When does love

I hold your heart

become

possession?

KAREN GREGORY

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Praise for Karen Gregory's

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Metro

'*Countless* is written with empathy and deep compassion and we could all do with more of that'
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'Gregory writes with a realism worthy of Ken Loach'
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'I inhaled this book. I was emotionally involved from the very start and couldn't bear to put it down … Though *Countless* is heartbreaking it is also full of heart and it celebrates the power of finding your people and yourself and the resilience to keep going'
Rhino Reads

I hold your heart

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Chapter One

Gemma

'We're going to miss it.'

Dad's hopping next to me on the touchline, face contorted in agonised suspense.

Mum's not doing much better, but she attempts a weak, 'It'll be fine.'

'He's not focusing, he's—'

Mum gives him a worried 'shhh' face; 'words' have been had with him before about shouting out during matches. I can sense rather than see Dad grappling with the stream of advice he wants to yell at Michael, swallowing it back down. I know how he feels. My brother looks suddenly small, positioned a few paces back and to the side of the ball, facing off the goalie a few feet away. The goalie is about six foot, even though he can't be older than fifteen. He's staring right at Michael, his gigantic gloved hands resting on his thighs, knees bent.

Don't let him psych you out, I think. It's not long since the summer league cup, and we all want *that* particular weekend wiped out. Like Dad said again on the drive here, this

season's make or break for Michael's chances at the Academy. He needs to score a goal – preferably in the opposing team's net this time.

I take a long breath in and let it out gently, trying to send positive vibes over on the breeze. It's seriously warm for September and I can feel the sun on the backs of my shoulders, smell cut grass and suncream and sweat, courtesy of Dad, who's been leaping about as ever through the whole match. Michael got some good touches in, a few shots on goal, but the match has gone on, vital minutes to impress tick-tocking themselves away. And now we're nearly at time and he's got a free kick just outside the penalty area. This is his chance.

The whistle goes. Michael flicks a look up at the goalie, assessing. Then he puffs out his cheeks, makes a sharp shrugging movement and starts his run-up. I sense Mum and Dad tense beside me as the solid thwack of Michael's foot connecting with the ball echoes around the pitch. I feel my fists clench too, willing it on.

The ball rises, and the lads forming a wall leap high in the air. Sunny Patel is running down the left wing. I hear Dad sucking air in through his teeth in a sharp hiss.

Go in, go in, go in.

It's going too high, too fast.

Come on …

And now at the last second, the ball's curling round, dropping like a bird of prey. The keeper dives, but even I can see he's way too late. A split second later the ball smashes into the back of the net.

I let out a massive whoop, Dad's roar practically deafening me.

'Get in! Superb,' Dad's shouting. He turns and envelops Mum in a massive bear hug, swinging her off her feet, all of us laughing.

A moment later, the whistle blows for time. We've won, one-nil.

I stop cheering and watch my brother, who's still zipping around the pitch on a victory lap. Short he may be, but he's super fast: even Sunny can't catch him until he stops and then all his team-mates pile on top of him. I spot Jim, the coach, pumping his fist in victory. Another parent claps Dad on the back.

I've still got a massive grin on my face as Michael looks over and gives us a thumbs-up, then the team start jogging off the pitch.

At that moment I get the sudden sense I'm being watched. I shift my gaze and see a tall boy, maybe a couple of years older than me, a golden Labrador at his calf. Technically, he's not supposed to be here, but there's a public footpath running across the next field and sometimes dog walkers stray over. He's only about three metres away, and as my eyes meet his, I get this weird sense I know him. Or that he knows me. An odd feeling flutters in my stomach, halfway between nervousness and interest. I wonder how long he's been there. He's about the best-looking boy I've ever seen – I suspect he knows it too. This is confirmed by the smile he flashes me: all overconfident, slightly teasing. I'm suddenly uncomfortably aware that I'm probably bright red with the heat and the cheering, and my fringe is sticking to my forehead.

The boy holds my gaze for a beat longer than generally

considered socially acceptable, then his smile widens. Something about it makes me smile back too. The next moment, Dad's saying, 'Come on then, Gemma,' and the boy twitches the dog's lead and begins to walk on.

I hesitate for a second, feeling oddly disappointed, then follow my parents out to the car, listening to them going over the goal for what I know will be the first of many times. Just as we get to the edge of the field, I can't help turning my head to check if he's still there.

He totally is.

I'm about to turn away, embarrassed, when he lifts one hand, as if in greeting and I swear I can feel his smile even from this distance.

