

'Agatha Christie
meets *The Girl
on the Train*'
THE SUN

the

Four friends. One promise.

lying

But someone isn't telling the truth.

game



ruth ware

The *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* bestseller

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Ruth Ware

Dedication

Title Page

Prologue

Rule One: Tell a Lie

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Rule Two: Stick to Your Story

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Rule Three: Don't Get Caught

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Rule Four: Never Lie to Each Other

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23

Rule Five: Know When to Stop Lying

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3

Acknowledgements

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About the Book

The twisting new mystery from international bestseller Ruth Ware.

The text message arrives in the small hours of the night. It's just three words:
I need you.

Isa drops everything, takes her baby daughter and heads straight to Salten. She spent the most significant days of her life at boarding school on the marshes there, days which still cast their shadow over her.

At school Isa and her three best friends used to play the Lying Game. They competed to convince people of the most outrageous stories. Now, after seventeen years of secrets, something terrible has been found on the beach. Something which will force Isa to confront her past, together with the three women she hasn't seen for years, but has never forgotten.

There is no cosy reunion: Salten isn't a safe place for them, not after what they did. It's time for the women to get their story straight...

About the Author

Ruth Ware's first two thrillers, *In a Dark, Dark Wood* and *The Woman in Cabin 10*, were international smash hits, and appeared on bestseller lists around the world, including the *Sunday Times* and *New York Times*. The film rights to her first two books have been snapped up, and she is published in more than 40 languages.

Ruth lives near Brighton with her family.

Visit www.ruthware.com to find out more.

Also by Ruth Ware

In a Dark, Dark Wood
The Woman in Cabin 10

To dear Hel, with (seventy?) lots of love

RUTH WARE

The Lying Game



Harvill Secker

LONDON

THE REACH IS wide and quiet this morning, the pale blue sky streaked with pink mackerel-belly clouds, the shallow sea barely rippling in the slight breeze, and so the sound of the dog barking breaks into the calm like gunshots, setting flocks of gulls crying and wheeling in the air.

Plovers and terns explode up as the dog bounds joyously down the riverbank, scampering down the runnelled side, where the earth turns from spiky grassy dunes to reed-specked mud, where the water wavers between salt and fresh.

In the distance the Tide Mill stands sentinel, black and battered against the cool calm of the morning sky, the only man-made structure in a landscape slowly crumbling back into the sea.

‘Bob!’ The woman’s voice rings out above the volley of barks as she pants to catch up. ‘Bob, you rascal. Drop it. Drop it, I say. What’ve you found?’

As she draws closer the dog tugs again at the object protruding from the mud, trying to pull it free.

‘Bob, you filthy brute, you’re covered. Let it go. Oh God, it’s not another dead sheep, is it?’

It’s the last heroic yank that sends the dog staggering back along the shore, something in its jaw. Triumphant, he scrambles up the bank to lay the object at the feet of his owner.

And as she stands, looking dumbstruck, the dog panting at her feet, the silence returns to the bay, like a tide coming in.

Rule One

Tell a Lie

THE SOUND IS just an ordinary text alert, a quiet ‘beep beep’ in the night that does not wake Owen, and would not have woken me except that I was already awake, lying there, staring into the darkness, the baby at my breast snuffling, not quite feeding, not quite unlatching.

I lie there for a moment thinking about the text, wondering who it could be. Who’d be texting at this hour? None of my friends would be awake ... unless it’s Milly gone into labour already ... God, it can’t be Milly, can it? I’d promised to take Noah if Milly’s parents couldn’t get up from Devon in time to look after him but I never really thought ...

I can’t quite reach the phone from where I’m lying, and at last I unlatch Freya with a finger in the corner of her mouth, and rock her gently onto her back, milk-sated, her eyes rolling back in her head like someone stoned. I watch her for a moment, my palm resting lightly on her firm little body, feeling the thrum of her heart in the birdcage of her chest as she settles, and then I turn to check my phone, my own heart quickening slightly like a faint echo of my daughter’s.

As I tap in my PIN, squinting slightly at the brightness of the screen, I tell myself to stop being silly – it’s four weeks until Milly’s due, it’s probably just a spam text, *Have you considered claiming a refund for your payment protection insurance?*

But, when I get the phone unlocked, it’s not Milly. And the text is only three words.

