THE LOVE INTEREST

THE LOVE INTEREST

HELEN COMERFORD

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY YA
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY YA and the Diana logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Text copyright © Helen Comerford, 2024

Helen Comerford has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers

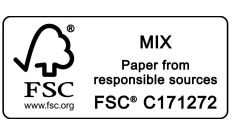
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-6758-8; eBook: 978-1-5266-6759-5;
ePDF: 978-1-5266-6760-1

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters

For the powerful women in my life,
especially my sister, Janine

HEROICS AND POWER AUTHORITY

POWERS

Because of the accelerated evolution of the planet (the EV), there are more people with powers now than ever before. We all know it is the law to register your power with the Heroics and Power Authority. But sometimes people need help to do the right thing.

Powers come in all shapes and sizes. They run in families. If you see someone drain the lights from a room, they could be a conduit, absorbing power like King Ron. If you see someone fix a machine with a touch, they could be a technopath like the Controller. If you see someone fly ... well, you get the idea. Report their family today.

HELPING IS HEROIC

In the wrong hands, powers can be dangerous, even weaker female ones.

Do your duty – report any and all suspected powers to the HPA. Registered people will be helped, tagged and protected.

EVOLVED CREATURES

Be vigilant around nature. Keep an eye out for EV creatures and always remember:

BLUE

Blue eyes
Large body
Unusually aggressive
Evolved creature

To report suspected powers or EV disturbances

CALL 777

Help the HPA to Help You

CHAPTER 1

One day soon my town will need a hero. So it was written by the Diviner in the nineteenth century. And so it was also written by most of the shops in Nine Trees who have used the prophecy to decorate tea towels:

2024
In the sharp blue heat of truth
A hero will emerge
In the three of three of trees.
– The Diviner, 1880

'Look, they've got a new line of prophecy posters. What painting have they used?' I waggle a poster at my best friend, Joy. She tilts it to see past the bright lights of the Culture Complex foyer.

'*The Scream*, it's by Munch.' Joy scoops her brown hair

behind her ears. 'I think he painted it as a response to the Rocks Prophecy. You know, the one without a location, but with pelting rain and rumbling land …'

'And slipping clay.' I hang the poster back in the little gift shop attached to the box office. 'I can see why he'd be stressed.' We drift into the line for cinema tickets. 'Did you see the £35 sticker? Who'd pay that much for a poster?'

'The tourists, Jenna Ray!' Joy grips my arm. 'Do you really need me to explain this to you?'

'N—'

'Imagine—' Joy lowers her voice, like she's presenting a horror podcast. 'You're on your way to the city, but hey, you're passing through pretty little doomed Nine Trees. Sure, a sexy new hero is going to turn up, but no one thinks waiting around for that to happen is a good idea. But! Maybe, you can risk stopping for a souvenir? You don't have time to shop around. You just want to grab a poster and get out before the disaster hits. Thirty-five pounds for a poster? Just buy it. You've already been here for too long and it'll be worth ten times more after Nine Trees has been wiped off the map.' She gives herself a shake. 'It's clever really. A disaster will strike this year and it's only spring. Imagine how much they'll be charging for souvenirs in November!'

'Oh, we'll all be dead by then.' I laugh and Joy laughs and then we both fall silent. I stare at some popcorn lying sadly on the floor and wince as someone steps on it.

'You girls seem worried.' A lady with grey curls joins the queue and smiles gently at us. 'Just because a new hero is coming doesn't mean there's going to be a huge disaster. I've

seen them before, of course. I was a little girl when the power plant malfunctioned and King Ron first appeared.'

I nod politely and elbow Joy, who is rolling her eyes.

'But remember the Controller?' the lady continues. 'His emergence was simply—'

'Saving a cat that was stuck up a tree,' we chorus.

She nods, reaches into the pocket of her powder-pink duffel coat, hands me one of the council's *Carry On As Normal* pamphlets and wanders serenely away.

