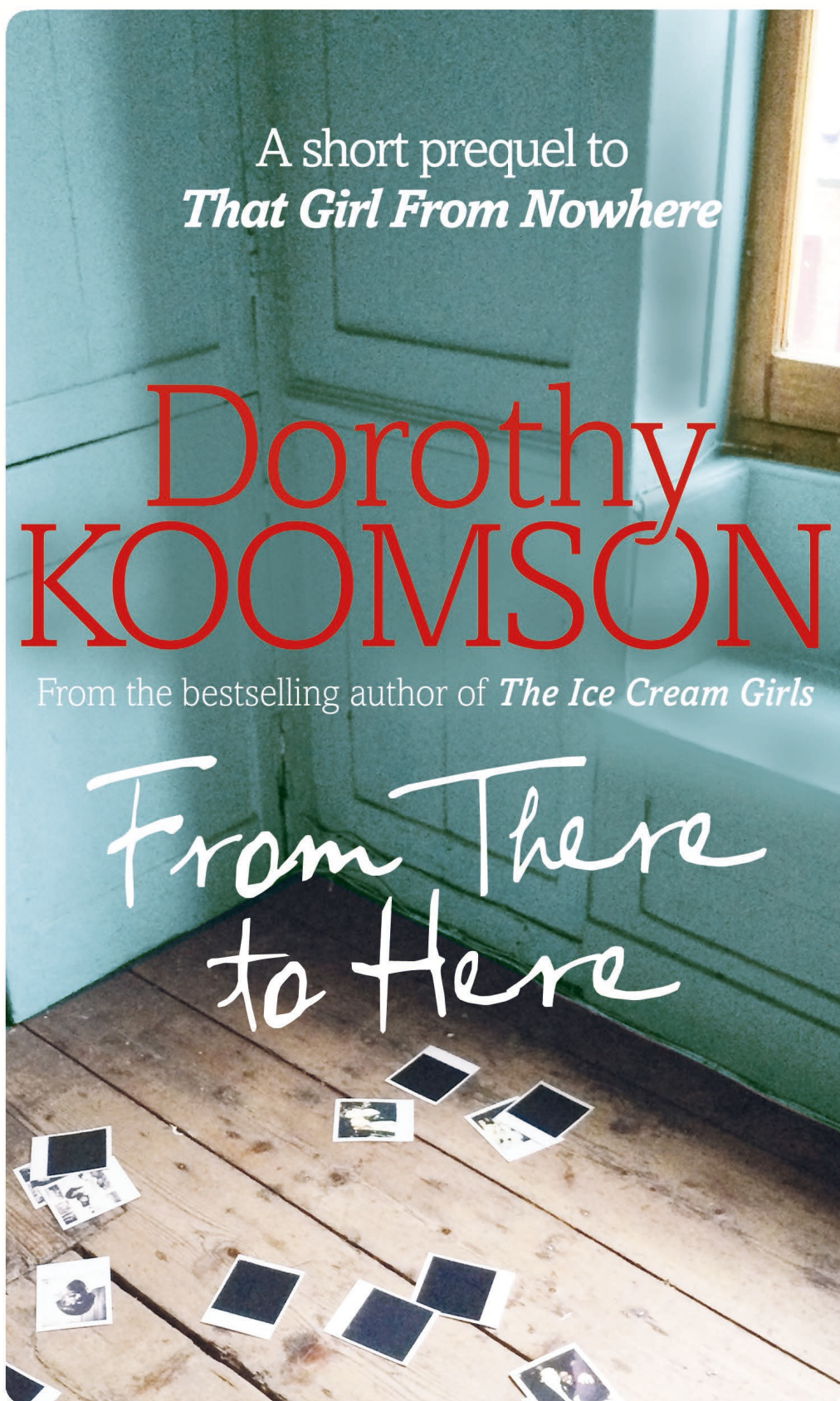


A short prequel to
That Girl From Nowhere

Dorothy KOOMSON

From the bestselling author of *The Ice Cream Girls*

*From There
to Here*



About the book

A short prequel to Dorothy Koomson's new bestselling novel *That Girl From Nowhere*

In *That Girl From Nowhere*, Clemency Smittson leaves behind her old life in Leeds to move to Brighton in search of answers to her past, and to escape from the sadness of her present.

