

THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DOROTHY  
KOOMSON

I know  
what  
you've  
done



'Koomson just gets better and better'

WOMAN & HOME

DOROTHY  
KOOMSON

**I know  
what  
you've  
done**

**H**  
REVIEW

For all of us,  
however we made it through.

# Prologue

## Priscilla

### *21 Acacia Villas*

*May 2021, Brighton*

I know who is going to do it.

That is, I know the person most likely to kill me.

I'm not sure how, but I do know *why*, and I do know it's going to be soon.

Should I tell someone? Probably. But who will believe me? Until it happens, no one will care. And therein lies my problem: until I'm dead, or as close to dead as I can be, no one will believe my life is in danger. They'll think it's all petty jealousies, problems best talked out over tea and biscuits.

They will not see the bigger picture until it is splattered with my blood and stained with the crocodile tears of those who mean me harm . . . *then* there'll be investigations, *then* there'll be the pulling out all the stops to uncover the truth.

Until then, I know that someone is coming to kill me.

I know who.

I know why.

I know soon.

I just don't know how or exactly when.

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This is what happens when you know what people have done: danger stalks your every breath.

Would I do it again? Probably. It's not like I can change who I am.

So this is it. My declaration: I know who is going to kill me.

I hope I am wrong. I hope it doesn't happen or I hope that I find a way to outwit them.

That is all I have: hope.

Plain old hope.

Will it be enough?

# Part 1

# Rae

## *II Acacia Villas*

*1 June 2021, Brighton*

*KnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnock!*

Loud and unexpected, the banging at my front door makes me jump.

*KnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnock!* Comes again, louder this time. That should, technically, be impossible since the brass door knocker, something unique and beautiful when we got it six years ago, has pretty much rusted into place and hasn't been properly lifted in at least a couple of years.

*KnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnock!*

*All right, all right, all right,* I mumble, more irritated at the noise than the fact they are taking me away from the deadline I've been fighting the past week.

*KnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnock!*

It genuinely sounds like whoever is on the other side of my door is properly trying to enter my house via the door knocker.

*KnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnockKnock!*

'*There is NO NEED for all of that,*' is teetering murderously on the tip of my tongue when I yank the door open, but it evaporates when I see who is on the other side.

Priscilla.

I draw back.

Priscilla is my neighbour who lives at number 21 to our 11 Acacia Villas. And I could not be more surprised to see her standing there.

I've spoken to her a couple of dozen times – mainly, when I'm delivering her stuff that has been sent to our house by mistake, and a couple of times at our 'Neighbour-2-Neighbour Watch' meetings.

We live in a well-to-do area of Brighton and a lot of the people are 'well-spoken', but even among them Priscilla is in a different league: her clothes are always bespoke or casually designer; her black, grey and white hair is cut into the sharpest bob; her make-up is always perfectly applied – smoky eyes, glossy coloured lips, flawless foundation; and she is always – *always* – scented to perfection. From the moment I met her, I knew she held herself above us. Not just from looking at her, but also from the way she would respond to anyone saying hello to her in the street. She would look at you, ever so slightly lift her chin – so slightly, you'd barely notice – and then offer a short, curt nod, before moving on.

Even at the Neighbour-2-Neighbour Watch meetings where I got the chance to speak to her for more than two seconds, it was highly controlled – she swept in, spoke to each person in turn, asking a few perfunctory questions, often making pointed and unsettling comments, then moving on to someone else. By the time the person who had called the meeting had stood up to talk, Priscilla would have spoken to everyone, settled with no one and made sure she left before the end, so, I guessed, she wouldn't be forced to walk home with anyone.

That is why I'm confused about her being on my doorstep. What could she possibly want with me?

'Hello?' I ask cautiously.

Priscilla lives by herself in one of the biggest houses on Acacia Villas. She's older than me, maybe mid-fifties, but with what I'm sure is a



lifetime of expensive products and a commitment to skincare, her pale-cream complexion makes her look younger than my forty-eight.

Although, as my eyes sweep over her, I have to admit I've never seen her looking like this before – her usually pristine clothes are dishevelled, her hallmark bobbed hair is a bird's nest halo of messiness, her eye make-up is like a Rorschach pattern smudged under her eyes, while her trademark glossy lipstick (today's colour is pink) is smeared from her mouth to her right cheek. Her usually dewy skin is a blotchy mass of sweat.

'Are you all right?' I ask, worried and a little scared. *Why is she here?* bolts through my head again.

'I know what you've done,' she gasps, her voice laboured, as if speaking is difficult, arduous, painful.

'What did you say?' I ask her.

Instead of replying, she sways dramatically on her pink, heeled shoes and I realise all of a sudden that all it'll take is for her weight to be off balance for a moment too long and she'll topple backwards down the stone steps leading up to our front door, possibly breaking something on the way.

Priscilla pants and gasps a while longer before saying again, 'I know what you've done . . . I know what all of you have done.' She suddenly thrusts what she's holding in her arms at me, and it takes me a moment to work out what it is: a book. A large blue hardback notebook, the type Clark uses to write his notes in. But this one is thick, the cover battered and worn, pieces of paper stuffed into its pages bulking it out even more.

'It's . . . it's all in here . . . I know what you've all been up to.'

