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Opening Extract from...

THE BRIGHTON MERMAID

Written by **Dorothy Koomson**

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THE BRIGHTON MERMAID

Dorothy Koomson is the award-winning author of fourteen novels including more than twelve *Sunday Times* bestsellers. Her books have been translated into more than thirty languages and she continues to be a method writer whenever possible. She wrote *The Brighton Mermaid* in part as a love letter to the place she's called home for more than ten years. And she hopes you enjoy it.

Dorothy Koomson in order: *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*.

Praise for *The Brighton Mermaid*

'Another brilliant, suspenseful read from a master storyteller'
Candis

'With a cracking plot to boot – this **brilliant read will hook you from the start**'
Fabulous

'This will **creep its way under your skin** and stay there long after you finish the final few gut-twisting chapters. **Brilliant**'
Heat

'**Tense** and **emotional**'
My Weekly

'**Thrilling**!'
Take a Break

'Koomson is the queen of the big reveal, and takes her time slowly building the tension in this **truly gripping** read'
Sun

'Has all the classic elements of the big beach novel. It adds **extra depths to the whodunit** in terms of characterisation and emotional impact, and races to a conclusion that had me **turning the pages as if they were on fire**'
Viva

'A hot read'
Woman

'Just when you think you know what happened and you have your suspects a turn of the page will prove you wrong. This novel is **fast paced** and a great read'
Woman's Way

'The novel **simmers with tension** and **an undercurrent of darkness**'
Daily Express

'*The Brighton Mermaid* is a **breathtakingly brilliant**, twisty belter of a book and you need to read it!'
Miranda Dickinson, author of *Somewhere Beyond the Sea*

'**Fast-paced, dark** and **simmering** – can't recommend this novel enough'
Caroline Smailes, author of *The Drowning of Arthur Braxton*

'**Gripping, twisty, scary** and **uplifting** in spite of it all . . . thriller lovers, this one is for YOU'
Cathy Cassidy, author of *Love From Lexie*

'A big, meaty read with a **complex, multi-layered plot**'
Vaseem Khan, author of the *Baby Ganesh Detective Agency* series

'All the twists and turns and characters in the story **totally engaged me**'
Trisha Ashley, author of *The House of Hopes and Dreams*

What the bloggers are saying…

'A bloody awesome read! I have **been on the EDGE of my seat**!'
Random Things Through My Letterbox

'A brilliant exploration of the **dark side of human nature** and the secrets people hide'
Life Has A Funny Way

'Emotive and thrilling this **makes for a compelling read**'
Charlene Jess

'It was an excellent, **absorbing read**, and there's lots of content to sink your teeth into'
Bookbag

'If you're looking for a book where you won't be able to guess where it's heading, where you are on the edge of your seat and **cannot guess the ending** then this is the book for you!'
Needing Escapism

'I'm convinced it's this intimacy between reader and character that makes Dorothy's stories so gripping. In the case of *The Brighton Mermaid* **the suspense, thrill and fear was palpable**'
Tiger Tales

'I've been **left reeling** from this book that packs a humongous punch. The story builds steadily at first but when I sat down for the last 30% this evening, I didn't expect anything like what I read'
Rachel's Random Reads

'As always Dorothy Koomson **uses a number of hard-hitting issues** in *The Brighton Mermaid* but all are deeply woven into the story-line, not one appearing placed for effect alone'
Cleopatra Loves Books

'The premise for this story is clever, intriguing and a perfect hook. The **lingering sense of threat** and **ominous atmosphere** builds gradually . . . kept me gripped and on the edge of my seat'
Bibliomanic

'Wow this is one of the best books I've ever read. It was **mesmerising** from beginning to end'
Sincerely BookAngels

'**Plenty of twists** and turns that kept me **on the edge of my seat** and unable to put the book down'
Opinionated Emz

THE BRIGHTON MERMAID

DOROTHY KOOMSON



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Arrow Books
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA

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To those who are missing and those who love them.

Prologue

Saturday, 2 June

The ground is uneven and crunchy underfoot, and I stumble when I hit it. But it takes a microsecond to steady myself, to force myself upright and then to start running.

I make it off the gravel driveway, through the gap in the hedge and then out into the fields that surround the farmhouse. In this inky blackness, in the distance, I can just about make out shapes – bushes, hedges, a line of trees far, far down over the fields. I need to get to the trees. If I can get to the trees, I can hide.

Thud, thud, thud, thud! The world around me is full of their footsteps, moving across the earth, chasing me down.

My legs are stiff from where I've been lying in the same position for so long, and they protest as I try to pick up the pace, attempt to run faster over the uneven, soggy ground.

Thud, thud, thud, thud! The noise . . . the vibrations . . . They sound horribly closer now.

Thud, thud, thud, thud! There's a fire in my chest where my lungs should be, and my eyes are struggling in the darkness as it constantly changes the shape of the horizon. But I can't stop, I can't even slow down, I have to keep moving.

Thud, thud, thud, thud! Nearer and nearer.