Clemency's mother, Heather Smittson, loves her with a fierce protectiveness that means she'll follow her daughter to the ends of the Earth. . .

From There to Here is the story of their journey from the north of England to the south.

About the author

Dorothy Koomson has been making up stories since she was thirteen and used to share her fictional worlds with her convent school friends. She is now the author of ten novels including *The Chocolate Run*, *My Best Friend's Girl*, *The Woman He Loved Before* and *The Flavours of Love*, having worked as a journalist and editor for several national papers and women's magazines.

While writing *That Girl from Nowhere* Dorothy developed a penchant for making jewellery, drinking coffee and taking photos with a real camera.

For more info on Dorothy visit www.dorothykoomson.co.uk

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Smitty

From my place in the driver's seat, I look at my mother, sitting stiff-backed in the passenger seat. We're about to travel three hundred miles but, it seems from the look on her face, that Mum is in fact about to be driven to her execution.

'Mum, what are you doing?' I ask her. She has her hands over the bottom of her seatbelt, attempting to hide the fact she hasn't clipped it in but is holding it in place. I remember some comedian joking about how his mother did that. I always thought it was nonsensical, that no one in real life would actually do that. Staring at my mother right now shows how wrong a person can be.

'I am waiting for this journey to begin,' she says.

'You actually have to clip the seatbelt into its holder, you know? You can't just hold it across you.'

'I may need to make a quick escape,' she replies without a hint of humour or leg-pulling. 'I have seen far too many television shows where someone is trapped in a car and the reason the heroine can't be freed is because of the jammed seatbelt.'

So many things I could say. So many, many things . . . 'Mum, it's the law that you have to be properly strapped into a vehicle before we set off. You know that and I've never seen you argue about it before.'

'I've never had to drive such a distance in this thing before,' she replies. 'Are you sure it's safe, Clemency?'

Most of my hackles rise but I remind myself that Mum is genuinely worried about all of this: the journey, the move, everything. 'Yes, Mum,' I say calmly, trying to soothe her nerves. 'Lottie is perfectly safe. Three different specialists checked her over.'

Every one of Mum's hackles rise – it more than irks her that my campervan has a name.

Buzzzzz-buzzzzz-ting goes my mobile, which is in my bag on the floor between us. Mum transfers her glare from me to my bag and, in that moment of silent fury at being interrupted, she clips the seat belt into place. I know exactly who it is that has texted me. Judging from the way Mum purses her lips after a cursory dirty look in my bag's direction, she does too.

'Ready?' I ask her. I reach for the ignition.

She nods and stares out of the passenger side window. 'Yes, love, ready.'

She isn't ready, neither am I, but we still have to do this. I still have to set off for Brighton to start my new life.

Buzzzzz-buzzzzz-ting goes the mobile in my bag again just for good measure.

With him, April 2012, Leeds

'Now, please don't be cross with me,' I said to him.

'Oh, no, what?' he asked, resigned to whatever hair-brained scheme I had come up with. There had been a few and, to be fair, he'd never actually got angry with me. Much. 'And, where are we?' He looked around the area of Leeds that I'd led us to when I suggested an early evening walk.

‘Where we are has something to do with you not being cross with me.’ I stopped in front of him, and looked up at him in what I hoped was a winning way.

He stared at me, affectionately at first, then suspiciously. ‘Come on, out with it.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘Do you see this vehicle you’re standing in front of?’ He rotated on the spot to stare at the rusty old, completely gorgeous red and white campervan behind him. ‘I kind of bought it,’ I said after he had been still for long enough to have taken it in properly and had returned to looking at me. He spun back to the campervan.

‘I know, I know. But I saw it, and I fell completely in love and I just couldn’t walk away from her. I think she was going to end up in a scrapyard or something. I couldn’t let that happen.’

‘Her?’ he asked. ‘This rust bucket is a “her”?’

I moved towards my new love, stretched my arms across the front trying to put my hands on either side. ‘Don’t listen, baby, you’re completely gorgeous,’ I said, soothingly. I scowled at my boyfriend. ‘Oi, you, don’t you dare say that about her. She’s beautiful.’ After stroking my hands over the big glass headlights at the front, I continued: ‘Look at those big, beautiful eyes. Her wonderful colour. She’s adorable.’