I need you.

It is 3.30 a.m., and I am very, very awake, pacing the cold kitchen floor, biting at my fingernails to try and quell the longing for a cigarette. I haven't touched one for nearly ten years, but the need for one ambushes me at odd moments of stress and fear.

I need you.

I don't need to ask what it means – because I know, just as I know who sent it, even though it's from a number I don't recognise.

Kate.

Kate Atagon.

Just the sound of her name brings her back to me, like a vivid rush – the smell of her soap, the freckles across the bridge of her nose, cinnamon against olive. Kate. Fatima. Thea. And me.

I close my eyes, and picture them all, the phone still warm in my pocket, waiting for the texts to come through.

Fatima will be lying asleep beside Ali, curled into his spine. Her reply will come around 6 a.m., when she gets up to make breakfast for Nadia and Samir and get them ready for school.

Thea – Thea is harder to picture. If she's working nights she'll be in the casino where phones are forbidden to staff, and shut up in lockers until their shifts are finished. She'll roll off shift at eight in the morning, perhaps? Then she'll have a drink with the other girls, and then she'll reply, wired up with a successful night dealing with punters, collating chips, watching for card sharps and professional gamblers.

And Kate. Kate must be awake – she sent the text, after all. She'll be sitting at her dad's work table – hers now, I suppose – in the window overlooking the Reach, with the waters turning pale grey in the predawn light, reflecting the clouds and the dark hulk of the Tide Mill. She will be smoking, as she always did. Her eyes will be on the tides, the endlessly shifting, eddying tides, on the view that never changes and yet is never the same from one moment to the next – just like Kate herself.

Her long hair will be drawn back from her face, showing her fine bones, and the lines that thirty-two years of wind and sea have etched at the corners

of her eyes. Her fingers will be stained with oil paint, ground into the cuticles, deep beneath the nails, and her eyes will be at their darkest slate blue, deep and unfathomable. She will be waiting for our replies. But she knows what we'll say – what we've always said, whenever we've got that text, those three words.

I'm coming.

I'm coming.

I'm coming.

‘I’M COMING!’ I shout it up the stairs, as Owen calls something down above Freya’s sleepy squawking cries.

When I get up to the bedroom he’s holding her, pacing back and forth, his face still pink and crumpled from the pillow.

‘Sorry,’ he says, stifling a yawn. ‘I tried to calm her down but she wasn’t having any of it. You know what she’s like when she’s hungry.’

I crawl onto the bed and scoot backwards into the pillows until I’m sitting against the headboard and Owen hands me a red-faced indignant Freya who takes one affronted look up at me, and then lunges for my breast with a little grunt of satisfaction.

All is quiet, except for her greedy suckling. Owen yawns again, ruffles his hair, and looks at the clock, and then begins pulling on his underwear.

‘Are you getting up?’ I ask in surprise. He nods.

‘I might as well. No point in going back to sleep when I’ve got to get up at seven anyway. Bloody Mondays.’

I look at the clock. Six a.m. It’s later than I thought. I must have been pacing the kitchen for longer than I realised.

‘What were you doing up, anyway?’ he asks. ‘Did the bin lorry wake you?’

I shake my head.

‘No, I just couldn’t sleep.’

A lie. I’d almost forgotten how they feel on my tongue, slick and sickening. I feel the hard, warm bump of my phone in my dressing-gown pocket. I’m waiting for it to vibrate.

‘Fair enough.’ He suppresses another yawn and buttons up his shirt. ‘Want a coffee, if I put one on?’

‘Yeah, sure,’ I say. Then, just as he’s leaving the room, ‘Owen –’

But he's already gone and he doesn't hear me.

Ten minutes later he comes back with the coffee, and this time I've had time to practise my lines, work out what I'm going to say, and the semi-casual way I'm going to say it. Still I swallow and lick my lips, dry-mouthed with nerves.

'Owen, I got a text from Kate yesterday.'

'Kate from work?' He puts the coffee down with a little bump; it slops slightly and I use the sleeve of my dressing gown to mop the puddle, protecting my book, giving me time to reply.

