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When I Was Invisible

Written by Dorothy Koomson

Published by Century

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When I Was Invisible

Please note: This book contains a storyline
that some may find triggering.

Sounds like Dorothy Koomson . . .

Dorothy Koomson is the author of eleven novels including *That Girl From Nowhere*, *The Chocolate Run*, *The Woman He Loved Before* and *The Flavours of Love*. She's been making up stories since she was thirteen when she used to share her stories with her convent school friends.

Dorothy's first novel, *The Cupid Effect*, was published in 2003 (when she was quite a bit older than thirteen). Her third book, *My Best Friend's Girl*, was selected for the Richard & Judy Summer Reads of 2006, and her novels *The Ice Cream Girls* and *The Rose Petal Beach* were both shortlisted for the popular-fiction category of the British Book Awards in 2010 and 2013, respectively.

Dorothy's novels have been translated into over 30 languages, and a TV adaptation loosely based on *The Ice Cream Girls* was first shown on ITV1 in 2013. After briefly living in Australia, Dorothy now lives in Brighton. Well, Hove, actually.

While writing *When I Was Invisible*, Dorothy rediscovered her love for music – especially 80s tunes – and has been asking everyone she sees nowadays, 'What's the one song you're embarrassed about loving?' So, what's yours?

*For more information on Dorothy Koomson and her novels, including
When I Was Invisible (and to answer that burning question),
visit www.dorothykoomson.co.uk*

When I Was Invisible

Dorothy
KOOMSON



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As always, I would also like to say thank you to you, the reader, for buying this book.

Prologue

London, 1988

‘Class, we have a new girl joining us today.’ Everyone was sitting in rows, at their wooden desks, in their blue school uniforms. They were probably looking at me, but I was looking at my teacher. She had one ear bigger than the other (I wondered if she knew that) and her hair was so long it reached her chest. ‘Class, meet Veronica Harper.’

Lots of the children gasped, others said ‘Wow’ really loudly. I looked at the other children then. Why was my name so strange to them that they were behaving like that? Some of them were turning round in their seats to look at a girl who was staring right at me with her eyes really wide.

‘That’s right,’ my new teacher said, ‘this is the second Veronica Harper we have in this class. Except they are spelt differently. Our Veronika Harper has a k instead of a c, new Veronica Harper has a c instead of a k. Isn’t that fascinating? Two names that sound exactly the same but are spelt differently and two girls who are both eight years old, called the same thing but who look very different.’

I grinned at Veronika Harper with a k. I thought she was the prettiest girl I had ever seen.

‘Fascinating as this is, though, it’s going to become very confusing very quickly,’ my new teacher said. ‘Do they call you anything else, Veronica with a c?’

I nodded. ‘They call me Roni,’ I said very quietly.

‘Brilliant. They call Veronika with a k Nika, so that’s settled. Now, if you’d like to take your seat next to Nika, we can begin the class.’ My legs were wobbly as I walked towards the other Veronica Harper and everyone stared at me. ‘Nika, I take it you won’t mind showing our new pupil around?’ the teacher said. Nika didn’t even have a chance to say anything or nod and the teacher said: ‘Good, good.’ She stood up and went to the blackboard.

‘Nice to meet you, Veronica Harper,’ Nika whispered when I sat down at the free desk next to her.

‘Nice to meet you, too, Veronika Harper,’ I whispered back.

‘Veronika and Veronica!’ the teacher snapped without turning away from the blackboard. It was like she had super-hearing or something. ‘I hope you’re not talking. I don’t want to have to separate you both on Roni’s first day.’

‘No, Miss,’ Nika said.

‘No, Miss,’ I said.

It wasn’t possible, anyway. It wasn’t possible to separate us now because we were going to be the very best of friends.

1

Nika

Birmingham, 2016

I've been here for hours.

It's probably not been *that* long, but it feels like it. It seems like I've been sitting on this uncomfortable plastic bench with my head on my knees, my arms curled around myself, the sounds of this police station going on around me for long enough for me to feel like my life is draining away. People come and go, the officers behind the bulletproof glass of the reception desk have conversations that are a touch too far out of range for me to understand or hook myself into. Every time the door opens I am treated to a blast of the noise of the outside world, and it, like everything else, is a reminder that I probably shouldn't do this.

If I have to wait to speak to someone, then maybe it's a sign that this is not meant to be. Maybe I need to unfurl myself, stand up, walk out of here. Slip back into the world outside and disappear again – become as faceless and invisible as everyone else out there.