He raised an unimpressed eyebrow. ‘Does it – sorry, does *she* – even move?’

‘Not exactly. The person I bought it from moved it here for me because I rented this garage,’ I pointed to the middle door in the line of five garages behind us, ‘where we can keep her while we work on her.’

‘We work on her?’

'I know how to solder and I can clear away rust, you know mechanics from working on your motorbike. We can find a mechanic for the really technical engine stuff, but this will be fun.'

He reached out, stroked her nose. 'She is pretty unique,' he conceded.

'Isn't she?' I said excitedly.

'I daren't ask how much she cost.'

'It doesn't matter how much she cost, not really. It's something we can relive together in the evenings and at weekends. I am so excited about this.'

'Me, too.' He grinned.

'And I've the name picked out – Lottie. You know, she's going to take a lot of time to relive back to her former glory.'

'And I'm sure she'll be even more beautiful once she's finished.'

Buzzzz-buzzzz-ting goes my mobile again and I try to shove the memory of how I came by Lottie to the back of my mind.

'What are those things on your arms?' Mum asks as I head out of Otley for the A roads that will take us Down South – it's almost a straight line to drive from here to Brighton.

I glance down at the ribbed, black wool items that I've pulled onto my forearms, leaving a large patch of exposed skin between my elbows and the top of my biceps where my T-shirt's sleeves begin. 'Legwarmers. Although I mostly wear them as armwarmers these days.'

'Take them off!' Mum orders.

‘What?’ I steal a look at her. She has her bag on her lap and her face is set as she glares at my armwarmers. ‘I can’t, I’m driving.’

‘I know you’re driving, which is exactly why you need to take them off right this instant!’

‘No,’ I reply. ‘I’m driving.’

Mum reaches over and unclips her seatbelt.

‘What are you doing?’ I almost screech at her. It’s ten o’clock and I haven’t had enough coffee yet (only two cups of instant have passed these lips) to deal with this.

‘I am not going anywhere with you if you are going to wear those things on your arms!’ Mum says loudly. From the corner of my eye, I see her gaze dart towards the passenger door. She really is about to open it while it’s moving, she feels that strongly about what I’m wearing. I hit the indicator, check my rear-view mirror and pull over behind a red, new-style Mini and a large black Volvo.

‘What’s the problem with my armwarmers?’ I ask as calmly as possible.

‘If you are cold, wear a long-sleeved top or a jumper,’ Mum says tartly, ‘not those ridiculous things. What if they slip over your hands while you’re driving, Clemency? What then? You could lose control of this vehicle – which I’m still not convinced is safe – and then what will become of us? Hmmm? What then?’

So many things that I would like to say to my mother float through my brain. *So many things.* ‘You’re right,’ I manage through gritted teeth. ‘I wasn’t thinking. I’ll take them off, right now.’ I strip them off and drop them onto my bag. Right on cue, my phone *buzzzzz-buzzzzz-tings* with another message from him, the person who bought these for me.

With him, June 2012, Leeds

'What, pray tell, are these?' I asked him. He had told me to close my eyes and placed something in my hands. When I opened my eyes, there were some black, knitted items with a beige cardboard band around the middle in my outstretched hands.

'Turn them over and you'll see,' he said, a salacious tone to his voice.

Do they make underwear in wool? I wondered as I did as I was told.

'Legwarmers?' I said, looking up at him. 'Legwarmers!'

'Oh, yes.' His grin spread right across his face. 'Legwarmers.'

'Most men would buy skimpy bits of underwear, but my random gift from you is legwarmers? You're a strange man.'

'Maybe, my love. But I often have flashbacks to that trip to Lithuania . . . How much time you spent in my jumper and knickers . . .'

'They were your knickers? Is that why—'

'How much time you spent in *my* jumper and *your* knickers,' he corrected to stop me derailing the conversation. 'They are *good* memories of you in wool. . . Do you see where I'm going with this?'

'I see where you're going all right.'

He nodded towards the door and our bedroom down the corridor. 'I think I've still got that jumper somewhere.'

