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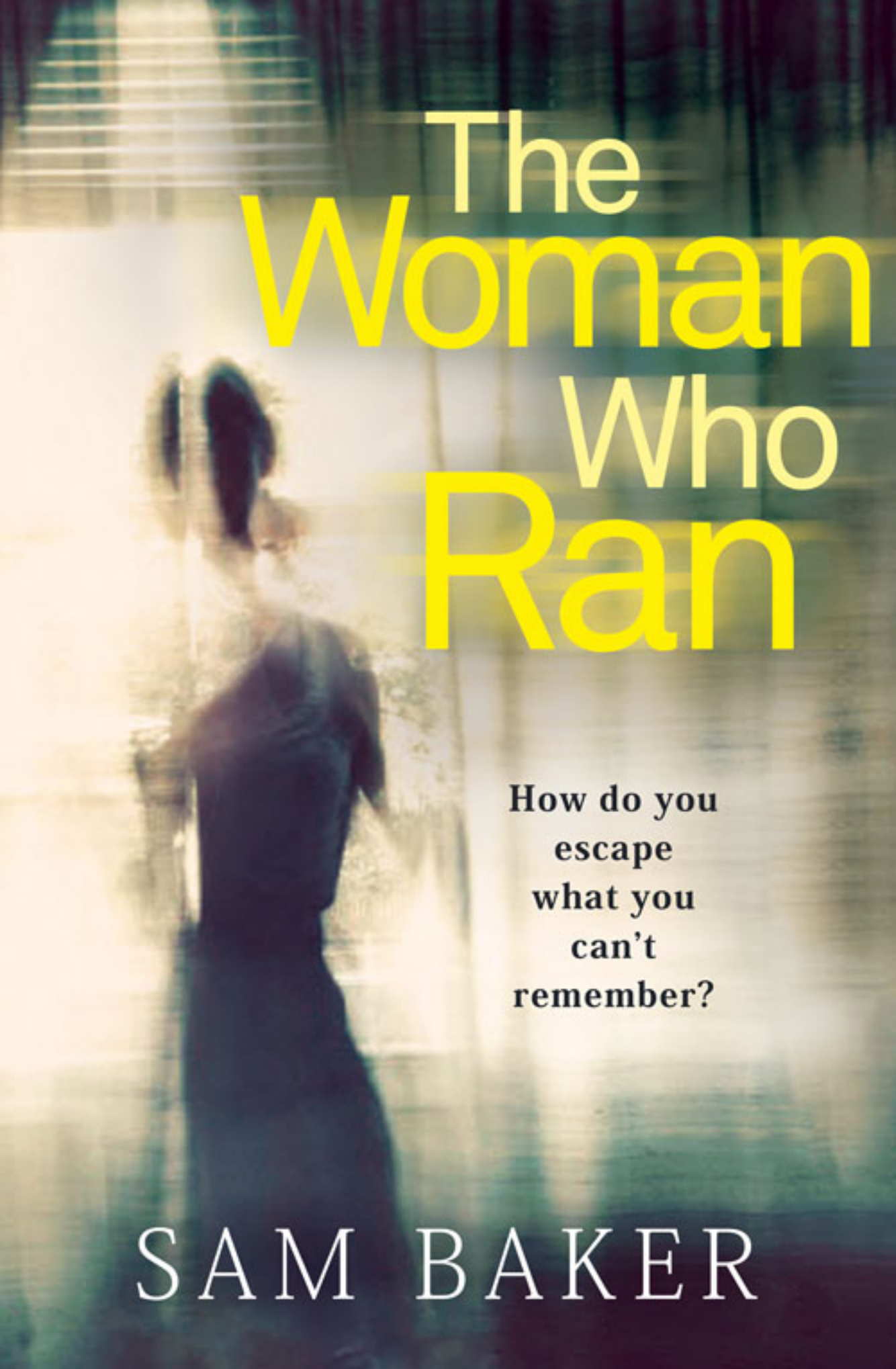
The Woman Who Ran

Written by Sam Baker

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The Woman Who Ran
How do you escape what you can't remember?
SAM BAKER

Sam Baker

The Woman Who Ran

HARPER

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Prologue

Paris, late August 2012

I wake to the sound of someone choking. It takes me a moment to realise it's me; my body convulsing like a child shaking its parent awake in the deepest hours of the night.