Maybe, because I have to wait – and the second thoughts I didn't have before I walked in here are now arriving, settling in my mind like roosting pigeons on a roof – I should admit to the absolute stupidity of this. Maybe I should be more brutally realistic with myself about what the repercussions will be, how doing this will touch the lives of everyone I know. Maybe I should stop thinking of justice

and start thinking of real life and what honestly happens to people like me.

A voice calls out my name.

Too late to run now, too late to change your mind, I think. Slowly, I raise my head, lower my legs, place my feet on the floor, my gaze seeking out the person who called my name.

I stumble a little when I am upright, but catch myself before I fall, curl my fingers into the palms of my hands, trying to hide the trembling. *No escape, no retreat. I have to go through with this now.*

‘How can I help you?’ the police officer asks. Plain clothes, some kind of detective, as I requested. He comes closer to me, but not too close. He doesn’t want to get too close to someone like me. Despite his slightly bored, uninterested expression, when he continues to speak, he sounds neutral and polite: ‘The desk officer said you wanted to talk to a detective, but you were reluctant to say exactly what it was about?’

I take a step closer, try to narrow the distance between us, so I can speak without being overheard. There is no one here now except the person behind the desk, but I still want to be careful. Quiet. *I can’t do this*, I realise. *I need to, but I can’t. I can’t open my mouth and say another word.*

The detective’s face quickly slides from ‘slightly bored’ and ‘uninterested’ into ‘perturbed’, teetering on the edge of ‘annoyed’. I am wasting his time and he does not like that.

I take a deep breath, inhale to see if I can shake off the second thoughts and recapture the certainty that brought me here. ‘I... I...’ My voice fails. *I really can’t do this.*

Unbidden, the sound, the one I first heard less than a week ago, streaks through my head, as sudden and loud and clear as the first time I heard it. It ignites every memory cell in my body with horror and I almost slam my hands over my ears again, try to shut it out.

Determined now, I firm up my fists, I strengthen the way I stand and I look the detective straight in the eye as I say: ‘I... I need to report an attempted murder.’

Nika

Birmingham, 2016

‘Sorry to keep you waiting,’ the police officer, DS Brennan, says.

I lift my head from the table. I must have dozed off. Everything was so quiet and still, almost peaceful, while I sat in the interview room and waited for him to come back, that I had closed my eyes for just a few seconds, determined simply to rest my tired, red eyes. The eye rest must have segued into a nap. Or – I stretch my back, feel the taste at the back of my throat, the heaviness of my eyes and limbs – into a sleep.

I blink heavily a few times, moisten my lips and stare at him, concentrate on what he’s about to say to me.

Before he left the room, I’d talked and talked at him, answered his very few questions, and then spoke some more. With every word I felt lighter, freer. I was reliving it all, sure, but it was liberating, too. When he left to ‘go and check on a few things’, I’d been able to unclench then. My body had almost melted into my seat.

When the police officer sits down opposite me, I notice that he’s different. He left here almost sympathetic, slightly buoyed that I was willing to talk about someone they’ve obviously had their eyes on for many, many years. Now, it is as if he has gone out of the room and changed his attitude. He is holding himself a little more reservedly, his cerulean eyes are a little colder, his expression a little more stern. He hadn’t exactly been overfriendly before – why would he be? I’m

not your average witness – but I could see him softening as I spoke to him. As I explained what had happened, what I had seen, why I’d made the decision to come here, *who* I was actually grassing up, he’d seemed slightly warmer. Now that’s all gone, replaced by the cold barrier of someone who doesn’t like to be lied to. ‘Who are you?’ he asks. Direct, to the point. ‘I mean, who are you really? Because you are not Grace Carter.’

I sit back in my seat, stare at the table that separates us as he continues to talk.

‘I went to verify your story and everything is as you say, every single detail, apart from your name and who you are. In fact, none of that checks out. I made some other calls and yes, people do know you as Grace Carter, or simply “Ace”, but I can’t find a birth certificate that matches your age, your fingerprints aren’t in the system and there’s nothing on any of our computer systems with a person of your description linked to the name Grace Carter. You are, what, thirty-five, thirty-six? And yet there isn’t a single credit card, bank account or financial record in your name. I’ll bet if I asked you to empty your pockets I would maybe find cash, but not one thing with your name on. I’d go as far as to say that you don’t actually exist. Except you obviously do and you’re a witness to a very serious crime committed by a very dangerous man.’ He leans his elbows on the table, closes his hands together as if in desperate prayer and then leans his chin on his clasped hands. After a few seconds of silence, he says: ‘So, who are you? Really?’