I stood up indignantly. 'You really think all it takes to seduce me nowadays is a pair of legwarmers and an old fusty jumper?' I said, sternly.

'No,' he said. 'Of course I don't.'

‘Well then you’re stupid, aren’t you?’ I giggled and darted out the door. We were both laughing as he chased me towards our bedroom.

Buzzzz-buzzzz-ting sounds in my bag.

‘Look, Mum, you don’t have to come with me this time, you know?’ I say to her before I set off again. ‘You can come another time.’

All this is about Mum not wanting me to do this. Of course it is. I don’t want to do it either, but I can’t stay here after everything that’s happened. After everything I’ve lost. At one time it felt like I had it all . . . and now it feels like I have nothing but the stuff packed into my campervan and the open road ahead of me. Well, I will have the open road if Mum ever lets us get out of Otley.

‘I need to feel safe on this journey, Clemency, that does not equate to me not wanting to come along,’ she says contemptuously, then aggressively clicks her seatbelt into its holder.

I inhale deeply, try to find some calm before I do my mirror, signal, manouvre and set off once again.

Buzzzz-buzzzz-ting comes from my bag again.

He’s probably taken the day off and is right now in our flat, sitting at the table in the kitchen, staring out of the window at the road, hoping that Lottie will turn into our street and I’ll come back to him. At least, that’s what I would be doing if I were him. I’d be sending texts, too. And, more than anything, I’d be trying to bend time and space to connect to him, to convince him through sheer force of will to come home. To come back to me.

With him, November 2012, Leeds

We sat at the kitchen table with our breakfast of warm buttered pikelets and the coffee he'd braved the wind and rain to pick up from the little café not far from our flat. While he was out, he'd also picked up the Sunday papers and a jewellery-making magazine for me to pore over later.

'Remember that piece of amber I bought in Lithuania way back when?' he said casually from behind the sports section of the broadsheet he was reading.

'Yes, I remember that piece of amber that you told me was huge but was in fact tiny,' I replied.

'Come on, it wasn't that small and it was good quality, you said so yourself.'

'Yes, it was good quality. What about it?'

'How do you fancy making it into an engagement ring and giving it to me so I can get down on one knee and propose to you?'

I laughed, the laughter spilling out of me unexpectedly. It was the most ridiculously wonderful thing I'd ever heard. I didn't even know that I was ready to marry him until he mentioned it. We'd discussed it, of course. We'd talked and talked about it, like we talked and talked about moving to London, and we talked and talked about me opening a jewellery shop in Leeds, and we talked and talked about him leaving his job and branching out on his own. What he was asking, though, wasn't just whether I wanted to get married, but also whether I was sure enough about him to believe we'd be together for the rest of our lives.

He glanced up from his paper, watched me laugh. 'I'm taking your laughter as a yes, just so you know,' he stated.

‘Of course it’s a yes,’ I eventually managed to say. ‘Was there ever going to be any other answer?’

‘I hoped not. But you never know with you – you’re always ready to throw something unexpected into the mix, aren’t you?’

Suddenly I sobered up, remembering how complicated our lives really were. ‘But we mustn’t tell anyone until I’ve made the ring,’ I said. ‘And even then, we should wait a bit.’ He did that thing he did when he nodded and agreed but would be persuading me to change my mind at some point. ‘And definitely no engagement party.’

‘We’re having an engagement party,’ he said. ‘Sorry, but we are.’

‘We’re not.’

‘We won’t be getting married for a while, so we’re definitely having an engagement party.’

‘We’re not, you know,’ I told him.

‘Let’s just skip to the end of this argument, we’re having one and that’s final,’ he said.

‘We’re not. That’s the end of this argument.’

Like with most things, he managed to change my mind, persuaded me to have an engagement party even though I knew what would happen. And after it did happen, I often wondered if it was the cause of the first fracture in the previously unbreakable chain that linked us together.

Buzzzz-buzzzz-ting

It's been twenty minutes and nothing has gone wrong. We're on the motorway and Mum is still wearing her seat belt. All of which I consider a win-win situation.

'Watch out for that car!' Mum shouts suddenly, causing me to leap right out of my moment of smugness and almost out of my seat.