Just in time, I roll sideways, bile splashing on the floor beside me. Acid burns my throat, and my eyes sting shut against billowing smoke the second I try to open them.

The smell of burning is all around me. The air filled with a buzzing, brown noise I know I've heard before.

Electrics burning and fizzing perilously.

An acrid stench. The unforgettable telltale smell of singed hair, flesh . . .

The memory plays at the edge of my mind. Teasing, torturing. I snatch at it, but it slips away, replaced by the heat that claws at my throat and sears my lungs.

Where am I?

It takes me a second or two to realise. Shock reduces me to choking. In what used to be my bedroom. On what used to be my bed. Naked.

I attempt a breath, gag on it, and try to suppress the panic that rises along with the bile. Nothing makes sense. Not my being here. Not the thick, dark smoke clouding the room and hiding its high ceiling.

Everyone believes fire crackles and rages from the start. A Hollywood idea of a fire. It doesn't, not really. Not at this stage. Not yet. Fires like this take hold by stealth, then, when they've got you, in their own time, when they're good and ready, they let rip.

The seconds preceding that sound like this.

That's how I know I still have time. A few precious seconds, maybe a few more.

If I can only make myself *think*. If I can only make myself *move*.

My brain is as thick with smoke inside as the room is without.

'Move!' it shrieks. 'Run! *Move!*' Or maybe it's me who shrieks. My voice is sucked into burning oxygen and absorbed. Legs buckling, I force myself up, head swimming dangerously, body swaying as the heat sends me crashing to the ground. Here, at least, with hot cheek to cold tile, there is air.

One lungful, two, three . . . I suck in as much air as my burning lungs can stand and try to think. My clothes . . . Where are they? Why aren't I wearing them?

Blindly I crawl round the bed, one hand in front of the other, towards the heat, the only way out, until my hand hits cloth. I grab at something – a T-shirt, then

thicker fabric, jeans, rivets searing my fingertips as my hands close on them.

Keep moving.

I drag myself along the wall until brick gives way to wood. Pulling myself up, I twist the metal door handle hard, screaming as my palm blisters. Heat billows around me and flames burst in behind, as if they've been waiting, vampire-like, to be invited.

I plunge into sickly orange fog, flames crackling now. An ominous crack across the room makes my heart lurch. I close my eyes, blinking against the smoke and stumble forward. Thinking only of the door, I begin to count.

Willing myself to be calm:

One, two, three . . .

As I fumble on, my hand lands on something *wrong*. Warm and soft, it gives beneath my weight. I gasp, and hear a whimper, like a kicked puppy. The noise, faint as it is, comes from me.

Scrambling backwards, I force myself to look. Through streaming eyes, I can just about make out the shape of a body, curled in on itself, in the corner between me and the door.

Despite the flames, my skin is suddenly ice; the fine downy hairs on my arm bristling even as I smell them begin to singe. I can't bring myself to touch him again. I can't make myself turn away.

Move! My brain urges. *Get out!*

I glance back. As I do, flames erupt behind me, blackening the rug and scorching my heels. Finally, my body obeys. Reaching for the handle to the corridor beyond, I hurl myself through.

PART ONE

The Stranger

'I would not send a poor girl into the world, ignorant of the snares that beset her path . . . nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power or the will, to watch and guard herself.'

Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

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SCANDAL-HIT HOSPITAL THREATENED WITH CLOSURE

Upper case, 124 point. Headline framing a picture of a dilapidated red-brick Victorian hulk, surrounded by a rash of outbuildings all stuck on over the last half-century. A seventies extension here, a Portakabin there. Paintwork peeling, signs with letters missing – *ardiology, out-patien s* – and that was before you started on the state of the equipment inside. Rumour had it – well, the rumour behind this latest crisis – that the families of long-stay patients were being asked to bring their own meals and take away soiled laundry. Beneath it a rogue's gallery of administrators and hospital managers whose neglect and cost-cutting had contributed to its place in the NHS's last-chance saloon.