'Didn't you want to see a film?' Joy calls after her.

I flick the leaflet and decide against bringing up the other hero emergences, the ones with higher death tolls. 'I don't need this. My house is covered in them; Dad keeps bringing them home from work. You have it.' I drop the glossy paper into Joy's hands.

'Don't be rude.' She pushes it back.

We look at the pamphlet between us for a beat, then Joy jumps at me and tries to stuff it down the front of the oversized cardigan I borrowed from my sister. I bounce back, narrowly avoiding the man behind us. He tuts. Joy giggles.

'That lady wanted you to have it!' Joy thrusts it towards me.

'And I want *you* to have it.' I gently push her hands back. 'You're welcome.'

Joy opens the pamphlet and shakes her head in mock disbelief. 'You don't even want this lovely map of all the town's shelters?'

'No. I know where they are. They've been lit in neon since New Year's Eve.'

It's finally our turn at the ticket machine. My finger hovers over the screen. 'Did we want the seven o'clock showing of *All You Need Is Love: A Classic Love Story for the Modern Age*? Snappy title.'

Joy drapes herself mournfully across the machine and taps the seven o'clock option. 'Nick left for Portugal today.'

'Uh-huh.' I manage to catch both tickets as they shoot out of the machine.

'Portugal, Jenna. Portugal!'

I pass her a ticket and we wander towards the pick-and-mix stall.

'Is it even any safer in Portugal?' I love Joy, but I'm not sure I've got the energy to listen to Nick's holiday plans again. Maybe I can distract her with sweets?

'There was that whole thing with EV sharks along the coast, but the rustic mountain village Nick's mum chose to escape to will probably be extra safe.' She sighs, managing to infuse her breath with melancholy. 'Is it so wrong to want him and his lovely arms here, to die with me?'

I narrow my eyes at her. 'Shouldn't you want him to go on without you and live a long life filled with love and laughter?'

'Psssht. No.' Joy whacks my arm. 'I've got to wee.'

'I'll be here.'

Joy skips off towards the toilets and I perch on a polished metal bench on the outskirts of the cinema section and play with a curl of my Afro. Even though my feet are now glued to the tacky floor, the Culture Complex is my favourite place in Nine Trees.

It was built the same year as I was born and, for some reason, they decided it should look like a great big greenhouse. Ferns decorate the balcony that runs around the building; green tendrils droop down over signs for the cinema, the library behind me and the restaurant to my left. The front of the complex is made of hexagonal windows. A few wispy clouds drift through the bright spring-evening sky, but even inside the complex the air feels heavy, like there's a storm coming.

My breath catches as I exhale. Before anything bad can happen, I picture a boy with a dark blue swimming cap and a kind smile, water streaming off his strong shoulders as he lifts himself out of the water. Okorie Ogundipe. I don't want a boyfriend, but thinking about Okorie's humble smile when he inevitably wins his race is better than spiralling about our impending doom.

Focus on swimming; that's a more wholesome cure for panic. The feel of the water as I cut through it, the bubbles that stream past as I flip turn, the droplets of water on Okorie's chest after training. Feck. It's not OK to use him like this when I've never even had a proper conversation with him. I'm objectifying him, but he's keeping my heart steady and my lungs full, and it's not like he'll ever know.

'Your green cardigan is too big for you.' A small girl with red pigtails arrives at my lap, pursued by her horrified dad. 'It is pretty though, and I like the buttons because they have glitter on them.' She puts her hands on my knees and smiles up at me.

Frantically packing away the image of Okorie in his trunks, I blink and focus on the preschooler critiquing my style.

‘Rosie! What did I tell you about touching strangers?’ Her dad reaches for her and she dodges, her small hands still pinching the fabric of my jeans.

‘It’s OK.’ I give her a closer look at one of the buttons. ‘I’m glad you like it. It’s the sparkly buttons that made me want to wear it.’

‘Thank you.’ The dad pushes his thick glasses up his nose.

