

**TELL ME
YOUR
SECRET**

Also by Dorothy Koomson

The Cupid Effect
The Chocolate Run
My Best Friend's Girl
Marshmallows for Breakfast
Goodnight, Beautiful
The Ice Cream Girls
The Woman He Loved Before
The Rose Petal Beach
The Flavours of Love
That Girl From Nowhere
When I Was Invisible
The Friend
The Beach Wedding
The Brighton Mermaid

DOROTHY
KOOMSON

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REVIEW

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For our Alex.
A dab hand with the Romulan Ale.
Miss you mate.

Prologue

'If you want to survive this weekend . . . there is only one thing you must do – keep your eyes closed . . . For forty-eight hours you must not open your eyes. If you do open your eyes, I will end you.

'No matter what you feel or hear, you must not open your eyes, not even for the briefest of seconds . . . If you do as I ask, I will release you and you can go back to your ordinary little life . . . It's really that simple. Do you understand?

'I'm going to take off this blindfold in a few moments, but before I do, nod if you understand . . . Come on, just a little nod to show you know what I'm talking about. A nod . . . That's it, that's right. Thank you. Now our weekend together can begin.'

Part 1

Pieta

Monday, 10 June

Keys, bag, coffee cup, tape recorder, notebook.

Pens. Mustn't forget the pens. I open my bag and peer inside. All present and correct.

Right, time to go.

Inhaler, car keys, memory stick, painkillers.

I open my bag for the third time. Definitely all there. I can go.

Purse? Security pass? Spare pair of armwarmers?

Gosh, I'm being slow today. I open my bag, *again*, and check everything is in there. Great. All there. Now it's time to go. Properly go.

At the front door, I turn to the woman and boy who have been standing in the corridor, waiting for me to leave. I grab my laptop in one hand and my reusable coffee cup and car keys with the other.

'Thanks so much for coming over early, Sazz,' I say to the childminder. 'I really couldn't have made this breakfast meeting without you.'

'No problem, Pi-R,' she says with a smile. She's known me many years and has shortened my name (Pieta Rawlings) like this pretty much since day one. She wraps a protective arm

around my son and affectionately draws him to her. ‘Me and the Kobster, we’ll have a great time getting ready.’

No one else – not even his beloved grandparents – would get away with calling my boy that. Kobi is very serious about his name – except when it comes to Sazz (real name Sarah Sazzleoj). Sazz can pretty much do anything she likes without consequences. Me? I’m regularly treated to a combination of ‘the look’ and a tone of voice that scorches every letter as it leaves his mouth for the smallest of indiscretions.

I have to put down all the things in my hands to reach for my son. I wrap my arms around him, pull him close, kiss his head. I linger over our goodbyes, I always do. It’ll only be a few hours till we see each other again, but I get so few of these moments with him in life, I want to enjoy and savour every second of every one.

‘Have a good day. I love you,’ I say. ‘Eat your breakfast. Behave for Sazz.’ I let go before he pushes me off and begin to gather my stuff up again. ‘And enjoy yourself tonight with Miles and Austin.’

‘It’s Sam and Oscar, actually,’ my son informs me.

‘What?’ I pause. ‘It’s Miles and Austin tonight. That’s what you told me. That’s what I wrote down, that’s what’s been arranged.’

My son shakes his head. ‘Nope. Sam and Oscar.’

‘But that means . . .’ I plonk down my coffee cup, dump my keys, open up my light-red, suedette bag and start to fish around for my mobile. ‘I’ll have to message Karen to double-check she’s let the school know that Sazz has to pick up Oscar and Sam. And then I’ll have to text Allie to make sure she knows that it’s not tonight . . . and I put rice for dinner beca—’

Sazz steps forward, picks up my coffee cup and keys, the latter jangling as she moves them across the gap between us. She forces

them into my hands, then jams in my laptop bag, too. 'I'll sort it Pi-R. All of it. I'll call both sets of parents, let the school know, then pick them up and bring them home. No worries whatsoever.'

She's hustling me out of the door, trying to get rid of me because I'm stopping their fun. I'm never quite sure what they get up to when I'm not there, but they regularly make me feel like I am excess to requirements.

'OK, if you can't get hold of Allie, then call Mike,' I say. 'Baycroft, they're Baycroft.'

'Allie, then Mike, got it,' she says, still manoeuvring me towards the door.

'And it's Karen and Julian Newby for—'

'I know, I know,' she says with that big grin of hers. Her smile – open and friendly – was one of the first things I noticed about her. The second thing was that, out of all the nannies and childminders I'd interviewed (eight of them) she was the only one who asked to see the baby. 'I've dealt with them all before. I'll sort it.'

'Bye, Mum,' Kobi calls approvingly when Sazz reaches around me and opens the door.

'See you, Pi-R.'

'Oh, just one more thing—' I say.

'You have the best of days, OK?' she says. 'I'll be rooting for you.'

Involuntarily, I step backwards onto the path outside my house.