'What are you talking about?' I ask her, not taking the book she is holding out to me. 'What's going on?'

She doubles over so suddenly, so violently, almost guillotining herself in half on the book in her hands.

I reach for her, but she brushes me away before slowly uncurling herself to shove the book at me again. 'Take this,' she orders. 'It's all in there . . . Who's done this . . . Why . . . It's all in there . . . Take it . . . Take it and find out who tried to kill me.'

I don't take the book – why would I? – instead I say, 'You're not making any sense, Priscilla. Look, come in. Have a cup of tea. Is there anyone you want me to call for you? Anyone who can come and be—'

'No,' she wails with such a strangled voice, it's as though someone has their hand around her throat and is squeezing tight. 'No . . . time . . . attacked . . . attacked.'

She sways again and this time the force throws her weight completely off balance, and she starts to fall. Without thinking, my hand snaps out to grab her and my fingers close around her bicep. In the beat that follows, the revulsion of having to touch her – *anyone* – shudders through me. *I can't do this*, I decide, and my fingers are desperate to let her go, to just let her fall, while I dash to the bathroom to scrub my hands. *This is a nightmare, I can't just touch someone like this.*

Before I can snatch my hand away in disgust, Priscilla lifts her gaze to meet mine. Her usually aloof blue eyes are tainted with terror, full of fear. She is scared. That is it: she is scared. Something bad has happened to her, something bad is still happening to her, and she is scared. I can't release her. I have issues that spark my anxiety, but I can't just let her fall and live with myself, especially not when I know that type of acute fright in her eyes, and so instead, I pull Priscilla towards me over the doorstep.

Once in my corridor, she lets out a silent scream and folds in half, dropping the book, which spins halfway across our golden, oak-floored hallway.

It is horrible to see what is happening to her; dreadful to watch and be so powerless to help.

'Are you saying someone attacked you?' I ask gently, not sure whether to cuddle her, ease her onto the ground or leave her be.

'Trust no one,' she manages between gasps, answering an entirely different question. 'Not even *him*.'

*Him?* Does she mean Clark? My husband?

I don't understand any of this – why has she come here in this state when she could have called an ambulance or the police? And why me of all people? I'm sure there are other people who live on this stretch of Acacia Villas that she's known longer and she can trust more.

'Trust—' Her breathing is so heavy now, forced, strained, awkward, that a new terror shoots through my heart. She's going to die. In my hallway. *In my hallway. Not only will that be horrific for her and those who love her, I will not be able to live here any more.* I can't let that happen.

'I'll call an ambulance!' I cry, before I rush down the corridor and partially trip on her book. I stop to scoop it up and then continue into the kitchen. Dumping the book on the table in front of the unit nearest the door, I snatch the house phone from its cradle by the stereo. It doesn't bleep, which means . . . I check the display . . . yup, it's dead. Momentarily furious, I notice someone has unplugged the phone to plug in the stereo but didn't bother to put the phone back on charge when they'd finished. Just yesterday, when the phone had beeped a warning that it was running low on battery, I ignored it. It wasn't important. I have my mobile. No one calls me on the landline except 'Your computer has been hacked' creeps and very occasionally, my mother. So no, I didn't need to worry about the house phone being charged. *And now look. Now look!*

My heart is racing and my body is trembling. This is bad. This is very, very bad. A terrible situation has landed – *literally* – on my doorstep and rather than being able to sort it efficiently, I have to run upstairs to grab my mobile, causing more delay.

I practically throw the handset down and rush back to go upstairs for my mobile, completely forgetting about the handset in the living room. I'm almost halfway down the corridor before it registers that my hallway is empty. Completely empty.

The front door is wide open, but there is no Priscilla, there is no sign that she was ever there.

I stop and stare, shock mingling with the adrenalin whizzing around my body. 'Where is she?' I ask myself out loud. 'Where did she go?'

*How long was I in the kitchen? I think. Because you don't go from being pretty much at death's door to completely disappearing . . . unless . . .*

Unless it never happened. Unless I imagined the whole thing.

No, surely I can't have? Surely not.

I stand very still in the middle of my wide hallway, staring at the open front door, and trying to work out what is going on. And what I should do next.

The thing is, if I shut the door and go back to what I was doing, it could be a sign that I am admitting there is something wrong with me. I mean, there must be for me to have conjured up something so detailed and terrifying and realistic about Priscilla.

But on the other hand, if I go outside to see if I can spot Priscilla, then I could be either taking a step towards actively seeking out the trouble she brought to my door . . . or immersing myself even deeper into the delusion I have conjured up.

*What do I do? What's the best thing to do?*

*Right, the grown up part of me decides. What I need to do is shut this door and pretend none of this ever happened. I won't think about it and I certainly won't talk about it. I am going to put Priscilla out of my mind until I hear something else about her.*

I'm about to shut the door, when my eyes snag on a smudge of something against the magnolia-painted wall of our hallway near where Priscilla initially stood. The faintest hint of red. *Blood? Is that blood?*

I go to step closer to have a proper look, when a flash of pink catches my eye from outside. I peer at the pink at the bottom of my grey stone steps: a shoe. The type Priscilla was wearing.

Maybe I'm not going crazy after all, maybe she was here.

