her first honeymoon. On the work surface are unwashed plates, remains of their last meal encrusted on the cutlery. I thought she was so neat, but then I never really knew her. Not like you did.

Through the kitchen into the large dining room, I move slowly. I don't want to miss a thing. I want to capture the memory of it. That is where we've sat, Emma and I, cradling hot cups of tea. I notice the red paint on the walls, the white pine of the window seat. On the table is a packet of Silk Cut cigarettes, a box of matches. She's supposed to have given up, but today has

been a hard day.

I see myself, reflected in a small mirror above the seat. I'm shocked by what my face reveals: there are flushed, red patches on my cheeks and forehead, my eyes are black. Curious, I look closer and see my pupils are fully dilated. I look excited, aroused even.

Momentarily, my heart palpitates; my hands are clammy with sweat. This must be the nervous thrill that burglars feel. But I won't steal anything. Emma was the thief, not me. I've only ever taken one thing from this house: the back door key. Secretly copied, and then returned to its hook.

I climb quietly up the stairs, avoiding places I know would groan under my weight. Night-lights illuminate the hall, making me blink. Emma's door is ajar and I can see into the bedroom. Her curtains are open and the moon is full.

Emma sleeps facing the window, the duvet pulled high on her face. Next to her is the bulk of a man, hidden under the bedding. Dominic. Entering their bedroom, I creep up to her foetal shape, studying her perfect ear, her cheek, her blonde hair turned ashen in the half-light, and wonder if I could touch her without her waking. Only inches separate me from her sleeping body.

She turns and my muscles tense. Then I realise that she's moving to the rhythm of troubled dreams. She now lies half facing me and I can see the crease on her brow, the tightness of her mouth. Have I caused that, or are you to blame?

Leaving Emma I walk further along the hall to the nursery, snaking behind the half-closed door. Inside the small room is the beautiful baby boy, asleep in his cot. Luke is surrendered on his back, hands fisted against the blanket, face peacefully fallen, soft skin and round fat cheeks. Usually I just watch him sleep, but tonight that isn't enough.

He's familiar with my touch and smell. He stirs when I lift him and I think I hear a voice in the next room. I pause but hear nothing. His weight is natural to me, I cradle him expertly, one

arm along his body, my hand on his thigh. Luke is so peaceful in my arms, head nestled to my chest.

I love him, love him fiercely.

I hear something in the next room; I freeze, waiting, and the noise becomes louder. Low whispers and then moaning. The repetitive sound of the bed banging against the wall. Careful not to wake Luke, I place him back in his cot and make my way from his room, passing the bedroom where Emma's moans are getting louder, "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes."

2

I'm still asleep when I hear loud knocking at the front door. I think it's you, hope it is, but it's the police. They've come for me. We know you were in the house, they say. There was a fire, they say. Then they tell me that Luke is dead and the air goes from my lungs. They want me to help them with their enquiries and I say I will.

I'm led down stairs and locked into a police cell, grey painted walls and a bench fixed to the wall. No fresh air. The door is unlocked and a man enters. He's going bald and wears a short-sleeved shirt, his arms are sunburnt and peeling. "I'm Mike Hogg, duty solicitor."

He doesn't sit or look directly at me, but scribbles on a jotter. He asks nothing that matters, just if I'm suicidal, if I'm hungry. I ask him if it's true, if Luke is really dead. He says yes, but that we had better not talk about that.

Next I'm taken by a uniformed police officer to an interview room. It is small and dim with high windows and a wooden desk, like you'd find in a school. Sat behind the desk a different police officer – in a suit, not a uniform – unwraps a black disc, slides it into the recorder. He chats to Mr Hogg, who sits next to me. They ask after each other's wives. This must be normal for them, something they do everyday, so they don't notice that I'm shaking. Mr Hogg tells the police officer about his holiday in Greece,

how his son learned to swim in the sea.

I feel closed in, lost. How can they chat about holidays when a baby has died? It takes all my energy to sit in the chair and not collapse. I'm tired and heavy and dull, as though my brain has been switched off. All I can think about is Luke.

Finally, ready to begin, the police officer leans back. He takes a cigarette packet from his inside pocket, showing the gold box first to Mr Hogg, and then offers it to me. "It's hard, this smoking ban. But you can take one for later, if you like?"