I grin and give a small wave back, then jog over to the car.

Later, after lunch, Mum drops me off at the Beach Cafe for my afternoon shift. I've been working here all summer, but now college has started, I'm down to weekends only. Esi's already here, and so is Dora, who owns the place. When she sees me, she gives a big smile before wiping her hands on a tea towel. 'Right then, I'll leave you girls to it. I'll be back later to lock up.' She bustles out.

I slide behind the counter next to Esi and stash my bag. The place is only half full, now we're into September, mainly retired people and a couple with a young baby. Cucumber sticks litter the floor under their table. The whole cafe is filled with light, slanting through the huge windows and bouncing off the floorboards, which Dora has painted white. There are seascapes on the walls, a model

ship in a huge bottle up on a high shelf and tea lights wavering in jars on each table, surrounded by artfully scattered shells.

I go to the little CD player at the back of the counter. 'Whose turn is it?' I say to Esi. Not that there's much of a choice. Dora doesn't 'hold with' useful stuff like docking stations, and we're not allowed to use our phones, which might be for the best, given Esi's taste in music, so we're stuck with the same ancient ten CDs.

'Yours. But please can it not be – oh, *Gemma*,' Esi says, as I pick up a copy of *Country Greats* and shove it in the CD player, holding my thumb on the Skip button until I get to a Dolly Parton track. A moment later, the familiar opening melody of 'Jolene' starts.

'You love it really,' I say.

Esi raises her eyes to the ceiling.

'It's a classic,' I add. I sing along for a few bars, but a couple of the old ladies look over, and I remember I'm not supposed to be belting songs out. Not even Dolly.

'Can we at least skip this one?' Esi says, pushing the sleeves of her shirt up to reveal a couple of bracelets. She looks at me. 'I'll never, and I mean never, understand why you love all this stuff.'

I lean over to flick to the next song, and grin; if there's one thing bound to annoy Esi more than Dolly, it's Shania Twain. She may have a point there – even I hate half of the songs on this CD, but it's worth it for the look on her face.

Esi grimaces, but she lets it drop. 'How did the match go?' she asks as she leans into the chiller to swipe a spoonful from a tub of sherbet lemon ice cream.

'We won!' I say happily.

Esi breaks into a warm smile, then gives the ice cream a lick and pulls a face. 'Who voted for this?'

Dora has a suggestion book for ice-cream flavours, and whichever one has the most votes each week gets made, which has led to some interesting taste combinations over the summer. The worst one had to be scampi. I rock-paper-scissored Esi for who got to try that one – and lost.

'Who knows? Those kids down from Bristol I think. Michael scored a goal from a pretty damn awesome free kick.'

'Cool,' Esi says neutrally. She's also not the biggest football fan.

'Yep, he's just got to keep it up now,' I say, echoing Dad. I go over to the coffee machine. The milk container needs filling up. 'Also,' I say, leaning into the fridge under the counter to grab a bottle, 'I saw a guy at the match.'

'A guy?'

'Yeah.' I find the milk and start to straighten back up, still talking. 'Didn't get to speak to him, but he was really ho— uh …'

It's like that moment in films when there's the sound of a record screeching to a halt. Because now I'm standing, I can see who's just come into the cafe, and for a second I can only stare, clutching the milk to me.

'He was what?' says Esi as the guy from this morning begins to walk towards us.

I elbow her with the milk.

Did he hear me? Hard to tell. He doesn't seem half as surprised to see me as I am to see him though. I watch him walk between the close-packed tables. He's wearing shorts

and a T-shirt that's tight enough to see his pecs. Which I am totally not staring at.

'Hey,' he says, all casual like he's never seen me before.

I lengthen my spine, push down the clenching in my stomach that's definitely escalating into something approaching full butterflies.

He's just a boy, Gemma. Like millions of other boys. Amazing cheekbones do not make him the Messiah.

And suddenly I'm not nervous at all. I'm me, Gemma, and I know exactly how to handle myself. I raise one eyebrow. 'You're going with "Hey"?' I leave a beat as he colours the tiniest amount, then say, 'Where's the dog?'

He blinks twice. 'Outside. I didn't think you'd recognise me.'

There are two ways to play that, and I wonder which one he's expecting.

'That must be the longest walk in history. Are you in training for something?' I say. We're miles away from the football pitch.

He laughs. 'Nah, I drove.'

'Well, what can I get you?'

'Some water? For the dog? This is empty.' He holds out the bowl we usually have outside and I realise he's had it in his hands all along.