From somewhere to the right of the house, a shout cuts through the Tuesday afternoon quiet. Right now, most people are out shopping, or working, or exercising. Lots of us who worked from home before it was forced on us, now deliberately go out to sit in cafés and libraries and shared office spaces rather than be trapped at home after more than a year of doing it. I don't mind being at home – I know it's safe, I know it's clean, I know I very rarely have to interact with people and have my anxieties triggered.

I pause, strain my ears, wondering if I did hear a shout or not?

'Help!' comes again. A man's voice, again shouting: 'Help!'

Cautiously, I leave my hallway and go down the stone steps. At the bottom the pink shoe is lying on its side waiting to be rescued, and just to the right of my gate is its twin, lying on its opposite side but waiting just as patiently to be picked up.

Now on the pavement, I can see clearly where the shout is coming from: one of my male neighbours is leaning over someone. Without my glasses, it takes me a moment to properly realise that it's Priscilla on the ground.

DOROTHY KOOMSON

‘It’s Priscilla!’ Dunstan, my neighbour, yells when he spots me, standing there frozen and, basically, useless. ‘She’s hurt! Get an ambulance!’

*Get an ambulance. Get an ambulance. Get an ambulance.* It’s like I know the words but I can’t get them to connect in my head. I can’t get myself to understand what to do.

‘Rae!’ Dunstan shouts, his voice loud and stern. ‘Wake up! Get an ambulance! I think she’s dying!’

That startles me out of my stupor, puts words into my brain in a place where they connect and I understand what actions I need to take.

Spinning on my sock-covered feet, I run back up the stone steps, into my house and then dash up to my office to get my mobile and dial 999.

# Rae

## *II Acacia Villas*

*1 June 2021, Brighton*

Dunstan and I stand at the bottom of my steps, both of us awkward, acting as though we've been on a date that hasn't gone very well, *but* we both fancied each other so we slept together and now we're both desperate to get away so we can properly blame the other person for how bad the non-sex part had been.

Dunstan lives in a flat around the corner at number 36. I'm pretty sure Dunstan is his surname, but I haven't heard anyone call him anything else; I think he even introduces himself as Dunstan.

There isn't much to say to each other. The air is only just calming down, the molecules seeming to settle like soft-falling snow after the violence of the ambulance people trying to revive and then save an unconscious Priscilla, and I think we're both trying to formulate what to say, or even what to think. There wasn't much time to talk before and now we're not sure what to say. I keep wanting to say out loud that I wished I smoked or didn't mind drinking in front of my children, because I could do with a drink and/or a ciggie right now.

After I'd called the ambulance, I had returned – with shoes and gloves on – to wait with them. Dunstan had continually taken her pulse as though he knew what he was doing, and I'd had nothing to do but

hold her hand saying soothing things – at least, I hoped they were comforting and not just generic and dull. Then when the ambulance pulled up and the paramedics took over, we lurked in the background, answering the questions we could and generally feeling utterly useless.

I am a freelance magazine and newsletter editor and Dunstan is a policeman – not sure of the grade or anything – so neither of us had anything to offer. But we exchanged looks several times when the paramedics kept repeating that her injuries – mainly on the back of her head from where she'd been hit quite hard, apparently – didn't match the wildly fluctuating vital signs.

The ambulance people stayed for a long time trying to stabilise Priscilla, and nothing had really worked. In the end they carefully loaded her into their vehicle and took her away.

Clark, my husband, approaches at a near run because our two dogs – Yam and Okra – are dragging him along as they bound home. The funny part of that is they are Yorkshire Terriers who are actually quite small for their breed. But from day one they have had the ability and stubbornness of much bigger dogs, and even someone as big and strong as Clark sometimes struggles to not be swept along by them. 'Dunstan,' Clark says with a nod, coming to a halt near us. 'What's up?'

I shoot my husband of twelve years a 'where do I even start' look and he instantly understands that something huge has happened and tries to pull the dogs back on their leads so they don't get involved. Yam, who has been a good girl since she arrived with her human dad, slinking around Clark's ankles like a snake, suddenly decides that she doesn't actually like Dunstan. She's looked at him, assessed his smell and his physique – all of which are more than acceptable to most humans – and has decided she's not impressed. In fact, she is completely unimpressed and she needs to express that displeasure – loudly.



She plants her back legs wide, sits back, lowers her tail and starts to remonstrate at him, telling him what she thinks of him in no uncertain barking terms. Okra, on the other hand, has made a similar assessment of the man standing with me and has been taken in completely by him, so much so, she wants to get as close as possible to him and starts to strain on her lead, her front paws in the air as she tries to get to him.

‘Stop it, girls,’ Clark says.

The reactions of our dogs seems to wake up Dunstan from the silent stupor he has been standing with me in, and he bends to chuckle Okra under her chin, blows a wry kiss to a still-complaining Yam and then nods a goodbye to Clark and me. His gaze lingers on me, asking, I think, if I’m all right because he certainly isn’t. I nod in reply, while trying to express that I am not OK either.

‘Yam, stop it,’ Clark says again, this time sounding more absent and disengaged because he knows the barking will soon stop now the source is walking away.