‘Green is my favourite colour.’ Rosie leans on my lap and inserts her fingers into the baggy wool of the cardy.

‘Rosie!’ The dad drags Rosie off me. ‘I’m so sorry!’ He’s gone crimson.

‘You’re pretty,’ Rosie says as her dad pulls her away.

‘Thank you!’ I call after them.

Rosie is dragged through the foyer, past the central box office and towards the family restaurant. I chuckle as she breaks free and legs it for the ball pit. As Rosie’s cry of triumph fades, a strange moment of quiet washes over the Culture Complex. There are still people in the busy foyer, but no one is talking. Perhaps they’re thinking about the prophecy. I place my hands firmly on my lap to stop myself from fiddling with my fingers. The pink light filtering in through a passing cloud makes the golden-brown skin of my hands look almost silver, like I’m underwater.

‘Ready to feel warm, fuzzy and like we’ll never be able to love like they do in the movies?’ Joy is back and clutching an enormous bucket of popcorn.

‘Am I?!’ I leap up to join her.

Walking into a cinema is one of my favourite things. We’re

intentionally late, to miss the adverts, so it's dark when we push our way through the swing doors. It's gloriously disorientating, wandering up the sloped walkway into a cavern lit with images.

'Let me go on the aisle. I always need to pee,' Joy whispers, far too loud.

We settle in our seats and balance the popcorn on the armrest between us, ready to watch the romantic comedy. We thought it would be a good distraction, although I can already guess the plot:

Boy meets girl, they trade quirky banter and—

Oh look!

They have an unexpectedly deep connection.

And oh wow!

They share a life-affirming experience.

But oh no!

Something goes wrong and all hope is lost!

Except it's not. By the end of the film they'll kiss in the rain

or get married

or something.

As the lead couple rescue a baby monkey together, my mind strays back to the prophecy. I picture a crack running up the middle of our cobbled high street, splitting the earth. A tree falls through the window of the bank and scatters its white blossoms over my trapped sister. I shake my head, but even Okorie won't displace the image of Dad, standing helpless at the council, as my town, my home, falls apart around him.

'Wait!' Joy shouts at the screen. 'Don't kiss your ex!'

My chair squeaks as I sink down and try to imagine the hero that the prophecy has foretold. He'll swoop in at the last moment and save the day. He'll be big, muscly, and have spectacular facial hair. It'll be like when King Ron appeared in the seventies; the hero will arrive and everyone I love will be fine.

'Well, obviously she saw them kissing. As if they'd all have the same dentist in LA. It's like a billion miles across.' Joy offers me some popcorn and then reaches over to stop my hands, which, I hadn't realised, had been going through a cycle of rubbing and clasping.

'Watch the film, Jenna,' she whispers. 'It'll help.'

I nod and put my head on Joy's shoulder to watch the leading lady cry over what could have been, and what definitely will be, by the end of the film.

'My bus is in two minutes,' Joy says as the credits roll and the lights fade up. Halfway into her coat she hesitates, even though we're at the end of the row and there are people waiting to get past.

'Don't worry, Ray. We'll be all right,' she says.

'Let's do something tomorrow,' I say confidently.

'Tomorrow.' She nods slightly too fast, hugs me, and legs it for her bus.

A band of pressure grows around my head as I make my way out of the cinema, and I pop into the bathroom to splash water on my face. The shock of the cold helps a bit, but the brown eyes gazing back at me from the mirror are still anxious.

Tomorrow, I'll wear my Afro in a side parting and borrow Megan's bronzer, which is the perfect colour to make my skin tone glow. Tomorrow I'll look powerful.

A deafening roll of thunder stops me as I step back into the foyer. Through the glass front of the complex, the dark sky is alive with flashes of light. Even though we're inside, my heart beats faster and I edge closer to the box office.

'A lightning storm.' An usher is waiting with a dustpan and brush. 'It's right on top of us.'