I pass an open-mouthed Esi the milk and reach over the counter to take the bowl. I fill it with water and hand it back. Both times, I avoid touching his fingers.

'Thanks.' He takes the bowl, gives me another killer smile – seriously, those cheekbones – and suddenly it's over, he's walking away. I wait until the door is closed, then turn

to Esi, who's staring at me with a bizarre combo of half-smile and one raised eyebrow.

'He *was* hot,' she says. 'Bit too muscle-man if you ask me, but still …'

I look at her. I look at the door.

Then I say, 'Bugger it,' and grab a glass of water.

Outside, the boy's looking at the sea, shielding his eyes against the sun.

'Here,' I say and thrust the water towards him.

He takes it, like he's not surprised at all, and gulps the lot down. 'Thanks.'

'Well, don't want you getting heatstroke. You don't realise how hot it is with the wind.'

He nods, but kind of leaves it hanging.

'So … cute dog,' I say.

'She's called Moonshine.' He reaches down to pat her and she gives a doggy grin, her tail wagging like crazy.

I laugh in disbelief. 'Like the bootleggers?'

'Just like that.' He gives me that smile again, the one that says Little Boy Lost with a hint of something much more adult underneath.

I keep my face straight. 'You're not supposed to walk dogs on the football pitch, you know,' I say.

'Yeah?' He's still patting Moonshine.

'Yeah.' Now for some reason I'm starting to get irritated; with him, with myself for whatever the hell the ridiculously intense reactions he's setting off in me are all about.

'Will I be in trouble?' he says, one side of his mouth going up. And now I can't get a read on him at all. He holds my eyes for a second, then says, 'I'm Aaron, by the way.'

'Gemma.'

He puts out his hand suddenly, and I feel mine come up automatically to take it. His hands are large, his grip strong but not like a bone crusher or anything. He's still holding my gaze, and it feels odd. My stomach does another butterfly thing, one that actually feels more like a flock of seagulls, if I'm honest. I can feel the sun on my face, the sound of the waves breaking along the shore as the moment elongates.

Then he drops my hand and thrusts the empty glass at me. Again I take it, like my body's still on autopilot. 'Well, it was nice to meet you, Gem.' He unties Moonshine's lead.

'That's Gemma to you,' I say, but my voice doesn't come out quite as full of snark as I was aiming for. I overcompensate. 'Nice to meet –' I pause for a fraction of a second, then look down at the dog – 'you. I'm sorry about your ridiculous name.' I reach to give her a pat and she lolls her tongue out at me, tail going like a motor.

He laughs, but doesn't say anything. I watch him as he walks away, heading for the beach, the dog trotting obediently by his side.

I wait for a few moments, until he's almost out of sight, but he doesn't turn around. It's not until I go back in to where Esi is waiting with a questioning look that I realise I'm super disappointed.

Chapter Two

Gemma

I should've given him my number. My shift has ended and we're on our way to a celebration dinner with Michael, but I can't help running through the conversation with Aaron one more time in my mind, even though I've already gone over it with Esi in between making coffee and wiping tables and mopping floors.

'Well, maybe he'll come in again,' Esi said, a bit optimistically if you ask me.

'But do you think I should have asked him out?' I said. Again.

'Gemma. Unless you've got a time machine, I think you're asking the wrong question,' Esi said, in a tone that indicated I'd used up all my dissecting a brief interaction with a hot stranger points for the day.

All of a sudden, I realised how dumb I was being. I mean seriously, who cares? He was probably a tourist anyway, due to disappear next week. I decided to shove him out of my mind. I even let Esi change the music to a *Now … !* CD, which she claimed was 'fractionally more bearable than

your rubbish'. Anyway, I can't help it. I've always had a thing for country music. I like the instruments, and that special twang to match in the singers' voices. Most of all, I love the way country songs are all story and emotion. Something real.

The talk turned to other things, like college. It's been weird not having Esi in my tutor group any more, now we're doing different courses. We still see each other in the refectory though, along with the rest of the crowd from school, and on the bus.

'I've got so much homework already,' Esi groaned. 'And Mum wants it all done before church tomorrow too.'

'Well, that's what you get when you sign up to four A levels.'

'I'm seriously thinking I should've stuck at three, but then everyone else applying to medical school will have four.' Esi's a future doctor: she's had it planned out since nursery, and so far, she's right on track. 'I spoke to Mum about it and she said I should cut back on something else.'