'No, Kate Atagon. You know, I went to school with her?'

'Oh, *that* Kate. The one who brought her dog to that wedding we went to?'

'That's right. Shadow.'

I think of him. Shadow – a white German shepherd with a black muzzle and soot-speckled back. I think of the way he stands in the doorway, growls at strangers, rolls his snowy belly up to those he loves.

'So ...?' Owen prods, and I realise I've stopped talking, lost my thread.

'Oh, right. So, she's invited me to come and stay, and I thought I might go.'

'Sounds like a nice idea. When would you go?'

'Like ... now. She's invited me now.'

'And Freya?'

'I'd take her.'

Of course, I nearly add, but I don't. Freya has never taken a bottle, in spite of a lot of trying on my part, and Owen's. The one night I went out for a party she screamed solidly from 7.30 p.m. to 11.58 when I burst through the doors of the flat to snatch her out of Owen's limp, exhausted arms.

There's another silence. Freya leans her head back, watching me with a small frown, and then gives a quiet belch and returns to the serious business of getting fed. I can see thoughts flitting across Owen's face ... that he'll miss us ... that he'll have the bed all to himself ... lie-ins ...

'I could get on with decorating the nursery,' he says at last. I nod, although this is the continuation of a long discussion between the two of us – Owen would like the bedroom, and me, back to himself and thinks that Freya will

be going into her own room at six months. I ... don't. Which is partly why I've not found the time to clear the guest room of all our clutter and repaint it in baby-friendly colours.

'Sure,' I say.

'Well, go for it, I reckon,' Owen says at last. He turns away and begins sorting through his ties. 'Do you want the car?' he asks over his shoulder.

'No, it's fine. I'll take the train. Kate will pick me up from the station.'

'Are you sure? You won't want to be lugging all Freya's stuff on the train, will you? Is this straight?'

'What?' For a minute I'm not sure what he's on about, and then I realise – the tie. 'Oh, yes, it's straight. No, honestly, I'm happy to take the train. It'll be easier, I can feed Freya if she wakes up. I'll just put all her stuff in the bottom of the pram.' He doesn't respond, and I realise he's already running through the day ahead, ticking things off a mental check list just as I used to do a few months ago – only it feels like a different life. 'OK, well, look, I might leave today if that's all right with you.'

'Today?' He scoops his change off the chest of drawers and puts it in his pocket, and then comes over to kiss me goodbye on the top of my head. 'What's the hurry?'

'No hurry,' I lie. I feel my cheeks flush. I hate lying. It used to be fun – until I didn't have a choice. I don't think about it much now, perhaps because I've been doing it for so long, but it's always there, in the background, like a tooth that always aches, and suddenly twinges with pain.

Most of all, though, I hate lying to Owen. Somehow I always managed to keep him out of the web, and now he's being drawn in. I think of Kate's text, sitting there on my phone, and it feels as if poison is leaching out of it, into the room – threatening to spoil everything.

'It's just Kate's between projects, so it's a good time for her and ... well, I'll be back at work in a few months so it feels like now's as good a time as any.'

'OK,' he says, bemused but not suspicious. 'Well, I guess I'd better give you a proper goodbye kiss then.'

He kisses me, properly, deeply, making me remember why I love him, why I hate deceiving him. Then he pulls away and kisses Freya. She swivels her eyes sideways to regard him dubiously, pausing in her feed for a moment, and then she resumes sucking with the single-minded determination that I love about her.

‘Love you too, little vampire,’ Owen says affectionately. Then, to me, ‘How long is the journey?’

‘Four hours maybe? Depends how the connections go.’

‘OK, well, have a great time, and text me when you get there. How long do you think you’ll stay?’

‘A few days?’ I hazard. ‘I’ll be back before the weekend.’ Another lie. I don’t know. I have no idea. As long as Kate needs me. ‘I’ll see when I get there.’

‘OK,’ he says again. ‘Love you.’

‘I love you too.’ And at last, that’s something I can tell the truth about.

I CAN REMEMBER to the day, almost to the hour and minute, the first time I met Kate. It was September. I was catching the train to Salten, an early one, so that I would arrive at the school in time for lunch.