My husband is wearing his usual work fug; it sits on his broad shoulders like a heavy, velvet cloak that he has to drag home with him every night. I can’t imagine who he’s spoken to today, what stories he’s heard and how he’s tried to resolve those issues that are, technically, nothing to do with him. Being a property solicitor you’d think that it would be very straightforward and emotionless, but the buying and selling of people’s homes, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, has so much emotion, sentiment and feelings of identity wrapped up in it, that he often acts like an unpaid therapist to his clients as he gets the necessary paperwork in order.

Clark used to travel to London three days a week after we moved to Brighton six years ago, but after the period when we were all forced to work at home for months on end, Clark had needed office space

outside the house. We were fortunate to have a house big enough that while we were all at home, it wasn't as difficult for us to work under the same roof as it was for some. He still has an office upstairs but when we were all allowed out again after the first lockdown, Clark declared, more than once, that he really needed a way to physically separate work from family life. He needed that commute, even if – like now – it was a fifteen-minute stroll along the seafront to a building that had been converted to accommodate lots of small offices with a communal café-type area downstairs.

He needed the decompression time, he told me. I understood completely. And, because he was getting a nice space to himself in a building full of other people who'd also had to reassess their working environment, it'd been agreed he take our two Yorkies with him every day. ('Agreed' makes it sound like I gave him a choice. If he wanted out of the house during working hours, then he took the dogs with him, that was the deal.)

'What's gone on?' Clark asks as we climb the steps together, his gaze constantly going to Dunstan's retreating form.

We enter the house and 'Oh, it's—' I begin, but my sharing of my despair is cut short by Yam, the bigger of the two dogs, making a dash for the stairs the second Clark drops her lead.

'Oh, what!' he says, letting go of Okra's lead, causing her to make a similar dash for freedom. Our one-year-old puppies are not allowed upstairs, which is precisely why they rush up there whenever they get the chance. I'm always telling Clark as well as our daughters, Bria and Mella, to hold on to the leads until they're in the kitchen to stop them darting upstairs like it is the gateway to doggie wonderland.

Clark looks at me, the expression on his handsome face appealing for me to do my usual dash up after our dogs. Out of everyone, I am the

one who hates dog hair all over the house the most, so I am the one who is always running to catch them and bring them back. Today, my other half is out of luck. Even with the expert way his beautiful liquid-brown eyes gaze at me, and his full, delicious lips are twisted to make him seem vulnerable, I ain't playing.

I will not be running up after dogs today.

In the second or two after he realises that his 'puppy dog' expression is not going to work on me, Clark dashes up the stairs, calling after the dogs as he goes.

As I turn away, the smudge of blood confronts me. And it immediately turns my stomach. It reminds me of the stillness of Priscilla's features as they fitted an oxygen mask over her face, the way the paramedics kept changing places as they worked on her. She might be dead now, for all I know. And I might be the last person to have held her hand before she died.

That reminder catapults me into the toilet under the stairs, where I rip off my burgundy gloves and dump them into the small washing basket under the sink. I pump copious amounts of organic peppermint handwash over my fingers and palms, before foaming them up and scrubbing and scrubbing until my hands have got some semblance of cleanliness back.

Once my hands are as clean as they can be without being dunked in bleach, I head for the kitchen and as I move, I realise a cold, burning-hot sensation has taken over my body – I am cold and burning hot at the same time, my muscles quivering out the disparity as I move. I think I'm in slight shock. All of this with Priscilla, being confronted by her mortality, has shaken me. It's one of the worst things that has ever happened.

I am almost halfway across the room when I see it.

DOROTHY KOOMSON

Sitting on the table, where I threw it as I went to grab the house phone, is the thing that Priscilla tried to give me earlier.

The item that ended up on the floor and I scooped up on the way to get help.

The diary.

The book of everyone's secrets.

# Nora

## *Attending Paramedic, Acacia Villas Incident*

*1 June 2021, Brighton*

‘I don’t get it – we’ve stabilised the head wound. Why is she still so tachycardic?’

Nora Helling has been a paramedic for fifteen years and she still finds ways to be surprised. She often feels that she’s seen every type of injury the human body can experience, but then she’ll be called to another emergency and there will be something she hasn’t seen before.

Like this woman. Fifty-something, white female. From one of the posh roads in Brighton. Assault victim, not sexual, an easy-to-treat wound, not much blood loss. And yet, she keeps crashing. Her vitals erratic, her heart promising to either race its way out of her chest or stop beating altogether. Nothing they do is working for any length of time. ‘Her heart rate is all over the place,’ Nora calls to her partner. ‘She seemed stable then her vitals just went haywire again. There’s something else going on. What is it, though?’

‘Poison?’ replies Fenn, the paramedic driving the ambulance.

Nora shakes her head. ‘If it was a poison, she’d most likely be dead by now. And she doesn’t have anything to indicate it is – no discolouring of her lips or nails or skin.’

‘Maybe it’s a slow-acting poison? One we’re not familiar with? Either way, we’re going to have to call the police.’

‘Surprised those two didn’t while they were waiting for us to arrive,’ Nora replies. ‘But wait, are you saying someone tried to poison her and then caved her head in just to be sure?’