My name is Grace Carter. It has been for more than ten years. I do not have a bank account; I do not have a credit card, a library card or passport in my name. I avoid anything that means I have to use identification and when I can get work, it is often cash in hand. Or it’s paid into a friend’s bank account and they draw it out to give to me. My name *is* Grace Carter. I used to be called something else, I used to share my name with another girl who was once my best friend at school and in ballet class, but not any more. She’s not my friend any more, and that name is no longer mine.

I *am* Grace Carter.

And I should not have come into this place and told the truth. Telling the truth, doing the right thing, has never worked for me. Not ever. And now it is going to go wrong again. But that sound, that inhuman sound made by someone I desperately love... I couldn't let that go.

Time crawls by and I accept that the detective is going to wait it out. He, after all, has all the time in the world. I don't. I can barely keep my eyes open, let alone sit here and wait for him to speak again. 'Does my name and who I may or may not be have any bearing on what I told you?' I eventually ask. I need to open a dialogue and see where it leads us.

'Not to me, no,' he says. 'Like I said, everything you say you witnessed has checked out so far, and because of who this is we're talking about, I have to hand all of this over to my colleagues in organised crime. After this, you probably won't see me again.'

I sit up straighter in my seat, force my eyes not to widen and reflect the momentary panic him telling me that has sent spiralling through me. He is easy to talk to – not nice or anything silly like that, but easy to communicate with.

What do I do next? Do I get up and run for it? Do I just get up and walk out of here? He hasn't arrested me or suggested he's going to arrest me. I haven't done anything he knows about, so I am a free woman who can come and go as she pleases.

Or do I tell him everything? Explain about my name, about who I am, who I was, why I had to leave my former name, Veronika Harper, behind and become Grace Carter instead? I swallow a laugh at *that* idea. Tell the truth? All of it? Where would I even start? Where would I stop?

Leaving without another word is probably my safest option here.

He suddenly speaks again, when I thought he was going to leave me spinning in silence. 'My colleagues, to speak out of turn for a moment or two, will be very pleased that you are not who you say you are. To them, it will probably mean that you know far, far

more than you originally meant to tell them. If that's the case, when they find out who you are – and they *will* find out who you really are – they will use that knowledge to compel you to appear as a witness.'

'Are you trying to scare me?' I ask him. This is how I ended up here, after all: someone using fear to make sure I always do what they want.

DS Brennan unclenches his hands from the tight, giant fist they have formed under his chin and sits back. A modicum of shame plays in his eyes. 'No, no,' he says, shaking his head. 'Honest is what I'm being with you.' *Now I want honesty from you*, he adds without actually saying the words.

I nod, my gaze fixed on the table.

'You must have been very frightened once upon a time to have changed your name, to have so completely removed yourself from society,' he states. 'What happened? And can we help you with it?'

I continue to stare at the table and at my music player that I took out of my pocket before I went to sleep. I had meant to put some music on while I waited but I didn't get any further than taking it out of my pocket. I stare at it, its thin black noodle-like earphone wires wrapped around its body, its earbuds like full stops that begin and end the existence of the player. When I was eleven I had a fantasy. When I was twelve I had the same fantasy. When I was thirteen the fantasy continued. When I was fourteen and fifteen the fantasy became more desperate, necessary. When I was sixteen and a half it wasn't necessary any more but I still had it. The fantasy. *My* fantasy. It pirouettes now through my head: 'rescue'. That is the word I have always used to describe those fantasies. *My Rescue Fantasies*. Someone would swoop in, rescue me. Everything bad from all of before would be swept away by those big powerful wings and I would be lifted up, cradled, loved better. In every fantasy I am rescued and I am safe. Slowly I raise my line of sight to the policeman opposite me.

He's only a little older than me in physical, countable years, but maybe he is older on the inside. He must have seen so much, doing

this job; he has probably seen every crime it is possible to commit. He has probably had every excuse for that crime thrown at him at some point in his working life. Nothing I say will shock or upset him. He may be The One. He may be the rescuer I have longed for all of these years. He may listen, hear it all, and then he may tell me those three words I long to hear and confirm that he is The One, he *can* save me. He will make sure everything is going to be all right.