'Like what? Not here? Or your martial arts?' I didn't mean to sound a teensy bit hopeful about the last option. It's just that if Esi was going to be quitting anything, I'd rather it was her three-times-a-week training sessions than working in the cafe with me. We've had such a laugh all summer.

'I don't know. I want to do everything,' she said.

I kind of knew what she meant. Starting college feels like such a massive step, like suddenly the world's got that much wider and there's all these options you can choose from. A time to fly. Do something amazing. Or different, at least.

For a moment, looking at Esi, it felt like life was full of possibilities.

That was earlier though. Right now, sitting in the car, things feel pretty much the same as always. Dad drives us along the winding, narrow roads leading from the clifftops inland. A few times, when the road curves around, gaps open up to reveal flashes of the sea, a shining smudge on the horizon, but mainly it's the same boring hedges rushing past my window.

Dad parks the car up at the restaurant and we get seated at our usual table. We come here whenever there's a win to celebrate, which means the waitress already knows what Michael's going to order before he says anything: a plain chicken breast, steamed veg and a mountain of rice. Luckily for me, I don't have to be match fit at all times, so I go for the double-decker burger with bacon, cheese and barbecue sauce, while Dad has a steak and Mum a salad.

Mum's salad looks a bit pathetic when it comes out, compared to our portions. I lean over and dump a handful of chips on her plate. 'Go on,' I say, with a grin, before she can say, 'Ooh, I really shouldn't.'

'Well, maybe one or two,' Mum says. Dad's tucking right into his steak, but he gives her a quick smile.

'You treat yourself,' he says and she beams at him and the whole thing's so mushy yet cute that I hold back on the sarky comment about getting a room. If Esi was here, she'd push back her twists with that look she gets when she's about to start on feminism. She reckons food is political, especially when it's women feeling guilty over chips, but I don't know if it's exactly like that with Mum. It's more …

an approval thing, maybe. Whatever, I leave it and catch Michael's eye instead, making him smile.

Michael's only a year younger than me, which I'm not sure was 100 per cent planned, or maybe it was: Dad's always joked he wanted a football team, but something went wrong after Michael was born and Mum couldn't have any more kids.

Dad continues the post-match analysis he started in the car. 'That Arley midfielder couldn't get near you, but you need to watch your turns …'

I eat my dinner as Dad and Michael talk tactics and what's coming up next, me and Mum chipping in every so often. Then, when Dad goes to the toilet, Michael says to me, 'You want this?' It's the rest of his chicken; Dad told them to bring out two breasts because he reckoned Michael needs the protein. I'm pretty full, but I nod and say, 'I'll shove it under my bun,' and swipe it off his plate. Mum doesn't say anything. If we had a dog – and believe me, I begged my parents for years – then I could've saved it for him, or her. I could have a dog like Moonshine, all joyous tail and grinning mouth, who loves you just because.

'How was work?' Mum asks.

'Oh yeah, good,' I say vaguely, half my mind still on the golden Lab. And her owner.

'Do you have much homework?' Mum says.

'A bit. We're still doing all the introductory stuff. I've got an essay on the origins of psychology.'

Michael leans forward. 'Is it about Freud?'

'Uhh …' I haven't actually started it yet, but I'm pretty sure the teacher wants us to go a bit further back than that.

I love that Michael's interested though. It's like he tries his best to de-football when he can, which is not right now because Dad's coming back to the table. He picks up where he left off, in between bites of steak. When he's finished, he raises his glass of beer. 'To Michael, for a fan-bloody-tastic opening match. I'm proud of you, lad.'

We all chink glasses and I watch my not-so-little brother as he smiles, sending a quick thanks to whatever power might be lurking up there, that the bad run he had in the summer seems to be finally over.

Dad has another pint, so Mum drives us home. She takes the twisty track up to our house in first gear, even though Dad tells her she can go a bit quicker. The car lurches over a couple of potholes as we climb. Our house stands almost alone, apart from Esi's, perched at the top of a cliff overlooking the sea. It's so close to the cliff edge that we don't have much of a garden and the only reason we could afford it was because there's a fair chance our whole house is going to end up at the bottom of the cliffs one day. But I love living up here. Well, most of the time anyway. Sometimes I wish we lived in a city, or at least closer to pretty much everything, but then where else can you lie in bed and smell sea-salt air, or lean out of your window and watch the waves? Once I swear I saw a whale. No one believes me because the closest they've ever been spotted to us is in Lyme Bay, but when I was younger, I used to spend ages staring out of that window with a pair of old binoculars, making songs up in my head. That was before I got my first guitar. And I know it was a whale I saw, despite what Dad

says. So yep, just occasionally there's magic in our house, despite the fact it has no central heating and rotten window frames.