Nora looks over the patient on the stretcher in front of her. The rush of an emergency rarely allows her to do this: to look at a person, see them in serenity. Even with her face obscured by an oxygen mask and her top ripped open to put the pads on to monitor her heart, she is still beautiful.

This is one of those surprises for Nora. This woman – Priscilla Calvert, the others called her – didn’t look like the sort of woman anyone would hate enough to try to murder – *twice*. Assault, that’s the sort of thing that happens all the time. But possibly poison? That is intentional. That is planned. That is executed. And this Priscilla *really* doesn’t look like the sort of person you would try to murder once, let alone twice.

‘Why would someone try to murder her twice?’ Nora says out loud, not really expecting an answer.

‘Why do people do anything? You’ve been doing this long enough to know that people will do anything for any reason.’

‘True,’ Nora says. But that doesn’t seem enough. There has to be more to this than that. There has to be a proper explanation. Yes, she’s constantly surprised – by the human body, by what happens to it, by the things that humans do – but at times like this, she isn’t just surprised. She is also baffled. Appalled. And ever so sad.

# Rae

## *II Acacia Villas*

*1 June 2021, Brighton*

I've been standing here staring at this book my neighbour gave me for a long time. More than anything, I can't believe I just tossed it onto the table without wiping it down with bleach first. If Clark had done that I would have had a breakdown! The thought of all those germs and bacteria and viruses crawling over the table where we sit to eat would have fired up my anxiety – and my nerves and fears would have twisted themselves so tightly inside I would have had to clean the entire house.

I was distracted at the time, though. I'd been trying to help a woman who I thought was going to die in my corridor. But now this whole matter has moved on and away from me, I'm confronted with this.

*What should I do with it?*

I can't touch it, obviously. What if the fingerprints of the person who attacked her are on it? What if I pick it up and get rid of the other person's fingerprints and the police don't believe me when I say I didn't attack her because mine are the only ones on there?

I can't touch it, but it can't stay here. Not on the table, not in this house.

I hear Clark chasing one of the dogs around Bria and Mella's bedroom, which is above the kitchen, the dog's little legs beating out a

comedic drumbeat as it darts from place to place, no doubt seeking socks, her favourite thing in the world after chewing on my long cardigans. I'm guessing, because I can only hear one dog's pawsteps, that Clark has got one already and any minute now he's going to capture the other, descend the stairs like a triumphant returning soldier and find me standing here, staring at this thing.

And he's going to ask me what it is.

And I'll say . . . I'll say . . .

I'll say, it's at times like this I wished I smoked or didn't have a problem drinking in front of my children because I need one of those things right now.

Slowly, because it feels like a violation simply looking at it, let alone touching it, I set aside my fingerprint worries and pick up the book. It's heavy, although probably a fraction of the weight of the secrets it holds, if Priscilla meant what she said and she honestly does know what everyone has done. I weigh it in my hands like I'm getting ready to pitch it across the room and need to check its form first.

I should look, shouldn't I? See if they are just the mad ramblings of a person who spends far too much time on her own or if there is substance to her claims; a hook to hang many, many revelations on.

*But then* . . . if someone read my 'diary', meaning a few private thoughts I jotted down, or even the letter I once wrote Clark because I thought he was getting ready to dump me . . . if someone read either of those, or simply put eyes on them in a meaningful way, I would be horrified. Just the thought of it sends spikes of horror shuddering through me.

Priscilla *did* give it to me, though. She *did* tell me to read it. It's not like I came across this by accident or went hunting for it. She *wanted* me to know what was in there. She said it would help to disclose who



had done this to her. And because of that, this is probably something I should pass straight on to the police.

*BUT . . .* I am nosy as hell.

I am nosy as hell and I'm sure a peek, a little flick through, won't hurt.

Before I delay things any longer by spinning off into another round of pros and cons, my hands pull open the book at a random page. I should probably start at the beginning, but I'll end up getting drawn in if I do, and I *don't* want Clark to catch me doing this because this feels like something that needs to be kept secret for now.

My eyes scan the page in front of me: in her small, scratchy but neat handwriting, Priscilla has scrawled a conversation. I can't work out who it's between without flicking back, but it's something to do with the bins. One person going on at another person for encroaching on the space outside the front of their house, for moving their bin far too close to the other's boundary. And because this thing kept happening, there was now bad blood between the two households.

*This is it? This is what she came to my door clinging on to after she'd been attacked? Literally: 'Your bin is too close to my house?' And page after page of it, too?*

Well, at least that's cured my shaking. Priscilla is clearly a fantasist and I was sucked in. For a few moments, I was as ridiculous as her. I flick on a few more pages, and it's more of the same. More about bins, about dogs encroaching on property, parties that were too loud and too long. I was wrong about Priscilla. She wasn't the local sophisticate, she was the local nosy parker. She used the position of her house, on the corner plot of the bend of Acacia Villas and its unique view of pretty much all of the street and the houses on it (even the ones around the bend), to watch people. To write down the things they did and

said. To create this ‘dossier’ that suckered me in for a few seconds. How sad am I?

I flick on a bit more, my eyes casually scanning each page to see if there’s anything of real interest, anything that might be a devastating secret. Nothing. I toss the book on the table. Imagine if I’d gone to the police, clutching this in my hot little hands, telling them that Priscilla’s attacker was in those pages. Just imagine their faces, the side-eyeing, the gentle suggestion that I might need to get—*Hang on*, I think. *HANG ON*.