Thud, thud, thud, thud! I need my legs to go faster. I need them to call up the muscle memory of when I used to do this, when I had to literally run for my life. I can do this. I *have* to do this. I have to reach the trees. I'll be safe there, I'll be able to hide there.

Thud, thud, thud, thud! fills my ears. *Thud, thud, thud, thud!* They're right behind me. *Thud, thud, thud, thud!* My ragged breathing, the whistle of the wind, the creak of my bones are all drowned out by it. *Thud, thud, thud, thud!*

I have to go faster. I have to—

1993

Nell

Saturday, 26 June

'Maybe she's asleep,' I said to my best friend, Jude.

We were both staring at her. She looked so soft, lying there on top of the pebbles, half in, half out of the water, her face serene. Even with the foamy tide constantly nudging at her, trying to get her to wake up, she was still; tranquil, lifeless.

'She's not asleep,' Jude said. Her voice was stern, angry almost, as though she couldn't believe I was being so stupid.

'I know she's not asleep,' I replied. 'But if I pretend she's asleep then she's not the other thing.' I couldn't bear for her to be the other thing and for me to be standing there in front of her when she was the other thing.

'She's not asleep,' Jude repeated, gentler this time. 'She's . . . she's not asleep.'

We both stood and stared.

From the promenade, I'd spotted her down on the beach, the light of the almost full moon shining down on her, and said we should check to see if she was all right. Jude had wanted us to keep going, getting back to her house after we'd sneaked out was going to be tricky enough without getting back even later than 3 a.m., which was the time now. But I'd insisted we check. *What if she'd twisted her ankle and couldn't get up? How would we feel, leaving someone who was hurt alone like that? What if she's drunk and has fallen asleep on the beach when the tide was out and is now too drunk to wake up and pull herself out of the water? How would we live with*

ourselves if we read in the paper in the morning that she'd been washed out to sea and had drowned?

Jude had rolled her eyes at me, had reminded me in an angry whisper that even though our mums were at work (they were both nurses on night duty), her dad was at home asleep and could wake up any minute now to find us gone. He'd call *my* dad and then we'd be for it. She'd grumbled this while going towards the stone steps that led to the beach. She was all talk, was Jude – she wouldn't want to leave someone who was hurt, she would want to help as much as I did. It wasn't until we'd got nearer, close enough to be able to count the breaths that weren't going in and out of her chest, that we could to see what the real situation was. And I said that thing about her being asleep.

'I'll go up to the . . . I'll go and call the police,' Jude said. She didn't even give me a chance to say I would do it before she was gone – crunching the pebbles underfoot as she tried to get away as fast as possible.

Alone, I felt foolish and scared at the same time. This wasn't meant to turn out this way. We were meant to come to the beach and help a drunk lady and then sneak back to Jude's house. I wasn't supposed to be standing next to someone who was asleep but not.

She must be cold, I thought suddenly. Her vest top was soaked through and stuck to her body like a second, clingy skin; her denim skirt, which didn't quite reach down to her knees, was also wringing wet. '*I wish I had a blanket that I could pull over you*,' I silently said to her. '*If I had a blanket, I'd do my best to keep you warm*.'

It was summer, but not that warm. I wasn't sure why she was only wearing a vest, skirt and no shoes. *Maybe*, I thought, *her shoes and jumper have already been washed out to sea.*

I leant forwards to have another look at her. I wanted to make her feel more comfortable, to move her head from resting on her left arm at an awkward angle, and stop her face from being pushed into the dozens and dozens of bracelets she wore on her arm. Thin metal ones, bright plastic ones, wood ones, black rubbery ones,

they stretched from her wrist to her elbow, some of them not visible because of where her head rested. I wanted to gently move her head off her arm and lay it instead on my rolled-up jacket. I didn't dare touch her though. I didn't dare move any nearer, let alone touch her.

Her other arm, the right one, was thrown out to one side, as if it had flopped there when she'd finally fallen asleep. That arm had only one slender silver charm bracelet, hung with lots of little silver figures. That arm's real decoration, though, was an elegant and detailed tattoo of a mermaid. My eyes wouldn't leave the tattoo, which was so clear in the moonlight. Usually when I saw tattoos they were a faded greeny-blue, etched into peach or white skin, but this one was on a girl with the same shade skin as me. Deep black ink had artistically been used to stain and adorn most of her inner forearm. I leant a little more forwards, not wanting to get too close, but fascinated enough to want to have a better look. It was truly beautiful, so incredibly detailed it looked like it had been carefully inscribed onto paper, not rendered on skin.

I could see every curl of the mermaid's short, black Afro hair; I could make out the tiny squares of light in her pupils; I could count every one of the individually etched scales on her tail, and I could see droplets of water glistening on the bodice, shaped of green seaweed, that covered her torso. The mermaid sat on a craggy grey rock, her hands demurely crossed in her lap, smiling at anyone who cared to look at her.

I couldn't stop staring at her. She was mythical, she was a picture, but she was also like a siren at whom I couldn't stop staring. In the waters beneath the mermaid's rock, there were three words in a swirling, watery script: 'I am Brighton'.