My heart is in my throat and my hands are trembling so violently I fear I may start swerving in time with the shaking.

'Mum, what are you shouting about?' I ask loudly. I fixed my eyes to the road ahead to try to ease my shaking.

'Did you see that car?' she replies equally loudly.

'Which car? There are loads of cars on the road, not to mention lorries and vans.'

'That green one, he looked like he was going to come into our lane, probably crash into us.'

My eyes take in the road, the only green car within sight is in the fast lane – a whole lane away and pretty far ahead of us now. 'It's nowhere near us.'

My heartbeat is starting to slow, the shaking subsiding.

'Clemency, if you had seen his face, you would have known that he was going to swerve into us,' Mum says as though I am the one who has behaved irrationally. 'I don't trust men with beards.'

'Fair enough,' I reply. 'But Mum, please don't do that again.'

'If I feel our lives are in danger, I will do whatever is necessary, Clemency.'

'Like I say, fair enough, but don't scream like that, it nearly scared the life out of me.'

'Clemency, if I—'

‘Mum, *don’t shout like that again*, OK? *Do not shout like that again* and we’ll be golden,’ I interrupt.

The traffic sign we go past tells me it’s still twenty miles until the next service station. I need to pull over for a cigarette. I don’t smoke and never have done, but I think a smoke and lie down are the only things that will get me through this journey. I’m trying not to, but I can’t help cursing him for this. This is all his fault. ALL his fault. His response, of course, is *Buzzzzz-buzzzzz-ting*.

With him, May 2015, Leeds

‘Don’t I deserve better than this?’ he asked loudly.

I said nothing, but instead moved to leave.

He stepped into my path. ‘How does this even work anywhere except in your mind? We make love for the first time after weeks and weeks apart, then you tell me it’s over and you’re moving to Brighton as soon as possible. Then you spend the night on the sofa, go to stay with your mother the next day and refuse to talk to me. How is that any way to treat someone? Anyone? Let alone someone you love?’

If you’d told the truth, if you’d just admitted it, this wouldn’t be happening, I thought. ‘Look, I’ll call or text next time,’ I said. ‘Arrange a proper time to come and finish this off so we don’t have to see each other. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have come here without warning you. I thought you were at work all day today. Do you want me to leave my key?’

He glared at me. Angry, confused, hurt. All mirror images of what I had felt since I found out what he’d done.

‘Stop it, Smitty! Talk to me.’

Talking was our thing. We rarely argued, would simply get short and snippy with each other, and when that lost its appeal, we’d make up without actually making up. I wasn’t sure we knew how to argue properly, how to shout and scream and slam doors.

‘We had a chance to talk and you said there was nothing to tell,’ I reminded him.

And there it was again: the flash of panic that I might know, the rationalisation that it’d be impossible for me to know. ‘If you’ve got something to say, just say it and stop playing games,’ he said. The rage was bubbling out of him into every word.

‘Do you want me to leave the key?’ I asked.

He glared at me again. ‘Keep the key. Don’t keep the key. Makes no difference either way to me,’ he eventually said. He shrugged. ‘What I want doesn’t matter to you, does it?’

He stood at the kitchen window, his hand against the glass, watching as I left the building and got into Lottie. He didn’t move while I started her up and pulled away from the kerb. I suspected he stood still and expectant for a long time after I’d turned the corner out of sight, probably hoping I’d change my mind and come back.

Buzzzzz-buzzzzz-ting

Mum hasn’t screeched again. She has told me to ‘watch out for that car’ even if it’s two lanes away, but no more heart-stopping shouting. I drive us between

the large red-brown pylons of Brighton that stand on either side of the A23, and as we come off a roundabout onto the crest of a hill there it is. Brighton.

The hills, a patchwork of different greens sit next to each other, the blue sea touches the light-blue sky, and orange and yellow buildings are scattered along the landscape. I take a deep breath as the calmness of the vista washes over me.

'I've done the right thing,' I remind myself. 'I had no choice, this is the best thing to do.'

And in my bag, my mobile questions my conviction with *Buzzzzz-buzzzzz-ting*.

*This is a short prequel to Dorothy Koomson's tenth book, **That Girl From***

***Nowhere**. On sale 9 April 2015.*

WANT TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