I immediately snatch up the book again, furiously flicking through to get back to where I was. *Did I just see . . . ? Did I just— Yes, yes, I did see that.*

Clark Whickman is written there bold as day, clear as spring water.  
*Clark Whickman from number 11 Acacia Villas.*

And there, on the same page as my husband’s name, is *her* name.

# Bryony

## *24 Acacia Villas*

*1 June 2021, Brighton*

‘And so, I rather calmly told him that this wasn’t the first time it had happened and if the subscribers list was that inaccurate again, I would have to escalate the matter.’

I sit across from my husband at our immaculately laid dining table in our immaculately tidy dining room and wonder, as I do every day, if he knows how irritating his voice is.

Most things about Grayson Hinter – head of a prestigious charity trust, father of two, husband of one – are exasperating. From the supercilious smirk he’ll have had on his face as he told off his staff member to the flaccid handkerchief tucked into his jacket pocket, hiding his solitary cigarette; from the neatly cut hair on his balding head to his constant attempt to appear militarily trained when he’s never had any armed services experience, there is a lot that could rub you the wrong way about Grayson. But it’s his voice that gets to most people. He speaks a whole two seconds slower than anyone I have ever met, and when you have to listen to every single thing that has happened to him in detail every day, a slow voice and a superior attitude are just the ultimate nuisance.

And I think I might actually hate him for it.

Every day Trent, our fifteen year old, Tilly, our fourteen year old,

and I sit and listen to the detailed breakdown of his day. Whether it is instructing a member of staff how they'd made an error on one of the spreadsheets or telling someone they didn't quite qualify for assistance from their charity, we are treated to a detailed dissection and replay of it – all . . . in . . . that . . . slow . . . patronising . . . voice.

I used to love his voice. I used to adore him and everything about him; the way he spoke was calming and authoritative and I admired that about him. After the chaos of my upbringing and the instability of my family life, the calm certainty of someone who spoke slowly, spoke well, spoke often was exactly what I craved.

I stab the dark green broccoli that sits in the middle of my plate, and for a moment, just a moment, the image of snatching up my fork, pushing off the broccoli and ramming it straight through Grayson's left eyeball flashes in my head. The thought of how I would then sit back down, wipe off the blood, pick up my knife and do my level best to finish the lasagne I'd made, causes me to giggle.

I'm not known for giggling, especially not during Grayson's daily debrief, so naturally everyone around the table stops eating to look at me. Tilly and Trent are both wide-eyed, scared. No one interrupts their father like this, no one.

'You're in a rather jovial mood, darling,' Grayson says.

Tilly and Trent will have noticed, just as I have, the twitch of irritation around his mouth and eyes. He'd been on a roll with today's tale of how he had very gently and expertly knocked order into Westlann Charitable Trust (Independent Charity of the Year five years in a row) and he is not happy at being even slightly interrupted. 'What is it that is amusing you, Bryony?'

'Oh, nothing,' I reply as I try to settle my face into its usual expression of interest, instead of one that wants to keep laughing at the thought

of Grayson having a fork sticking out of his eye. Instead of Harold with an arrow in the eye, it's Grayson with a fork in his eye. 'It was just a silly thing.'

'Well, if it was a silly thing and not "nothing" as you originally stated, then do share. I'm sure all of us around the table would be delighted to hear something amusing.' My husband looks first at Trent, his younger and taller doppelganger, who, seeing his father is looking at him and expects backup, nods as though he is interested too, and then Grayson looks to Tilly, who hasn't raised her gaze from her almost full dinner plate all evening, which is par for the course.

I want to glare at Grayson across the table. I would like to whip away the napkin on my lap and drop it onto my plate of unfinished food while screaming: 'I am not a member of your staff, nor am I a person who has come to you for help that you can lord it over, so I'll thank you not to speak to me as though I am! I am your wife! Your equal! I'll thank you again to remember that!' I would then push out my chair and stomp my way up to my sewing room where I could calm down by sitting in front of my sewing machine and starting on a few orders.

In front of the sewing machine I know my physical transformation would be almost instant: my shoulders would fall, my furious heart would slow, the burning blood would cool in my veins.

I would love to do all those things but I cannot. I simply cannot.

'I'm sorry, Grayson,' I say, quietly. 'I was just—'

*BRRRIINNNGGGG . . .* The loud, intrusive chime of the doorbell interrupts my scrabbling for an explanation, and that upsets Grayson. He doesn't have time for interruptions and me being erratic. He is on a schedule to unload his day on to us and he does not like being disturbed while doing it.

‘I’ll just see who that is,’ I say, and dash for the door. Grayson obviously has a desire to know what is going on and reaches the door a moment after me.

It is he, though, who tugs open the heavy front door. I don’t think either of us could be any more surprised to find two police officers on his doorstep. On the street behind them, several police cars are parked. Along this tree-lined, leafy road, police officers are approaching different doors.

*They have come for me!* I realise, and the feeling engulfs my whole body almost straight away. *They’ve found out and they’ve come for me.*

‘Good evening, sir,’ the first officer begins. ‘Sorry to disturb you. We’re investigating a serious assault – possible attempted murder – that occurred along this road this afternoon.’