I focus on the table, my music player again. 'My name is Grace Carter,' I say. 'And I am here to report an attempted murder. I will speak to whoever I need to, but that is who I am and what I am here to do.' Rescues never happen to people like me. You can, after all, only rescue the people you can see are in trouble. And, if you're like me, and you are invisible to everyone, especially the people who might carry out the rescue, then you have no chance at all, have you?

DS Brennan's shoulders fall, his mouth lets out a small sigh of disappointment and frustration as he shakes his head. Carefully he stands. 'Have it your way,' he says. 'My aforementioned colleagues will be here soon to talk to you.' At the door he stops and turns back to me. 'Good luck, Grace Carter, whoever you really are.'

I dip my head further. I can't let him see the tears that have sprung to my eyes, I can't give away that a treacle-like emotion has coated my throat. No rescues today, but kindness, concern. They are so very alien to me.

London, 1999

I stood by the bins, hidden as much as I could be from the back of the theatre, slowly enjoying my last ever cigarette. It'd been a short but meaningful relationship with those tiny white devils, I'd enjoyed every moment of every one, but I'd promised myself the opening night of my first professional play where I was a stagehand, I would stop. I would have one last cigarette and never go there again. I was good at keeping promises to myself.

'Ah, a fellow deviant and pariah,' a smooth voice said.

My heart, my heart. It was as if someone had squeezed it, stopped it from beating, and instantly my body was on edge, on guard, ready for trouble. I didn't look at his face straight away, I wanted to get the measure of him first, to see what I would be dealing with. I kept my head lowered and checked him over from the corner of my eye.

Tall, handsome, fit. Expensively dressed, polished. He reminded me of someone, a celebrity; he was a looky-likey who probably dined out on the similarity even if, like me, most people couldn't quite place him. He wasn't overtly threatening, I didn't feel as if I was in imminent danger, but danger comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes, and I knew that. So, I turned towards him but I didn't drop my guard, and I reassured myself that in five quick steps I'd be back at the stage door, which I'd wedged slightly open when I came out here.

His smile was smooth and easy when I looked at him. 'Are you in this play, because I didn't see you?' He moved his hands when he spoke, an unlit cigarette was clamped between the forefinger and middle finger of his left hand. 'I certainly would have noticed you, if you were.'

I didn't know what to say to that so smiled at him. I'd 'run away' from home two years ago, when I was seventeen, and no one had said anything that nice to me in that time. I'd been felt up on public transport, I'd been propositioned with vile terms and words, I often had to sleep with a chair propped under the handle of my bedroom door because one of my housemates liked to 'sleepwalk' into the women's rooms at night, but no one had ever said anything as nice as that to me.

'I'm sorry, does that sound a bit creepy?' he asked. 'I imagine you hear things like that all the time.'

'No, I don't hear things like that ever, actually. I'm one of the stagehands and I shouldn't be out here – I should be in there running around with everyone else – but I wanted to have a quick cigarette.'

'Really?' he asked, astonished. The more I looked at him, the more he reminded me of that celeb I couldn't quite remember. His name was on the tip of my tongue, what he was famous for was teetering

on the edge of my memory, but neither of those things would fall into place, let me recognise him properly.

‘I’m really surprised by that. You deserve to be told that every day for the rest of your life. You’re very, very noticeable.’

I smiled a little wider, then caught myself. I knew nothing about him and he could be saying all that to get me to relax my guard. Even the nicest guys could be dangerous. ‘Thanks,’ I mumbled. I stared at my cigarette for a moment: it was two-thirds gone, but I had to stop now. Get back inside, go back to my job that it’d been so dream-fulfilling to land.

‘I also like that you’re a secret smoker, too,’ he said, raising his cigarette. ‘Every day I promise myself no more, but every day I seem to find a reason to break that promise.’ Another grin, this time conspiratorial, trying to bring me into his world. ‘My manager and coach would kill me if they knew.’

‘I see,’ I said.

‘Don’t say much, do you,’ he stated.

‘No, not really,’ I said.

‘I’m Todd,’ he said. He held out his hand for me to shake.

I hesitated. What exactly would I be doing if I took his hand? Would I be promising myself that I would stay out here, just a little bit too long, become a little too involved with this man instead of simply going inside and going back to work? Would I be telling myself that maybe I was ready for this, and I could maybe be someone other than Veronika the runaway whose sister forwarded her mail but who no one in her family spoke to even now, two years later?

‘I’m Nika,’ I said.

