

A close-up photograph of a woman in a pink, sequined dress and a man in a white shirt. They are standing together with their hands clasped in a prayerful gesture. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting. The lighting is bright and natural, highlighting the textures of their clothing and the skin tones.

Between
love and
death there
is obsession

The *Sunday Times* Bestseller

**DOROTHY
KOOMSON**

The Woman He
Loved Before

the woman
he loved
before

DOROTHY
KOOMSON

sphere

prologue

28th February 2003

Are you her? Are you the one he's with now? Is that why you've come looking for me?

If you aren't reading this letter fifty or sixty years from now then it's likely that I'm dead. Probably murdered.

Please don't be upset by that, it probably won't have been too much of a surprise to me - not with the life I have lived. But if you have these diaries because you came looking for me, and you were clever enough to think like me and find them, or even if you came across them by accident, please, please can I ask you a favour? Please will you burn them without reading them? Please?

I do not want anyone else to know these things. I wrote them for me. I know I should probably burn them myself, but it'd feel like suicide, killing a part of myself. And, in everything I've done, everything I've gone through, I would not kill myself so I can't destroy these diaries. Maybe you can.

I say 'maybe' because if you're with him then you'll want to know about him, you'll want to know if he really is dangerous and if he was the one to murder me, so, while I don't want you to, I can't blame you for reading on.

There's not much else I can add, except that I hope you do not feel sorry for me. I have lived a life and even though I knew great pain, I also knew great love. Some people can live a long, long time without ever experiencing that. I am lucky.

I wish you well, whoever you are.

Love,

Eve

chapter one

libby

When I think of Jack, I try to think of walking on wobbly legs after stumbling off the mini roller coaster at the end of Brighton Pier. I try to think of being fed puffs of sticky candyfloss while lying on a threadbare blanket on the pebble beach. I try to think of having handfuls of popcorn stuffed down my shirt in the front row of the cinema. I try to think of laughing and laughing until I'm doubled over and breathless, tears running down my cheeks.

'Libby, Libby, come on, wake up. Don't fall asleep yet.' The voice is gentle, nudging and slightly pleading.

I open my eyes and he's blurry. The man with the soft, pleading voice is slightly out of focus, and blinking doesn't seem to clear the view. My face is wet, and I'm dizzy, and I feel so cold. And it hurts everywhere all at once.

'Good girl,' he says. 'Try and keep your eyes open, OK? Try and stay awake. Do you know who I am? Do you remember me?'

'Sam,' I say, even though I don't think I am making sounds with my words. '*You're a fireman so you're called Sam.*'

He's a bit more in focus now, the blurriness is ebbing away and I can make out his features so I see his smile split the darkness of his face. 'Close enough,' he says.

'*Am I going to die?*' I ask him. Again, I'm not sure I am making

sounds of my words, but Sam The Fireman seems to understand me.

‘Not if I can help it,’ he says, and he smiles again. If he didn’t look so much like my brother, have the smooth contours of his face, his dark brown skin and bright, almost-black eyes, I could probably develop a crush on him. But that’s what you’re meant to do with heroes, isn’t it? You’re supposed to fall in love with them.

‘*Is the car going to explode?*’ I ask, more out of interest than fear.

‘No. That only really happens in films.’

‘*That’s what I told Jack. I don’t think he believed me.*’

‘Tell me about him.’

‘Jack?’

‘Yes. You were telling me before.’

‘Jack . . .’

When I think of Jack, I try not to think about the locked cupboard without a key that sits in the basement of the house that’s meant to be our home. I try not to think of him curled up alone in the dark, crying as he watches old movies. I try not to think of sitting opposite him at dinner and asking myself when he started to feel like a stranger. And I try not to wonder when time is going to stretch its healing arms towards him and make him feel whole so he can truly open his heart to me.

‘Libby, Libby, come on now. Tell me about your husband.’

‘*Can you hear me?*’ I ask Sam The Fireman, because I’m fascinated that he seems to be able to when I can’t hear myself.

‘I can lip-read.’

‘*So you drew the short straw, did you? Got stuck with me.*’

‘It’s not a chore.’

‘*Short straw. I said, short straw. You can’t really lip-read, can you? You’re just putting it on so you get to stay with the car. Avoid any heavy lifting.*’

He smiles again. ‘Busted. Didn’t realise I was so obvious.’