There's a loud buzz and the lights go out.

Gasps echo around the complex. As my eyes adjust to the soft glow of the emergency lighting, I can see the silhouettes of people moving; some heading to the automatic doors, others getting to their feet in the restaurant. There's another blinding flash and a crash of thunder which sounds like the complex has been hit by a tank.

'There's no way I'm going out there.' A man in a *King Ron* hoody leans on the box office next to me.

Has the complex just been hit by lightning? The alarm bells in my brain are jangling, but it's not like when I walk past a big group of people or speak in class. There's a pinch in the air irritating the back of my throat and making my eyes sting. I inhale deeply, hoping that I'm wrong, but the smell of smoke is unmistakeable.

CHAPTER 2

The fire alarm screeches into life, and I slip into a stream of people moving calmly towards the exits. Smoke tingles my nostrils and my eyes dart around the complex. I'm half expecting to see fire racing down the drooping ferns or bursting from the restaurant, but there's nothing. Just more and more people clogging up the foyer.

We're all trying to move towards the doors, but no one wants to go outside. How are there so many people here? No one has opened a fire exit yet and this press of bodies is growing tighter around me, pushing against my shoulders and back. Were all these people sitting on each other's laps in the cinema? I don't know if my heart is beating faster because I'm stuck in the growing pressure of this crowd or because I'm about to go out into a lightning storm.

My breath catches and then vanishes.

No.

Please not now.

'It's the EV. It's got to be,' a man leaning against my shoulder mutters. 'A crazy EV storm with the killer winds and supercharged lightning like the one that hit Salvador.'

Has an EV storm hit Nine Trees? My knuckles move in small circles, pressing into my chest. The crush is growing tighter around me, but all I can do is exhale and exhale again, hoping my lungs will fill. This can't happen now. We can't go out into an EV storm. We can't stay in the complex. I can't move. This breathlessness is how it started last time, when I knocked a pack of pasta with my bag and an aisle-full of people watched me trying to clean up the scattered fusilli. I can't have another panic attack. I can't hide in the loos here. There's a solid chance they're on fire.

I breathe out *two, three, four* as another flash illuminates the foyer and gasps ripple through the crowd. I exhale heavily again and focus on memories of the sea: the rise and fall of the waves, the push and pull of the tides, the storms I've watched pass over the horizon whilst I counted the forks of lightning from the safety of the beach. The pressure on my chest eases as the waves roll through my mind. The sea must be fierce tonight.

'Fire!'

My heart skips a beat, but I keep breathing.

'The library!'

I whip round to see a flickering orange light coming from the library. It's the books. The books are burning.

'Please head to your closest exit. Help any women or children that you see.'

The storm chooses that moment to illuminate the foyer again, but the shock of the crowd disappears under the screech of the alarm.

'Mother Earth,' I whisper, balling my hands into fists. If Joy was here, she'd make a joke or do something weird like pretend to be a game show host. *'Tonight on* How to Die*: Lightning storm or fire?!'* She'd probably do an American accent. *'Jenna Ray, the choice is yours …'* I hope she didn't get caught out in this.

Sweat blurs my vision and the creeping smoke rubs out the detail of the foyer. I pull my T-shirt up around my mouth and breathe, sucking the air through the cotton, and step. Breathe and step. The crowd grows grey and faceless, but I'll still force myself to move as a part of it. Coughs cut through the air as the smoke thickens. I breathe and step.

'The fire is coming.' Someone behind me gasps and tries to squeeze past me, but I'm stuck too. There's nowhere for either of us to go, just a slow-moving wall of people. I won't have an attack. I suck in air faster and try not to imagine the rack of prophecy posters igniting.

'The fire is coming!'

A shoulder thuds into my back. I stagger and fall on to my knees, but I barely touch the sticky floor before I'm up again.

I'm coughing too now, hollowing out my lungs as if that will help me to fill them again.