‘Nika, like Nikky or Nicola?’ he asked.

‘No, short for Veronika, actually. Veronika with a k.’

‘I think Nikky suits you better.’ He smiled at me, so sweetly I thought I would burn up with embarrassment. ‘I’m only going to call you Nikky from now on. That’s if you let me see you again?’

‘You want to see me again?’ I asked. I probably had a frown on my face. ‘*Why?*’ I wasn’t exactly dressed up, I had *no* make-up

on – why the hell would he be interested in me after a few minutes of conversation?

He laughed. ‘Why do you think? I’d like to take you out. Like on a date?’

‘Oh,’ I said.

From his jacket inside pocket he produced a small white card. ‘This is my agent’s number. Call him, tell him who you are and he’ll pass on the message.’

I took the card without looking at it.

‘Go on, Nikky, take a chance and call me,’ he said.

After the last few years, after everything, maybe I was due. Maybe this man was going to help me change my life. Make me be the Nika I was meant to be. He had noticed me, after all. After years and years of being unseen by most people, this nice-looking man had seen me and *liked* me. I smiled. ‘OK, I’ll call you.’

Roni

London, 1988

In our little town, on the south-east side of London, a new dance school opened. They were offering a free session to all local children and teenagers who were interested in dance and Mum didn't need much persuading to let me go. I had got there late because Mum was taking her time as always and in the end Dad had got really cross and said, 'Come on, Veronica, I'll take you,' and we'd had to run to the car and I had to almost run into this large room with mirrors around every wall, a long wooden barre running around the middle of the mirrored walls.

There were lots and lots of other children sitting in there but the beautiful teacher was talking so I couldn't look around to see if there was anyone I knew. I sat down and listened to her. And after I listened to her speak, I knew I was going to be a dancer.

I was eight years old and I was going to be a dancer. Not any type of dancer: a ballet dancer.

I wanted to be like the pretty lady in front of me. I loved her leotard and her floaty skirt, her tights and her shoes. Her shoes were the loveliest things I had *ever* seen. She was wearing black, but her shoes were as pink as candyfloss with shiny ribbons that tied up around her ankles and nearly up to her knees. She said they were *pointe* shoes and that you only ever wear them for exams or for dancing in shows. She had them on today to show us what we could wear if we decided to become ballet dancers, too.

I was going to be a dancer. I wanted to look like her, so I was going to grow my hair long and wind it up on top of my head into a bun, and I wanted to be able to do what she had shown us she could do. A few minutes ago, she'd stood on the toes of both feet, and then she'd stood on the toes of one foot – *en pointe*, she'd called it. *Then* she'd spun until she was a blur, her leg going up and up and up. She was amazing. *Amazing*. I wanted to be like that. I was going to be like that.

'Some of you are going to make it as ballet dancers,' she said, smiling at all of us sitting in front of her. We could see ourselves in the mirror wall behind her, we could see what she saw. 'Some of you are special, and I – we,' she pointed to the tall man standing by the piano who was holding a long black stick, 'we will be able to bring that out in you, help you to become dancers who will dance on stages across the world, and will appear in films and on television. Others of you won't be able to become professional dancers, and that is OK because we can help you to dance, to nurture and grow a true love of dancing. You might not become a professional dancer, but you will be able to dance much, much better than most people and, most importantly, you will love it.' She smiled at us. Her face was bright and shiny, she looked excited to be here in the room with us, to be talking to us. 'You need to decide now if you want to be a dancer. And when you've decided, don't tell anyone else, don't share your dream, don't dilute your dream by telling anyone else, just decide and let it be your little secret. We'll know, of course, so you don't need to tell us. But it's important to know what it is you want. And then, we will help you to get it.' She grinned at us again.

I'm going to be a dancer, I thought to myself. *I want nothing else more in this world than to be a dancer.*

I looked around to see if I could see what the others were thinking. If anyone else had made the same decision as me and I'd have someone to do this thing with. I saw *her* then. We both stared at each other at exactly the same time, and she had the exact same

expression as me, and she was sitting upright like I was, and I could see the decision to be a dancer made her as happy as it made me. It was the other Veronika – Nika.

We kept on staring at each other. It was like we were made to be best friends. We sat next to each other at school, we had the same name and now we were both going to be ballet dancers. Suddenly she smiled at me and she looked so happy to see me and to know that I was going to be a ballet dancer like her. I smiled right back at her, just as happy as she was.