'Not bad.' Gil Markham stood back to admire his handiwork.

As front pages went, it wasn't his finest, but it would do. It ticked the boxes. A real story, with real implications for the local community. Everyone knew someone who'd suffered as a result of the hospital's decline, or knew someone who knew someone. It was like that round here. The last place in Britain where news travelled just as fast via garden fence, front doorstep and public bar as it did online, if not faster. Even that – a love of good old-fashioned local gossip – wouldn't be enough to save his beloved paper.

Gil sighed, glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one had heard.

A hospital closure wasn't the swansong he'd had in mind, but he could leave with his head held high. No small achievement for the end of August. He could just as easily have ended up with a silly season story or a hospital visit from a minor royal. He'd done enough of those over the years.

'Boss –' one of his subs appeared at his side – 'it's short. Want me to pad it on page four or shall I find a filler?'

Gil rolled his eyes. 'How short?'

'Hundred, hundred and fifty, thereabouts.'

'Hell of a lot of padding. Got anything else?'

'This just came off the wire.' The sub – a temp, Gil couldn't remember his name, if he'd ever known it – handed him a printout. 'Reporter, bit of a hotshot back in the day, missing after house fire.'

Gil perked up. 'Local angle? Got family round here? Leeds? Bradford?'

'Nah, fire was in Paris.'

'Paris? I don't call that local.'

'Steve says he was a trainee at the *Mirror* same time as him.' The sub indicated an old hand on the news desk. 'Reckons he was born Sheffield way, moved south when he was a kid . . .'

'Still, a bloody long way from West Yorkshire.'

The sub shrugged as Gil balled the sheet of A4, lobbed it in the general direction of the recycling bin and missed. Both men watched it bounce across the floor and roll to a halt by the printer.

'Pad it,' Gil said. 'But no fluff. Full names, ages, marital status – bung in some details about that last MRSA scandal, if you need it – that sort of thing.'

While the sub filled, Gil skimmed the two tiny pars below the headline, removed a widow and tracked back the sentence, more out of habit than necessity. Any reader whose attention span was too short to turn, as directed, to page four, would find all they needed here. If he had to hazard a guess, Gil would put that at upwards of 90 per cent of them. Made him wonder if it was worth bothering with page four at all.

'Good to go?' the sub asked as Gil speed-read the end of the story. Fluffy, but not too fluffy. And, like he said, no one would read it anyway.

Gil nodded and the sub's right hand shifted slightly, his finger twitched, and the page vanished from his screen. The move was barely perceptible. All that work and then . . . Gil tried not to let it gall him. His last front page sent to the printers and that was it?

He knew it made him sound like an old fossil – he was, practically Palaeolithic – but he missed proper print. He wasn't asking for hot metal, he wasn't that much of a dinosaur, although he'd liked the linotype machine

when he was an apprentice on Fleet Street. The smell, the noise, the *commitment* of real print. The sense that, once you'd decided, that was it, there was no going back. It was a big decision in those days. What you thought, what you chose to go with, it mattered.

Digital was too easy.

Don't like it? Change it. Try this, move that. Up a type size, swap the headline with the picture. Better before? Put it all back where it was then. No problem . . . After all, by the time this was printed, it would be old news, already replaced several times over by something newer and more exciting online. Truth was, he was glad to be retiring five years early. No one bought a paper nowadays, not like they used to. Give it a few months and they'd be giving the thing away. If they bothered printing it at all.

'So, what's to say about Gilbert Markham?'

As if on command, Gil began to slink backwards. Shoulders drooped, head down, making himself as invisible as possible. Not easy when you're six four, but over the years he'd turned shrinking into an art form. The glasses helped, he found. One of the reasons he'd never bothered with contacts. If he could only drift as far back as the bar he could fortify himself with another pint. He'd need another, and a chaser, to get through this.

Fat chance.

'Come on, Gil,' someone from the sports desk shouted. Gil tried to remember the man's name, if only to mark his card, but it escaped him. 'It's your big moment, get yourself up there.'

Nev, that was it. He looked like a Nev.