People push past and stream out of the doors either side of the complex. I don't want to push back. I don't want to be the reason that someone else falls, but that means I find myself waiting at the centre of the front wall, at the end of both queues. Waiting patiently for my chance to live. It's weird that in all this smoke, noise and chaos, I can feel my hand shake as it holds my T-shirt over my mouth.

'The doors, they won't open!' a man in front of me shouts. Beneath the shriek of the alarm, I can hear him banging on the glass wall of the complex. There's so much smoke now that I can barely see, but I know from memory that this area doesn't have any exits.

My heart is beating hard enough to break. All my instincts are screaming at me to move, to run, that my path to the door is finally clear, but I hesitate.

The staff shouting directions at the exits are getting harder to hear, but how has this man missed the shining green lights of the fire exits?

'It's not a door!' I yell.

A gust of fresh air blows across my face as the last few people steam through the exits, and then it becomes unbearably hot. Staying in here is death. The flames reflect off the glass and makes it feel like we are surrounded.

'We need to go!' I scream at the man.

The alarm stops for a moment and even though my ears are ringing I catch the quiet sound of a child crying and

choking. I wave my hands through the molten grey, searching for them. Their cries vanish beneath the alarm as it restarts. I can't find them.

This isn't real.

It must be a nightmare.

Please let this be a nightmare.

I wipe the sweat from my eyes and take another wheezing breath. I think everyone else might be out. Everyone except me, the banging man and the lost child.

I don't care if my body is drowning in its own terror; I can't leave without them. Staggering forward, I wave my hands through the thick smoke until they hit something soft and wet. I think I might have hit the kid in the face, but once I know where their small body is I take hold of their hand.

'Hey!' I shout, turning my attention to the man hammering on the glass. I try to grab him, but his panic has made him much stronger than me. I thump him on the back to get his attention.

'Hey!' I shove him ahead of me towards the watery slither of green in the distance and drag the child behind. I can't breathe, but we're almost there. The green is shining just ahead of us when the man spins round and shouts, 'Where is she?!'

He pushes past me, running back where we came from.

No! I think, but I don't have the breath left to say it. My free hand finds the bar on the fire exit. I open it and gulp in the sweet night air. The oxygen is dark and cold and feels as smooth as water as it rushes down my throat. I push the coughing child out on to the pavement and blink at her, trying to clear the smoke from my eyes. It's the little girl, Rosie.

I spin, hoping to see firefighters. Someone needs to go back in to get the man, her dad, but there's no one. There's no one else. A flash lights up the distant town. The storm has moved on, but everyone else must have rushed away from the huge metal frame of the glass Culture Complex. There are some people drifting through the car park, but there's no staff to be seen. The sirens howl on the other side of town. They're too far away. Everyone is too far away.

There's no one else.

Tears spring into my eyes. I'm his only chance. The only people who know that there's still someone inside are me and this small child.

What else can I do?

The cold air has done nothing to cool my red-hot panic, but I push Rosie towards the confusion of people in the car park, pull open the door and run back into the inferno.

It's so much worse. I don't know how it could have got so much worse in just a few seconds; it's dark, but so bright and hotter than anything I've ever known. I was wrong before; this is what death looks like. Sweat streams down my face and into my eyes. Every inch of me wants to run straight back out of that door, but I can't.

'Hey!' I shout, lurching forward with my arms out, hoping that I'll be able to feel the man because I can't see him, and I can't hear him this time either. I didn't know that fire could roar. I can't breathe. I fall to my knees. I'm not fast enough. I don't know why I thought I could do this.

'Get up, Jenna.' I push myself up and make it a couple of

steps before I'm back down on the floor. I need to find him, but there's no air. I can still see the green of the exit sign. I could still make it out, but I'm not leaving Rosie's dad in here to die.

'Hey.' I crawl forward. He's got to be here. He can't have got far. He might be right in front of me. Maybe we can both still go home. I reach out, but my fingers find nothing but smoke. My arms wobble and I collapse.