'Bye,' Kobi calls before the door is shut in my face.

'It's always lovely to know you're superfluous to your life,' I reply to my black front door. 'Always.'

Jody

Monday, 10 June

I'm not sure about other detectives, other officers, but this never ever feels real to me.

Not straight away, I mean.

Not until I actually see the person, and then it's brought into sharp relief, a big dose of reality forced into my face. But until then, when I am approaching a crime scene, when there are area cars and blue-and-white tape and uniforms, high-vis jackets and tents and people dressed in white overclothes, it all looks like something off the telly.

My heart feels like it is in my throat right now, but if you look close enough, you'll be able to see it hammering away in the middle of my chest, as though it's trying to escape. Because I know this is going to be number six. I desperately don't want her to be, I want her to be someone different, someone who isn't dead because of me.

I've been dropped off at a place called Preston Park in Brighton. When I'd asked for a PC to drive me there because I didn't really know Brighton beyond the seafront and the flat I'm staying in, I'd been expecting the same type of park as the one

near where I live in London. Nice and green, trees, paths and benches, a slight incline here and there, but essentially you can see the other side wherever you stand. If a body had been found in that park, you'd have no trouble finding out where you needed to be. 'Which part of Preston Park?' the driver asked as we strapped ourselves in.

'No idea. The parkiest bit?' I replied.

'It's quite a big park, Inspector,' he stated.

'To be honest, it's seven thirty in the morning. I came in early to set up my incident room, I wasn't really expecting to be called out, I haven't got my bearings or anything. Can you take me there and we'll have to look for where the incident is.' That wasn't totally true. I *had* been expecting to be called out but at the same time, I had been hoping I was wrong about the pattern that had been playing out for the last seven months. I'd been rather successfully pretending to myself that I was wrong about what would happen on this particular day because it was the sixth Monday.

The officer who was driving me had kept his face neutral as he nodded in agreement. When we arrived at the park and I realised what he meant about it being 'quite big', I was impressed that he had managed to hide his irritation so well. To be fair, though, it didn't take that long to find the incident. He'd asked if I wanted him to wait for me, but I'd said no. I didn't know how long I would be there and I didn't want to keep him hanging around.

As I approach the garland of blue-and-white police tape that links the trees and protects the area from prying eyes, I realise I'm holding my breath because this has an added dimension.

It's not a simple case of the horror of finding a dead body, the confirmation that people can do terrible things to other people,

this is a reminder, like I said to you before, that another woman is dead because of me; that this is all my fault.

Surprisingly, there are no media vans or cars, no reporters desperate for a story but I'm not sure if this has been called in yet. I know the last three – found in Queen's Park, Hollingbury Park and Hangleton Park – were reported as suspicious deaths, which kind of gave the impression that they had been deaths as the result of misadventure (i.e. drugs or drink or both). Very little information had been given out because very little had been known. It was only when I linked them with the ones in London that I was allowed to come to Brighton to assess the bodies, and was allowed to call them the work of a serial killer. More than three means the work of a serial, after all.

The press down here haven't caught on, yet.

'What have we got?' I ask the PC who stands guarding this outer part of the cordoned-off area.

She tips her head back slightly to look at me because her too-big helmet sits below her eyebrows. I should probably pull her up on that – remind her of the importance of looking neat, especially when you're out here where the public can see you. In the grand scheme of things, it isn't important, though.

'Ma'am?' she replies. What she means is, *Who are you?*

I flash my warrant card and say, 'I'm down from London on secondment.' *Kind of.* 'I received a call asking me to attend this scene.'

'Ma'am.'

'What have we got?' I repeat when it's obvious she's not intending to say anything else.

It's likely she won't know, which is why she isn't speaking, but

I want to give myself a moment before I find out if this one is one of *them*. If this one is body number six. She will be, they wouldn't have called me if she wasn't, but I can hope, can't I?

'Dog walker found her,' the officer says, realising that I want something, no matter how inane. 'Up near the centre.'

Never get a dog, my friend Sharon used to say. *You'll either get murdered while walking it or find a dead body*. It's quite disturbing how right she was. (I often wonder if that's why she named her dog Lucky.)

'I don't know much else,' she admits. She doesn't know much, I'd bet, because she is incurious. She won't have asked, she won't have looked, she will have been told to stand here and so she is going to stand here and do nothing beyond that. She's the perfect PC for this job, really, because no one – press or member of the public – will be able to pry, bribe or trick any information out of her. Hopefully the other officers stationed at different points will keep a better eye on who is watching us, who is taking a keen interest in what is going on, who is – potentially – the killer sticking around to watch his handiwork be uncovered.

I take another look around at the park, its shapes and nuances, its colours and its shades coming slowly alive, into fuller focus, as the light arrives with the continued rise of the sun. *What a place to meet your end*, I think. *What a place to have this happen to you*.

'Thank you,' I say to the PC, as I negotiate my way under the tape.