"No, thank you."

"No? But then you don't smoke B & H, do you Rose? Silk Cut is your brand, isn't it?"

Somewhere in the distance my brain registers what he's implying.

He presses the record button and a red light comes on. He speaks slowly and deliberately. "This is Sergeant West. Also in the room are..."

"Mike Hogg. Duty Solicitor."

West points at me and I say, "Rose Wilks."

"I have read Miss Wilks her rights. This interview is commenced on Sunday 6th June at 11.26 am. Now, Miss Wilks. Can you tell me when you last visited the house of Emma and Dominic Hatcher?"

"Yesterday."

"For the benefit of the tape, yesterday was Saturday June 5th. And what were you doing there?"

"I was babysitting Luke." His name catches in my throat. I grip the chair to keep my hands from shaking.

"And what was your relationship with the Hatchers?"

"We're friends. Luke is – was – like a son. I babysat for him a lot. Emma is my friend."

"I see. And what time did you leave the Hatchers' home on Saturday?"

"When they got back from their trip to Southwold. They were

back earlier than they said they would. It was about four in the afternoon.”

“And did you return at any point that evening?” he asks.

“No.”

“No? Can you speak clearly for the benefit of the recording, please?”

“No, I did not return that evening.”

“You are absolutely certain about that? You didn’t go back into the house? You need to think about what you are saying; anything you fail to disclose now but tell us later will be used against you.”

“I returned early this morning. Around three.”

Sergeant West’s jaw loosens. He hadn’t expected me to admit this and I can see him smile beneath his lips.

Mr Hogg shifts in his seat. “I want to stop this interview and speak to Rose alone, before the interview goes any further.”

West shoots him a look of contempt, betraying their earlier friendly chat. But I don’t want to speak to Mr Hogg alone. I want to tell the truth. I’m intent on the recorder trapping my voice, trapping my words in that plastic casing forever.

“I went back to see Luke at three this morning.”

“Rose, I really think you should...” interrupts Mr Hogg.

Sergeant West ignores him. “How did you get in?”

I feel the warm metal on a necklace around my neck. My precious key.

“The back door was unlocked. Emma is careless about things like that.”

“And did you go to Luke’s room?”

“Yes.”

“Did you light a cigarette?”

“No! I would never smoke around him.”

“Did you drop a cigarette as you left, starting a fire in the house?”

“No!”

"I will ask you again; did you light a cigarette in the Hatcher's home?"

"No. I did not."

"A cigarette started that fire and you admit to being there, in the early hours of the morning."

"But Emma smokes! It would have been hers. She was awake when I left. She was having sex with her husband."

Sergeant West looks at me with undisguised contempt. "Mrs Hatcher was alone last night. Her husband was sleeping elsewhere. She was alone and asleep and you were in her home, holding their son who shortly after died in a fire. How can you explain that?"

I close my eyes, hot tears behind my eyelids.

"Rose Wilks, did you start a fire in Luke Hatcher's bedroom?" Sergeant West says the words slowly, giving each one weight. Mr Hogg shifts beside me.

I summon all my strength and lean forward, whispering into the speaker as if my words are only for its benefit. I speak low, my mouth touching the plastic. "No." And then I can't stop myself, because I'm tired and Luke is dead and I can't bear any of it. "No, no, no, no, no."

3

It's Monday. I spent last night in a police cell and this morning the magistrates refused bail, so I've been remanded into custody. I'm led into a white van and a guard shackles me into a tiny booth. A few years ago protesters blocked the Felixstowe docks, worried about how animals destined for slaughter were transported. No-one protests about prisoners though.

I feel sick. I never travel well, and I'm facing the side, my back to the window. I can only see out if I twist my neck. Someone's in the next booth, but I can only see the top of a head, brown hair, thick and wavy. No-one's told me where we're going.

It's a long journey and the sickness doesn't ease. There's no drink, no toilet break. I'm exhausted, I haven't slept for two nights. I want Luke, I ache for him.

After an hour the van slows and gates are opened for us to drive through. When we stop I hear women's voices, some with an Essex accent. The prisoner next to me is removed, the door is slammed shut and we are on our way again.