When we get in, Michael says, 'Grabbing another shower,' and jumps up the stairs three at a time while Mum and Dad settle down in the living room, Dad's arm slung over the back of the settee behind her. Dad got that settee last year so he and Michael can watch their matches on the TV that takes up one wall, and we're not allowed feet on it, even in socks. If I brought a drink anywhere near the shiny leather, Dad would probably have a heart attack. It was pretty funny watching him pace around as the delivery guys tried to squeeze it through our tiny hallway though.

I go up to my room, past the rows of pictures lining the stairs. Lots of Michael holding various trophies, family holidays and Mum and Dad's wedding. My room is my little oasis. On one wall I have the Kacey Musgraves poster where she's holding the peach fan. It cost loads to ship from the US but it was totally worth it, even if Esi disagrees. I've given up trying to get her to see the genius of Kacey, or any country music. The only exception I think she's ever made is Iris DeMent's 'Wasteland of the Free', but that's just because she likes anything political. Anyway, my heart belongs to The Greenwoods, who are possibly the most perfect country duo in the UK. And 'Greenwood' is their actual surname – how awesome is that? Like some things are just meant to be.

Next to my desk is my guitar and amp. I've also got an electric piano covered in sheet music, my works in progress. It was a squeeze to fit the piano into my room but there

was nowhere else for it once The Settee arrived and anyway, I prefer having it up here, even if it means my stereo and recording equipment are now in a jumble under my desk. The piano was a gift from my nana when I was twelve and it's what got me into music properly – learning to play and write songs myself as well as just listening and singing all around the house. I've only had a couple of years of lessons, but I'd already taught myself to read music before that and there's loads of stuff on the internet too. I know Nana would be proud of me. She died not long after she got me the piano and I still miss her sometimes. We didn't see her much – I don't think she got on well with Dad, who incidentally wasn't impressed about the piano, especially when we had to lug it up the stairs – but she got me. What I mainly remember about her was that she gave the warmest hugs, but her eyes were always a little sad, because Grandad died before I was even born.

After I get into my PJs, I sit at the piano and plug my headphones in. I've been working on a song for a while now, a duet. I try out some new harmonies, thinking about possible lyrics as I play. The story of a girl on the edge of the world, gazing out to sea. A boy by her side who takes her hand. Together they lift off and head towards the horizon, their toes skimming the waves, while overhead the sky bursts into colour.

I stop and scribble a couple of notes down, but I already know I won't forget this song. I'm dying to try the whole thing out loud without headphones, or on my guitar, but Michael always goes to bed early after matches and he's got training tomorrow. I can't resist going over it one more

time, fingers flying on the keys, and don't hear the knocking at my door until it opens and Mum's standing there. I take my headphones off.

'Dad says can you finish up? We can hear the pedal banging downstairs,' Mum says.

I nod and close the piano lid.

Mum gives me a peck on the cheek. 'Night, then.'

In bed, the window open, I listen to the swish of the sea on rocks far below. It lulls me to sleep like always, but just before I drift off properly, it's like the noise of the waves shifts, so that my new song is the last thing I'm thinking about as I fall asleep.

Chapter Three

Gemma

'Have you even checked your phone?' Cal shouts the next day the second he gets on the bus. Next to me, Esi looks up from her book. It's something by someone Russian. Or possibly in Russian, knowing her. I've been doing that thing where you're looking but not really seeing everything flying past and composing lyrics in my head. We were the first ones on the bus, given we live the furthest away. Esi's family moved here from Ghana when she was a baby, and she's been my next-door neighbour since I can remember. We've been walking down the track to the bus stop together for years now.

'Who are you talking to?' Esi says mildly. Cal bounces along the bus, throws himself down behind us and then pops his nose through the space between our seats.

'Gemma of course,' Cal says. He's waving his phone madly in my direction. 'How are you not excited by this?'

'By what?' I grab his waving hand and take his phone. A second later I shriek; I can't stop myself. 'When did you see this?'

'Last night. I messaged you.' Cal shakes his head. 'So? You doing it?'

I stare at the screen, feeling all the blood in my body firing up my face, making my heart pound as I reread:

From Nashville with Love: The search for the UK's best country songwriters

Country music is booming in the UK. More people than ever are falling in love with the sounds of Nashville. Now we're hunting for the nation's most talented country songwriters. Could you be the UK's next country sensation?