Grayson doesn’t know what to say and neither do I.

‘Do you mind if we come in and ask you a few questions?’ the officer persists.

Grayson turns his head slightly to look at me – he seems to have genuinely blanked out and is not sure which way is up.

‘Sir?’ the policeman prompts.

‘Oh, of course, of course,’ he says, recovering.

He steps aside to let the police officers in and I know that this is the beginning of the end.

# Lilly

## 47 *Acacia Villas*

*1 June 2021, Brighton*

The cork comes out of the bottle of fizz at such speed and with such force that I can tell it's been waiting to do that since it was originally stuffed in there.

I understand how it feels. That's how I've felt today. Like all the tension, the unrelenting pressure of the last few years have finally been unleashed . . . And everything has exploded.

The bubbles catch the light and they glint as I plug the cold liquid into a large wine glass. No, I shouldn't use alcohol as a crutch. Yes, I should find a way to work through all these feelings and express them in a constructive, positive way. And, yeah, F that for a game of soldiers.

I need this liquid to rampage through my body, erasing everything that has happened in the last twenty-four hours – failing that, I need it to sparkle through my veins, effervescing away anything resembling a feeling.

I shouldn't have left.

This is the conclusion I am coming to about where my life is now. Eighteen years ago, I should not have left Brighton to go and live in Italy. But at the time, when I lived in England, I vividly remember thinking: *what am I doing here? I'm just sitting around waiting to get*

*fat while obsessing about parking permits, what days the bins (recycling and general) go out and who doesn't pick up their dog's poo. Really? This is what my life is going to be?*

It's hard for me to believe, sometimes, that I was so sneery about everything. That I looked down on what was a perfectly good existence – *life* – and thought I deserved more. *Better*.

Turns out, Italy was gorgeous and fun and different. But not better. Nowhere near better, just different.

I can see that now, nearly eighteen years later, when I practically inhale a bottle of fizz at the end of every day and I spend way too much time staring at the photo of my college friends that sits on my mantelpiece – things are very rarely better, just different. I spent all that time running from the me I thought I was becoming; only to find myself here anyway and not hating it as much as I thought I would.

The fact I am now stuck and scared; terrified and trapped is because I went away. If I'd stayed, I don't think it would have come to this.

If I had stayed, I'd still be with him. And he would have rescued me from all of this before it even began.

### *1991, Leeds*

In our halls, he was the coolest. One of those guys who was always on the periphery of our group and lots of other groups, but was intriguing enough to catch my eye. I had noticed him. When he walked into the canteen at breakfast, when he sat in the common room at lunch, when he walked into the on-campus student bar, I would notice him. I would smile at him. He would smile back. And I'd wonder what it would be like to kiss him – the big guy with the cool name and sweet smile.

It was never going to happen, though, I'd kind of accepted that. He



was the guy I was destined to crush on from afar. Until that night I ran out of money and couldn't go into town with my friends. I'd hoped that one of them would lend me the cash, or even cover me, but every one of them just kept avoiding my eye, and ignoring the sad-girl sighs as they got ready and gambolled off to get the bus, leaving me alone. Despite the strong feelings of poor me – literally and emotionally – I was not going to sit up in my room on my own, no way. I was *not* that sad person who spent Friday night alone, so I went to the student bar, found some people I vaguely knew who didn't mind buying me the odd pint, then I moved on to the students' union, where someone paid the two pounds for me to get in and another someone bought me a few drinks. I felt bad getting people to buy me stuff when I couldn't immediately pay them back, but I would pay them back. I wasn't someone who wouldn't – eventually – stand her round.

I had just been considering my options – find someone else to get me another drink or go home to bed since I was more than a little drunk – when he walked in. I was standing right by the door, so when I grinned at him, he saw me and smiled back in recognition and didn't flinch when I leapt at him for a hug.

'That was unexpected,' he said, a little confused as he let me go.

The music thumped loudly, and the perfect mix of snakebite (cider and lager) and the drags of cigarettes I'd had were working nicely to make me bold. 'You're gorgeous,' I slurred, my arms slung like a stole around his neck. 'Has anyone ever told you that?'

'No one as drunk as you,' he teased.

'Do you have a girlfriend?' I asked, having to get closer to him because the music seemed to have gone up a notch and I couldn't hear him from that far away. I mean, it was a real chore, pushing my body closer to him and my face nearer to his.

‘No,’ he replied.

‘Do you want one?’ I persisted. Shouldn’t he have kissed me by now? *Do you have a girlfriend?* was literally code for ‘kiss me’.

‘Are you offering yourself up for the position?’ he joked.

*Oh my goodness! Was he really that slow on the uptake? Because that was going to irritate me in a couple of hours, let alone in the year or so I’d been planning on us being together.*

‘Because if you are, then you’ve got the position,’ he said, and covered my lips with his in a movie-style kiss.

### *1 June 2021, Brighton*

Most of these mouthfuls of Prosecco – well-priced, delicious and on repeat order from the local wine dealer – don’t even register as they go down.