‘*Obvious is nice sometimes.*’

‘So: Jack?’

'Do you fancy him? Is that why you're going on about him?' I ask. *'I can put in a good word for you, if you want?'*

Sam The Fireman laughs. A deep, throaty laugh. 'I'm pretty sure I'm not his type. And I'm a one hundred per cent sure he's not my type.'

'Ahhh, go on. You shouldn't be so closed off. He wasn't my type when I first met him. But look at us now: him with one dead wife and another on the way.'

'You're not going to die, Libby,' he says sternly. He is cross with me all of a sudden. And I'm tired all of a sudden. I hurt all over, but especially one side of my head, and my nose. Actually, all that side of my body hurts and I can't move it properly. And I'm cold. I really want to sleep so that this pain and coldness goes away. You can't hurt in your sleep, can you?

'Libby, Libby, Libby!' he says again. 'Stay awake, please. Jack's waiting for you. He's refusing to go to the hospital until he knows you're safe. It's all going to be OK.'

'You're a nice man,' I say to him. He's so nice I don't want to upset him by telling him how much it hurts. He doesn't want to listen to me whining on. I just want to sleep. I just want to close my eyes and go to sleep—

'The lads are going to start cutting soon, Libby. After that, you'll go straight to the hospital where they'll look after you. OK? But I need you to stay awake while they're cutting. Do you hear me, Libby? Do you understand what I'm saying?'

'I understand everything,' I say. *'I'm the most understanding person on Earth – just ask Jack.'*

'There's going to be a lot of noise in a few seconds. I need you to stay awake while it's happening. OK?'

'Stay awake.'

The world is screeching, the car is screaming at me. It is being sliced apart, torn from around me and it is screaming out in agony. It wants the pain to stop, and I want the noise to stop. I want to sleep. I just want to sleep. I close my eyes and rest my head.

When I think of Jack, I try to remember the way we used to

sleep together: our bodies like two pieces of a living jigsaw, slotted so perfectly together the gaps looked like tricks of the imagination. I try not to think when I started to wonder, as we climbed into bed at night, if he wished for even a moment I was someone else.

When I think of Jack—

July, 2008

'I think you and this car are going to be very happy together,' Gareth told me. Gareth was one of those men who was your best friend when you were sitting in front of him, being convinced to part with your cash, but if you saw him in a pub or a club he'd not only ignore you, he and his mates – all of them old enough to know better – would take the piss out of you. Would judge your looks, your weight, your sense of dress, because you did not live up to the porn-star ideal he held in his head.

It was safe to say, having been in his company for forty minutes or so, I did not like Gareth.

I curled my lips into my mouth and managed a smile. I wanted this bit to be over. I wanted to pay the deposit, to give him my details and then to leave here – hopefully never to return, as I could get the car delivered after I'd made the rest of the payment by credit card over the phone.

My eyes strayed to the showroom window and to the Pacific-blue Polo sitting on the forecourt. She seemed to shine, to stand out among all the other grey, black, red and silver monsters out there. She seemed almost regal but demur with it.

Gareth was talking again so I turned back to him and forced myself to listen. I'd sort of lost interest in most things after slipping into the soft cream leather interior and taking her for a ride. My first car. I'd passed my test two weeks ago, and this was the first car I could see myself driving and that I could afford. I'd had to push for a good bargain because I had no other vehicle to trade in, but she was worth all that haggling.

‘Another masterpiece from Dorothy Koomson . . .

A must-read that will have you gripped ★★★★★’

Heat

Libby has a good life with a gorgeous husband and a home by the sea. But over time she is becoming more unsure if Jack has ever loved her – and if he is over the death of Eve, his first wife.

When fate intervenes in their relationship, Libby decides to find out all she can about the man she hastily married and the seemingly perfect Eve. But in doing so she unearths some devastating secrets. Frightened by what she finds and the damage it could cause, Libby starts to worry that she too will end up like the first woman Jack loved . . .

‘It had us all gripped from start to finish’

Woman

‘A brilliant and startling novel’

Star magazine

‘Gripping and compelling’

Closer



read your heart out with

DOROTHY KOOMSON

www.dorothykoomson.co.uk



Natural
Renewable
& Recyclable

visit littlebrown.co.uk

ISBN 978-0-7515-4350-6



uk£XX.XX

9 780751 543506 >

GENERAL FICTION