My eyes track back down to the prizes. £10,000-worth of promotion, time in a recording studio, the chance to sing in front of all the major record labels and, best of all, a year's mentoring from The Greenwoods.

'Doing what?' Esi says.

I hand the phone wordlessly to her. She reads, then nods. 'Cool. You should enter. It's that band you like, isn't it?'

'The band I like?' I echo faintly. I hear Cal let out a little laugh; he knows what The Greenwoods mean to me.

'What song are you going to do?' he says. Then, 'You are entering, right?'

'Uhhh …'

It's weird. I'm usually so confident in, well, pretty much everything.

'You have to. This is huge.'

'I know,' I say. 'But what if—'

'Oh no. Nopey-nope. No way. Your stuff's too good to

go to waste. What was that one you uploaded on to YouTube the other day?' He sings a few bars, loudly.

'Oi!' comes from the front of the bus. It's Grumpy Sharon driving today. 'Keep it down,' she hollers over her shoulder. I hand Cal his phone and we pull faces at each other behind our hands in case she spots us in the rear-view mirror. Grumpy Sharon has been known to kick people off the bus before. I'm thinking hard, running through possible songs in my head, but all I can muster on repeat are the words, *I want this. This is mine.* Cal is uncharacteristically quiet, sensing I need some space to process. Esi's gone back to her book. A while later, we pass our old school and Cal puts three fingers up to his forehead in a salute. The bus stops at some lights and he says, 'Oh look, a magpie. Singular. On the school roof.' He shakes his head in mock sadness as he looks at the students arriving. 'And just think, that was us trudging in just a few short weeks ago.'

'Do you mind? Some of us are trying to block out the memory of GCSEs,' I say. I got decent results in the end, but the hours of revision and the gut-clenching feeling walking into that exam hall have made me wonder more than once why I'm subjecting myself to more of the same at A level.

I've got a free period first thing, so technically I don't have to be at college until ten, but Mum goes the other way into work and Dad always drives Michael to training. My seventeenth birthday cannot come fast enough. While Esi heads off to Chemistry, I go with Cal into the refectory, get out my laptop and attempt to start my Psychology essay, but I keep getting my phone out to read about the competition again. There are three rounds: auditions, then regional finals,

with the winners from the twelve regions going on to a national final. The website says the national final will be televised. Whoa.

Before long, everyone else is pulling out chairs and soon I'm in the middle of a noisy argument about *Queer Eye*. Cal reckons the chemistry between the Fab Five is all faked for the cameras. 'None of them can stand each other. Fact. There'll be public spats before long,' he says.

'Spats?' I say, shaking my head.

'Yes, spats. I'm telling you.' Cal sits back and sips from a gigantic cup of tea, his lips pursed primly. 'And have you noticed how they give them all the exact same set of shirts? It's like a uniform or something. I'm gonna grow this –' he motions at his barely-there stubble – 'into a full-on giant Gandalf beard, like that guy from season one.'

'Nice.' I wrinkle up my nose.

Next to me, Phoebe and her girlfriend, Beth, have their heads together over Beth's phone. Beth's one of the few newcomers to our group; she went to school the other side of town, but she's been going out with Phoebe since the middle of Year 11. I think they met online. They've been super loved-up since Beth wangled coming to college here and they get to spend every day with each other.

I'm still thinking about the songwriting competition. Cal looks over and says, 'So, you've decided which song you're doing, haven't you?' and grins. The annoying thing is, he's almost right. The duet I've been working on, 'Sea Dreams', would be perfect.

Phoebe looks up. 'What's this?' After Cal fills her in, her soft eyes get wide. 'Are you going to enter?' she says.

I take a second and the words come to me again: *This is mine.* And I know, like Cal knew, that I made up my mind a nanosecond after reading the word 'mentoring' in the list of prizes.

'Sure!' I say, all breezy grin. It's like muscle memory; you just have to act confident, that's most of the battle. After a while, it stops being an act, and then it's just you. I think.

'I wish I had the guts. Or the voice,' Phoebe says.

She does have the voice, in this breathy, quiet way. We've done school musicals together before, Phoebe usually playing second to my lead, but it's never got in the way of our friendship.

'You do, on both counts,' I say.