I hate this. I hate the 'off the telly' feeling, but the 'about to be real' moment really gets to me, churns me up like a plough through soil. It never gets easier, it only ever gets worse. Statistics tell me

that someday, it'll be someone I know. Possibly someone I love. Someone I can't bear to be without.

I've been in Brighton three days. It's unusual for someone who doesn't know the terrain to be assigned as Senior Investigating Officer (SIO) on multiple murders, but after I'd linked the London and Brighton murders, after I campaigned hard at every level to not allow them to dismiss this as simply 'drug related', after I persuaded and cajoled, showing all the evidence I'd amassed on my own, I think they gave me the assignment just to get rid of me. I could not let this go. Could not let anyone else take charge of this. Not when I had been there at the very beginning.

I shake my head to stop that line of thought. I'm here now, I'm doing this. I will make things right.

The path has obviously been cleared from the outer cordon through to the tent where the body is. In other words, the ground had been searched for evidence before the small metal footplates had been laid down for us all to step on to get to the murder site.

'What have we got?' I ask the plain-clothes officer who is approaching me via the footplates with the speed of someone who is desperate to cut off an intruder into their realm, and certainly before I make it into the inner cordoned-off area.

'And you are?' he asks.

'Detective Inspector Jody Foster,' I say.

He double-takes either at my name or my position, or maybe both. 'Jody Foster?' he asks, questioning the name over the position.

'She spells her name differently and you need to get over it, really quickly,' I say. I pull out my warrant card and his back stiffens, his demeanour formalises. 'What have we got?'

My eyes focus on his face – jowly, sagging, sallow. He’s done his time, but he isn’t ready to wind things down yet. He is small, wiry, his hair white and black at the same time. I’m studying him because I do not want to look over at the people in white overalls, I do not want this to be real. If I focus on this man, maybe I can delay the inevitability of what is coming just that bit longer, so that when we reach the time when I have to look, maybe, just maybe, I’ll be able to cope.

‘Black woman. Mid-to-late thirties. They’re guessing strangulation right now, but no one’s hanging their career on that because the bruising hasn’t appeared yet. Not sure if she’s been sexually assaulted. Looking likely.’

‘Any unusual marks?’ I ask as casually as I can.

He nods. ‘I’ll say.’

My heartbeat quickens. It still might not be. It could be some other sicko. ‘What is it?’ I ask.

‘It’ll be easier if I show you,’ he replies.

Easier for who? Not for me, certainly.

We cross the distance to the white forensics tent and I pull on the white overclothes, tuck my hair inside the hood, and then snap the face mask into place. Once I am suitably attired, we walk towards the inner cordon with him in front. I have to force myself to keep eyes forward, to not show any weakness or fear, to not give in to the little white creature of terror that sits hunched on my shoulder, dribbling its ‘*this is all your fault*’ poison into my ear.

Will this one have been deliberately placed, like the others, laid face down, displayed so we’ll instantly know? So I’ll instantly know. It does feel personal. It feels like all of this is being done to get at me, to remind me how fallible I am.

The sergeant crouches down, and I watch his rubber-covered fingers reach for the edge of the sheet, slip it back over the shape of her body. He does this more respectfully than I've seen others in his position do.

Definitely placed; absolutely displayed.

And there it is. That mark, that brand.

Breathe, Jody. Breathe.

Pretend, Jody. Pretend.

You are a police officer. An inspector. You are hardened and wise, experienced and knowing. You do this day in, day out, you've seen so many bodies, so many permutations of people being dead that it doesn't touch the sides. It's the crime that bothers you, the audacity of those who think they can get away with it.

Come on, Jody, I cajole myself. This shouldn't bother you. You shouldn't be standing here, hoping she was unconscious when it happened. No, when it was done to her. You shouldn't be allowing yourself to slip into the vortex by imagining the hell of the pain she went through first time around and then the terror she went through again right before the end.

I stare at the woman, knowing she should be full of life.

She should be walking, running around, reclining on a sofa scrolling through her phone, running a bath, washing up, cleaning her toilet, or not tidying up her living room. She should be doing a million other inconsequential and more vitally important things than lying here.

Stop it, Jody. Stop this! I tell myself fiercely. *You can't be a SIO if you're going to do this, be like this. Focus, concentrate, be a police officer and take down the particulars of this scene.*

Around this woman's head is a blindfold. Silk, expensive,

stretched over her eyes and tied with a single knot at the back of her head.

Her body is doughy, like she didn't work out but kept herself slim. Her back is bare and the skin is a soft, chestnut brown that is blemish-free and clear down to where it disappears under the sheet. Her back. It was a perfect, untouched canvas. Until the weekend that changed her life. Until his calling card was cruelly pressed into her back.

I want to tear my eyes away. I want to stop imagining the agony, the fear, the horror. But I can't. *Won't*. This is part of the job. This is part of the process of stepping out of the surreal into the reality. This is my life.

And this is him.

What I am looking at right now is him.

The Blindfolder. This is all him.