The guard in the back of the van sleeps and I listen to the sound of his snoring, the sound of the engine. I watch the service stations and motorway cafes flash by. I'm so tired that I doze off, waking to find the van has stopped and the guard is opening the door.

A voice shouts, "Just the one?" and then a burly female officer pulls me from the back of the van. She has a clipboard,

like a holiday rep, but she isn't smiling. "Wilks?"

"Yes."

She ticks her sheet and unshackles me. My wrists are sore and I rub them, breathing in the rancid smell of rotting waste.

"Welcome to Holloway," she says.

I'm marched passed hospital-style green screens where a woman dressed only in her underwear is having her hair inspected by an officer. I see her place a watch and jewellery into a plastic tray. I can't give up my key. It's the only thing I have left, now Luke is gone. The only thing that links him to me.

"Please? I need to use the loo."

"Through there. But leave the door open."

The officer is moving around the corridor, chatting to someone. Quickly, I remove the key from my neck and undo my jeans, squatting on the toilet seat.

I can't give up. Luke wouldn't want me to. The officer stops talking, turns and walks my way. I slide the key inside my vagina, wincing as it catches. I hitch up my jeans and the officer is stood in front of me.

"Hurry up, Wilks. Some of us have work to do."

I follow the officer back to where the hospital screens are.

"Take off your clothes and put them on the chair. Jewellery in the tray."

I lift off my top, unbuckle my jeans and step out of them, feeling the cold air on my skin. I remove my earrings and watch.

"Undies as well," she says. "Come on, I haven't got all day."

I unhook my bra and slide it off. My breasts are large with milk, the veins blue and prominent. I can feel her looking at them. I bend over and slide off my knickers, folding them in half. I haven't had a change of underwear for two days, or a shower. I feel dirty.

She grabs my knickers and opens them up, running a finger along the seam. She picks up my bra and feels the cups, then inspects my other clothes. She puts on gloves and sharply tugs at

my hair, looking and pulling. I'm taller than her, so I have to bend over until my back aches.

"I haven't got nits."

"Not nits I'm looking for."

"Open." Her gloved finger circles my mouth, making me gag.

"Do you feel suicidal?"

"No."

She looks me up and down, I clench my legs together, hoping the ordeal is over. Please don't search inside me. She glances at the clock on the wall.

"Okay, get dressed. It's bang-up time."

I follow her through gates and corridors. A cell door is opened and I see two narrow metal beds, a sink to one side. To the right is a silver toilet, only partly screened. There's another woman in the cell, lying on a bed, drawing with wax crayons. She has a wide smile and a dozy, sleepy look. The officer throws a threadbare towel and a sheet on the unused bed. "I'll get you some nosh. You'll have to make do with whatever's left." She bangs the door behind her and locks me in.

I stand in the small cell, my hands shaking. The other woman stares at me, wide-eyed. She has mousy hair and grey eyes. On her lap is a drawing of a stick person and a house.

"Hello," she says, "would you like a sweet?" She opens her palm, revealing a squashed tube of Rolos.

"No thanks."

I sit on my bed, my fingers scratching the rough wool of the blanket.

"Are you okay?"

"No."

"You'll get used to it," she says, sucking chocolate off her fingers. "I've been in and out of prison since I was fifteen. They all know me here. They put me with the new ones so I can help them – sometimes they can't cope at first." She parrots the

question I've been asked before. "You're not suicidal, are you?"

"No."

"You'll be alright," she says, with confidence. "Some of the new ones shake like kittens."

I hold my hands behind my back, glad she hasn't noticed that I am.

"What's your name?"

"Rose."

"That's a pretty name. I'm Jane." She smiles trustingly, "but friends call me Janie."

"I need to use the loo," I say.

"You don't need my permission." She points at the silver loo behind the half-screen.

"Would you mind not looking?"

She stares at me like I'm mad, then shrugs and rolls onto her side, so her back's to me. Behind the screen I slide my hand down my trousers, into my knickers. After a few moments I sigh, releasing the uncomfortable pressure I've been carrying for over an hour.

I pull the key into the light, rubbing it on the fabric of my jeans. My precious key. The only thing I have left.