'Hey,' I whisper. I twist back to look for the exit, but the green is gone.

I always thought dying would make me sad, but I'm not. I'm angry. I'm angry at myself.

I can't save his life. I can't even save my own.

I'm choking.

My stinging eyes close.

Sweat rolls down my hot cheeks.

Everything is heavy.

Dad and Megan will be so annoyed with me.

There's no more air.

There's just heat and the dark.

Fingers.

There are fingers gripping my cardy and pulling me up.

Hands.

A hand passes under my knees and another curls
around my shoulder.

Arms.

I'm in someone's arms.
I'm being held tight.
My joy is distant, but it's there.
I'm being rescued.

It's so hot higher up, but a moment later cool air surrounds me, rushes into my lungs and makes me cough. My eyes water as I prise them open. I can't make out much apart from the flames leaping from the Culture Complex.

'There's a man,' I croak.

'I'm on it,' the person holding me replies, and before I know what's happening, I am lying on the cold concrete of the car park and he's gone. My head is swimming, trying to make sense of the cool and the calm. Am I really OK?

A gust of wind blows my cardy against me and a violently coughing man is suddenly on the ground beside me.

'Daddy!'

I lurch up to see Rosie throw herself on her father. He's OK. I sag with relief and ease myself back on to the ground. My eyelids close, but fire still dances across my vision as I draw another deep, cool breath into my body. It must have rained during the film. The damp is soaking up through my clothes to soothe my baking back.

'Hi.' The energetic voice above me sounds more like someone at a party than a disaster. I force my eyes open to find the person who rescued me standing over me.

Tight, my sluggish brain comments. His black-and-red uniform is tight enough to show off every muscle he has.

Dimples. The young face gazing down at me has dark hair, dark eyes and dimples.

Kissable. His lips are pulled into a smile. They look soft.

Pose. His clenched fists are on his hips and the flames from the Culture Complex leap into the air behind him.

Mother Earth.

It's him.

I frantically blink away all thoughts of sculpted muscles and kissable lips.

I've just been rescued by the brand-new hero.

'I like your cardigan,' he says.

It's the hero! I've never been up close to a hero before, but it's not as intimidating as I'd have imagined. I wipe my streaming eyes. It's hard to tell from the ground, but he doesn't look like a huge and muscly super-strength type. He's slim, and he's young. He looks the same sort of age as me.

The hero rubs a shoe against his calf. His hands drift past

his thighs as if he's looking for pockets that aren't there and then he clasps them in front of him. We're all waiting for him to go and rescue someone else, but he's still staring at me. 'This is awesome, right? You're my number one.' He's smiling at me.

The words that he's saying sound like English, but nothing is making sense. Luckily my own personal hero, Rosie, has recovered enough to interrogate him.

'Are you a hero?' She edges closer to the boy. 'You don't look very old. But are you old? Are you thirty?' Rosie reaches for his utility belt and the hero is suddenly on the other side of me without seeming to move.

'Um, I'm not thirty. But I'm definitely an adult now.'

I blink and try to get my brain in gear. Did he just teleport? Or is he super-fast? That would make sense with how quickly he was able to find Rosie's dad. He seems nervous; his deep brown eyes keep flicking back to me as if he needs something from me. Does he need something from me? Should I be doing something other than lying here sweating?

'What's your name?' I manage.

'Well, they said I'd figure out my name on my first mission, so I guess I'm Ember,' he answers enthusiastically. He's British, but his voice has got a softness to it that I can't place.

The Culture Complex is blazing on the other side of the car park, but the sirens are getting closer, and there hasn't been a flash in a while. The storm is over and now we deal with the fallout. At least the distant chatter of the crowd is still subdued. They haven't noticed the hero yet.

The hero who is looking down at me with the weirdest expression.

Did my jeans burn off? I subtly glance down and exhale when I see all my clothes are still there. Why is he still looking at me?