If I hadn’t gone to Italy in search of something ‘better’ eighteen years ago, how would my life have panned out? Because all that stuff I ran away from – it’s still here, and I didn’t realise that just because I didn’t care about things like parking permits and the days the bins went out back then, didn’t mean I would never care about them. Those sort of things might have seemed boring and unimportant to someone who was young and didn’t have to care about anything other than her career, but that all changes. As you become part of a community, part of the society around you, caring about people not parking recklessly, avoiding littering, picking up after their dog, and putting the bins out on the right day is essential to making your own living environment pleasant.

Like it or not, those are the small acts of community service we all carry out to make our world better. I really wish I had the chance to explain that to past Lilly; to show her how important those things she

once sneered at actually are and how, if she'd just given them a chance, she'd still be with the love of her life.

Past Lilly, I think, assumed that the pause button would be hit on life in England while she was away; that nothing would change and she would be able to slot back into the life she had left behind when she was ready. Everyone and everything would stay exactly the same, would wait where they were in their lives for me to return and we could carry on where we left off.

None of it happened like that, of course. The world kept on turning, the people continued to live and learn and love and hate and succeed and fail.

It wasn't even an issue, at first, that he didn't want to come with me. That he wanted to stay here and carry on living the same old life I hated so much. I initially assumed that since his position at work had stalled, and since he hardly saw his family who lived in London, and since we hadn't had even one conversation about moving to a bigger place nor starting a family and/or getting married, that he would very quickly decide to come with me.

I was a little arrogant, too, I suppose.

I stare at the picture on the mantelpiece, drinking in his smile and the way he is looking at me as I take a photo of the group.

We were meant to make long distance work, but in all honesty, I thought he would come with me – that a month or two without me would have him packing his bags and heading over. Because he always said he couldn't live without me. But the months became years, and long distance was what we worked on, and long-distance difficulties were what we put it down to when things started to drift. When you love each other, you don't think that what will wear you both out is the constant having to get to know someone again – how to be with them,

live with them, relax with them – every ten days when you get to spend time together.

We tried to keep our relationship going but once the ‘drifting apart’ process started (not speaking as regularly, things coming up that stop visits, long, uncomfortable silences on the phone, several calls where you forget to say, ‘I love you’), I realised it meant the rot had set in. There was no way to stop it – it was like a virulent fungus and it needed to be excised. What I didn’t want was our previous years together to be washed away on tides of resentment and bitterness, on forgetting how much we meant to each other as our relationship broke down, so I said it was over and we should finish it.

And suddenly, he started talking about moving to be with me, he begged me to come home, he suggested we find a country in the middle where we could both base ourselves and travel from . . . But all of this came *after I ended it* . . . nothing was too much trouble or impossible for him after that, as long as we stayed together.

By that point, though, I knew that splitting up was the best thing for both of us so I stuck to my guns: we were split, we should stay split. And we would both be able to move on.

*I was wrong.* This thought flitters across the surface of my mind before it skitters down to settle in the pit of my stomach. That happens every time I think about him.

*I was wrong. I should have stuck it out. I shouldn’t have given him the chance to marry someone else.*

I take three big gulps of Prosecco, wait for the familiar sensation of fuzzy warmth to effervesce in my stomach. I stretch out my neck by moving it side to side, pull air into my lungs, force my body to relax, to be calm. Slowly I release. Let go. Let the booze swirl itself into my veins and unhook me from stress and tension.

At times like this, I miss him. Properly miss him and who I was with him. I've never had someone treat me as well as he did, I've never been with someone who makes me feel as real as he did. Yes, it's been a good fifteen years since we split, but I know all this stuff would not be happening now if I was still with him. I would be safe. I would be secure. I would not walk around with an anvil of fear where my heart should be.

Everything is spiralling out of control. And because it's a slow spin, the revolutions gradual, I've been lulled into thinking that the crash, when it happens, will be fine. That I'll walk away without a scratch; in fact that the crash may not happen at all.

But it's coming. The tension of its approach, the vibes thrown out there before the collision, have been hanging in the air for a while now. I've been ignoring them, but it's coming, it's definitely coming.

The thought of *that* has me lifting the glass to my lips to take the biggest gulp yet.

*KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!* on the front door stops the wine glass just before it hits my lips.

That is not the knock of a delivery driver or someone who knows me; there is nothing efficient or pleasant about it, it is something officious and slightly threatening.

The anvil in my chest expands then drops. What if it's the police? What if they've finally come for me? What if this is the start of the crash?

My glass makes a small clinking sound as I place it on the table to go to the door. Is that noise, a tiny insignificant sound, what I'm going to remember after I answer the door? Is that the last sound I'm going to hear as a free woman?

There are two of them: one male, one female.

DOROTHY KOOMSON

Both seem inexplicably tall. Both have the same razor-cut black hair, muddy brown eyes and sallow skin.

‘We’d like to talk to you about an incident that took place on this street earlier today,’ one of them says.

I’m not sure which one of them speaks because my mind is racing, I am desperately trying to get my story together, get all the stuff straight in my head.

I need to get my story straight.

I need to get my story straight but all I can hear is the clink of my glass on the table, and how I knew it was going to be the last sound I remember hearing as a free woman.

‘Do you have a few minutes to answer our questions?’ one of the police officers asks.

I nod and stand aside, the sound of glass on wood tinkling loudly in my ears.

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**July 2021**



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