‘Excuse me!’ I called nervously up the station platform, my voice reedy with anxiety. The girl ahead of me turned round. She was very tall and extremely beautiful, with a long, slightly haughty face like a Modigliani painting. Her waist-length black hair had been bleached gold at the tips, fading into the black, and her jeans were ripped across the thighs.

‘Yes?’

‘Excuse me, is this the train for Salten?’ I panted.

She looked me up and down, and I could feel her appraising me, taking in my Salten House uniform, the navy-blue skirt, stiff with newness, and the pristine blazer I had taken off its hanger for the first time that morning.

‘I don’t know,’ she said at last, turning to a girl behind her. ‘Kate, is this the Salten train?’

‘Don’t be a dick, Thee,’ the girl said. Her husky voice sounded too old for her – I didn’t think she could be more than sixteen or seventeen. She had light brown hair cut very short, framing her face, and when she smiled at me, the nutmeg freckles across her nose crinkled. ‘Yes, this is the Salten train. Make sure you get into the right half though, it divides at Hampton’s Lee.’

Then they turned, and were halfway up the platform before it occurred to me, I hadn’t asked which was the right half.

I looked up at the announcement board.

Use front seven carriages for stations to Salten, read the display, but what did ‘front’ mean? Front as in the closest to the ticket barrier, or front as in the direction of travel when the train left the station?

There were no officials around to ask, but the clock above my head showed only moments to spare, and in the end I got onto the farther end, where the two other girls had headed for, and dragged my heavy case after me into the carriage.

It was a compartment, just six seats, and all were empty. Almost as soon as I had slammed the door the guard's whistle sounded, and, with a horrible feeling that I might be in the wrong part of the train completely, I sat down, the scratchy wool of the train seat harsh against my legs.

With a clank and a screech of metal on metal, the train drew out of the dark cavern of the station, the sun flooding the compartment with a suddenness that blinded me. I put my head back on the seat, closing my eyes against the glare, and as we picked up speed I found myself imagining what would happen if I didn't turn up in Salten, where the housemistress would be awaiting me. What if I were swept off to Brighton or Canterbury, or somewhere else entirely? Or worse – what if I ended up split down the middle when the train divided, living two lives, each diverging from the other all the time, growing further and further apart from the me I should have become.

'Hello,' said a voice, and my eyes snapped open. 'I see you made the train.'

It was the tall girl from the platform, the one the other had called Thee. She was standing in the doorway to my compartment, leaning against the wooden frame, twirling an unlit cigarette between her fingers.

'Yes,' I said, a little resentful that she and her friend had not waited to explain which end to get. 'At least, I hope so. This is the right end for Salten, isn't it?'

'It is,' the girl said laconically. She looked me up and down again, tapped her unlit cigarette against the door frame, and then said, with an air of someone about to confer a favour, 'Look, don't think I'm being a bitch, but I just wanted to let you know, people don't wear their uniforms on the train.'

'What?'

'They change into them at Hampton's Lee. It's ... I don't know. It's just a thing. I thought I'd tell you. Only first years and new girls wear them for the

whole journey. It kind of makes you stand out.'

'So ... you're at Salten House too?'

'Yup. For my sins.'

'Thea got expelled,' a voice said from behind her, and I saw that the other girl, the short-haired one, was standing in the corridor, balancing two cups of tea. 'From three other schools. Salten's her last-chance saloon. Nowhere else would take her.'

'At least I'm not a charity case,' Thea said, but I could tell from the way she said it that the two were friends, and this goading banter was part of their act. 'Kate's father is the art master,' she told me. 'So a free place for his daughter is all part of the deal.'

'No chance of Thea qualifying for charity,' Kate said. *Silver spoon*, she mouthed over the top of the teas, and winked. I tried not to smile.

She and Thea shared a look and I felt some wordless question and answer pass between them, and then Thea spoke.

'What's your name?'

'Isa,' I said.

'Well, Isa. Why don't you come and join me and Kate?' She raised one eyebrow. 'We've got a compartment just up the corridor.'

I took a deep breath and, with the feeling that I was about to step off a very high diving board, gave a short nod. As I picked up my case and followed Thea's retreating back, I had no idea that that one simple action had changed my life forever.