Phoebe smiles, but I can already tell she's talking herself out of it, which is kind of a shame because the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced a duet would be my best shot. I'm about to say this when a crash from the corner distracts me. There's an indoor football table set up there, next to the only settees in the refectory. Since term started a couple of weeks ago, it has been swiftly established as the place the second years hang out – usually a gang of *that* sort of guy. The ones who might be in college but at heart they're still at the flicking-girls'-bra-straps-and-giving-them-marks-out-of-ten stage of emotional development. They're normally accompanied by a couple of girls who are 'allowed' to sit and watch their games. I'm sure when I walked by last week I caught them all smirking over a phone with porn on it, if the noises were anything to go by. *Bleurgh.*

One of the guys is whacking the side of the football table, and when that doesn't work, lifting it up to tilt it; it

seems the ball has got stuck somewhere. I'm about to turn away, back to my own group of friends, when I stop short.

Right in the centre, a girl with cascades of blonde hair so close to him she's practically got her boobs pressed against his arm, is the guy from yesterday.

Aaron.

Chapter Four

Gemma

There's about five seconds of stunned surprise, which feels like a lot longer, and then I'm sure his eyes meet mine. Before I can decide what to do, Cal's snapping his fingers in front of my face and saying, 'Wakey-wakey, it's almost ten.'

I stand up, flustered, fumbling with my laptop and shoving it in my bag, before looking over again, but there's no sign of Aaron. Cal links his arm through mine and we walk up to meet Esi in Psychology. We're launched straight into research methods, our tutor telling us we're going to be designing our own mini-projects over the next few weeks. So it's not until we're back at what's becoming our usual table, when we can grab it, at lunchtime, that I get the chance to mention my Aaron sighting to Esi.

'He was with the knoboons,' I say.

The knoboons is what Esi christened the table-football lot on our second day, after we'd been having an in-depth conversation about what different groups of animals were called. This was because she'd slipped us the conversational nugget that a group of giraffes is called a 'tower', which had

me in hysterics. I also bet her it wasn't true, which was a mistake because she immediately whipped out her phone.

'What are you betting, exactly?'

'I'll do all the floor mopping and toilet cleaning at the cafe for the next three weeks,' I said, which was a tad over-confident of me, in retrospect.

Cal gave a sad shake of his head. 'Hope you've got marigolds.'

They were right. Google confirmed that a 'tower' was indeed what a group of giraffes were called.

'Oh,' I said. 'I thought it'd be a herd, or something.' Then I got the giggles again. 'Go on, what are some others?'

Esi read them out while we tried to guess. 'Lions.'

Cal rolled his eyes. 'Pride. Give us something harder.'

'OK.' She looked over at the lads in the corner, then gave a wicked grin. 'Baboons.'

'Er, troop?' Cal said.

One of the table lot was playing obnoxiously loud music, with lyrics to match. Esi wrinkled her nose. 'Yep, a troop of baboons. Or –' she got this inspired look in her eyes – 'knoboons.' We all collapsed in laughter, apart from Beth and Phoebe, who were busy gazing at each other.

Now Esi raises her eyebrows and says, 'You sure it was him? He seemed older than that the other day.'

'Yep.' I look around, as if he's going to materialise in the refectory right in front of me. 'That's the third time I've bumped into him, how weird is that? It must mean something.'

Esi opens her mouth, probably to tell me for the millionth

time there's no such thing as the universe intervening, or fate or whatever, but at that moment, Rachael comes up. She gets the late bus in on a Monday, because she hasn't got any lessons until after lunch, which everyone else is deeply jealous of.

'What's up then?' she says, flopping down next to Cal and flipping her gorgeous-as-always hair back over her shoulders. I wish my hair would go that shiny but it has a tendency to frizz. Rachael's is so smooth, I want to reach out and touch it, and judging by the way Cal's looking at her, he's having similar thoughts. He clears his throat and says loudly, 'Gemma's got a Mystery Man.'

Rachael's eyes light up. 'Oh yeah?'

'Not exactly …' I say.

At that moment, my phone buzzes with a notification from my YouTube channel.

'Hold that thought,' I say, one finger in the air. The next moment, my jaw drops. The comment is on my latest video, the one I uploaded the other week:

Love this. You have an amazing voice.

This isn't what's got my heart going extra fast, though – I get comments like that all the time. Nope, it's the name of the person making the comment that I can't seem to stop looking at.

Aaron Weaver.

Esi looks over my shoulder. 'Wait, is that …?' She squints at the thumbnail. 'It's him!'