Thank God there wasn't literally an up. Gil had never been one for a stage. Up at the front of this crowd, in the back room at The Cricketers was bad enough. Nev's jeer was joined by a second from one of the subs and a combined third from half the news desk; until even Gil could see he was making more of a spectacle of himself by refusing.

'So,' the new editor repeated, 'what's to say about Gilbert?'

'For Christ's sake,' Gil muttered, pushing his way to the front of the room, grudgingly accepting the affectionate pats that greeted his passage. 'Call me Gil. Haven't been Gilbert since I accidentally burnt down the Boys' Brigade hut when I was seven.'

'Gil joined the *Post*, back in . . .' The man paused, making no pretence of not looking at his hastily unfolded notes. He'd only been there six months, less. He hardly knew Gil. Why would he, when most of his time was spent cutting staff and trying to deal with falling circulation, the crash in advertising revenue and the paper's transition to digital?

'Back in . . .'

'1985,' Gil supplied, taking his place at the front and instantly dwarfing the younger, squatter man. 'Probably around the time you were in primary school.'

Gil remembered his first day clear as a bell, like it was yesterday – and all those other clichés he expected the subs to strike out. Life flashing before your eyes . . . Wasn't that meant to be when you were dying? From where Gil now stood it was same difference. London had been wet and sticky that summer; the

worst combination. Jan, pregnant with Karen, was hot, heavy and worried. It wasn't an easy pregnancy. If he were being unkind, he'd say Karen started the way she intended to go on: bloody-minded and difficult.

Lyn was due to start junior school, house prices in Greenwich were soaring, and riots bubbled under the urban sprawl. Jan's mother was never off the phone worrying about the safety of her only daughter and granddaughter; though they lived nowhere near Brixton, or Tottenham for that matter, and trouble was brewing in Liverpool and Manchester, too. London was different, apparently. His own mother wasn't much better. The decision to move back north to head up a news desk, have a higher standard of living, better schools, a house twice as large for half the price, eventually made itself. He cracked when Jan accused him of not worrying about his kids having a safe place to grow up, a decent community, decent neighbours . . .

The things her mum said Gil was trying to deprive her of for the sake of his blessed career.

Working on a national was working on a national, but when the job on the *Post* came up it was too good to turn down. Trouble was, he'd been there ever since. Risen to Assistant Editor/News; covered when the boss was off (holidays, Christmas); pulled more than his fair share of lates in Jan's eyes. Editors came and went, but the top job eluded him, time and technology moving faster than he had a mind to. When he'd joined, the public image of a journalist was a hard-bitten hack in a trench coat with a book of off-the-record contacts. Now it was run by suits, marshalling whichever twelve-year-old with a camera phone happened to be in the right

place at the right time, and was happy to sign away their rights for exposure.

What a cliché he'd been back then.

What a cliché he still was.

'You with us, Gil?'

The editor was frowning; the rest of the room had fallen silent and was staring in a way that made Gil uncomfortable. Tolerant was the only way to describe the expression on the younger faces. Like he was an elderly relative at a difficult funeral.

'Senior moment.' Gil mugged at the news desk. 'Comes to us all, guv.'

'Glad to be rid of you then, mate.'

'Give me a gold watch and I'll race you to the door.'

'Ah, about that: what's five letters . . .' He was grinning. The new editor never grinned. It should have been a warning. '. . . and ends in E-X?'

A smile broke across Gil's face. He knew head office would see him right. Tight bastards these days, dicking around with pensions, changing contracts for the worse, but he'd put in the time and they knew that. From his jacket pocket, the one furthest from Gil, the editor produced a box, black leather or something that would pass for it. Emblazoned across the top in foil was one word: *Timex.*

The room dissolved.

'You really think we'd send you off after twenty-seven years with a couple of warm pints and a Timex?' That the younger man's cuff had ridden up to reveal a Rolex Day-Date didn't make Gil feel any better. Gil was meant to say, *No, of course not*. Set himself up for the next fall.

New guard and old locked eyes. There was no hint of a smile in either of them. No mutual respect. No amicable passing of the baton from one generation to another. 'Yeah,' said Gil, loudly enough for the rest of the room to hear. 'I think you would.'