'You think it's all right?' he asks.

'What?' I manage before another coughing fit consumes me.

'Ember,' he repeats when I've finished. 'Is it a good name?'

Rosie's dad shuffles closer to us.

'Thank you,' the dad manages.

'You're welcome, sir,' Ember replies.

Rosie comes over to me, and without saying a word sits down and leans on me.

'But seriously—' Ember starts. 'Wait, what's your name?'

'My name?' Why does he care what my name is?

'Tell him your name,' Rosie prompts.

'Jenna.'

'Jenna.' Ember nods as if he approves. 'How old are you?'

'Seventeen.' I clench my lips shut. That was a strange question. I don't want to give this hero any more of my personal details.

'Jenna.' He crouches beside me. 'What do you think of Ember as my hero name?'

Several responses surge towards my mouth, but *Why do you care what I think?* and *Shouldn't you be saving people?* are beaten by—

'It's not great, Ember.'

His face falls and I immediately feel guilty.

'Oh. I thought, you know, it's like fire but more, er, mystical.'

He waggles his fingers. There's a loud crack from the complex and the flames get even brighter, blazing almost white in the smoky sky.

'It's a terrible name for a hero, Ember,' Rosie's dad croaks.

'Oh.' Ember's forehead creases softly as he frowns at me. 'What do you think it should be?'

'Maybe Blaze?' It comes out before I've had a chance to think, and his eyes widen. Have I insulted him? Is Blaze actually an insult and I never realised?

'Blaze …' he says slowly.

'Sorry,' I start.

'Blaze!' He jumps up. 'It's perfect! And you thought of it! You of all people! Blaze! Hi, I'm Blaze. The Blaze? No, just Blaze. Hi.'

'Excuse me, Mr Blaze?' Rosie's dad says. 'It looks like the town is on fire?'

'It *is* on fire!' Blaze nods confidently. 'I am absolutely on that!'

He winks at me and then he steps into the air and shoots into the sky.

'Wow.' Rosie peers past my cardy.

My insides feel weird. Maybe it's because he winked at me. Why would a hero wink at me? Maybe it was a wink for everyone. Can winks be for everyone? And why did he just say *you of all people?* What did that mean? Maybe he's got me confused with someone else.

He disappears in the smoke rising from the high street. There's so much of it! I push myself up, and Rosie rises with me. I can't see how far the fire has spread. Has it got to our street? If

this really is the prophecy, will there be any of Nine Trees left standing in the morning?

There's another crash from the complex and my head whips round to take in the shuddering building. 'I think we should move away from the—'

And then the Culture Complex explodes.

London Reels After Soft Prophecy

***River Times*, 25th June 1999**

1999
A hero will emerge
West of the River Thames
Where life hangs in the balance
Amongst the oak leaves

The world is in turmoil today as London's Oak Leaves prophecy was revealed to refer to a tabby cat called Mr Onion. Mr Onion was rescued from the highest branches of his neighbourhood oak tree by a new hero, who has chosen the title the Controller.

The rescue itself was impressive. The Controller used his technopathic abilities to turn his gadget pack into a hoverboard. But his emergence leaves London authorities frustrated at the millions wasted on shelters and safety precautions.

'I know we should all be grateful to the Diviner,' said paramedic Gillian Cole, 46. 'But it's like this was her idea of a joke.'

The emergence has also left unanswered questions about the Controller and the direction his heroic path will take. With no humans rescued, there is no significant 'first' from his prophesised emergence – the person who often goes on to play a pivotal role in the hero's life as a friend, a sidekick, or even a Love Interest.

As Mr Onion was handed back to his owner, Victor Tim, 84, there were several quips about a possible octogenarian sidekick. However, with Mr Onion safely back in his basket, Victor Tim did not hesitate to dismiss the press and the world's newest hero.

There will no doubt be parties tonight on the streets of London as the city celebrates a deathless prophecy, but we are left wondering what course the Controller's future could take.