'Who? What?' Rachael says, looking from one face to another like a meerkat, which makes me smile. I bring her up to speed with the football match and the cafe and seeing

Aaron earlier. She sighs happily. 'That's so romantic. How did he find your channel?'

I shrug.

'He must've asked around, found out your name,' Cal says reasonably, without looking up from madly swiping at his phone. (He's on his millionth attempt to get top run on Subway Surfers. It's never going to happen, but we indulge him anyway.) It's not like I'm particularly anonymous; I use my full name on YouTube because, well, you never know. A scout from Decca Records might be browsing one day and … OK, that's probably also never going to happen, but still.

'Yep, that's definitely romantic. He's well into you …' Rachael says. I dart her a quick look – she can sometimes be a bit cynical – but she only seems wistful. Then her face clears and she says in her normal voice, '*Anyway*,' and a moment later she's inviting everyone to a party some girl in her Geography class is having on Saturday night.

The conversation moves on to who's going, but I sit back while I consider what to say in response to Aaron. I settle on … nothing. Let him do the chasing. Still, I can't stop myself scanning the refectory for a sign of him, or from feeling a teensy bit disappointed when he doesn't appear. But by the time I've emerged from double Biology (why, *why* did I think this was a good idea?) the thoughts have been driven out altogether. It would seem the teachers at school were right when they warned about the leap up to A level; my head's spinning.

I set off for the bus home. As I'm coming out of the main entrance, I sense someone walking up fast beside me. A moment later, I'm overtaken by a cloud of perfume. It's the

blonde girl I saw body-checking Aaron in the refectory earlier. I register this just as someone leans on a horn. It's coming from a pretty nice-looking car – I can't see the make, but it's dark and way sleeker than a lot of the buckets people rock up to college in – which is pulled up at the edge of the car park. Blonde Girl immediately pivots and snakes her way over, then leans so far down she's in danger of falling through the open window on the passenger side, boobs first. I carry on walking, but out of the corner of my eye catch the girl straighten abruptly. She turns and gives me the sort of stare that's designed to inflict mortal injury. Luckily for me, that sort of thing only makes me laugh, though I'm curious now as to exactly why she's exiting stage left in a storm of heels. Then a voice floats out of the car: 'Gem!'

It's him. Of course it is.

I pause for a second, then tip my chin up and take my time walking over. I stand, arms folded like I have about three minutes – which incidentally is totally true if I'm going to catch my bus – and I'm prepared to give him 0.5 of those.

Oh, and I am not about to go leaning down into his car. I don't need to though, because Aaron's already leaping out, striding around the bonnet end and coming to stand next to me. He's tall, but I'm wearing heels – and I'm five nine barefoot – so we're pretty much level-pegging it in the height stakes.

I wait for him to speak first. And suddenly he seems less confident, now we're actually face to face again, lifting his hand to run it through his carefully styled hair. I don't want

to, but part of me can't help finding this cute, especially when he says the next thing, which is, 'You saw my comment?'

I raise my eyebrows to indicate yes.

There's a pause.

'I loved your video.'

'Thank you.' I shift my bag, conscious the bus will soon be leaving without me on it.

'You want a lift home?' Aaron says.

'Do I seem like the sort of person who gets into strange boys' cars?'

He inclines his head as if to say this is a fair point, but then says, 'Ah, but I'm not a stranger now we're internet buddies.' Then he deploys *that* smile. And it totally works. A charge goes right through me, like it's leaped straight from his mouth, his eyes, into my skin. All of a sudden, I want to laugh. Instead I say, deadpan, 'I don't know, has the dog been sitting there?' I nod to the passenger seat.

Aaron's smile widens. 'One hundred per cent dog-hair free, I swear it.'

He holds my eyes. Neither of us moves. I'm so close to leaping into that car, but instead I pull my gaze away, say, 'No thanks, not today!' with a laugh, and the next moment I'm dashing away from him, down the slope towards the bus.

I just manage to swing myself on before Grumpy Sharon shuts the doors. The bus pulls off and I slide into a seat next to Esi in time to see Aaron slouching back against his car. He raises a lazy hand to wave at me as we pass.

He's smiling too.

Five minutes later, my phone goes, like I knew it would. A private message request on my Instagram. He must have followed the link from my YouTube channel. I hit Allow.

Tomorrow then? Come on a date with me. A

A few minutes later: **Go on …**

Then: **At least talk to me.**

Please????

I look at Esi, nose buried in her Russian book, and the trees outside the window, framed against a blue September sky, and I sit back in my seat and start typing.

All right then. What do you want to chat about?