


THE LOVE INTEREST



HELEN COMERFORD

BLOOMSBURY

LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

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 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 super-charged 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.

CHAPTER 3

An unfamiliar rattle invades the dark space between dreams and wakefulness. A trolley is out there somewhere. There are people too, passing in waves of chatter and sighs. Are they the sounds of a dream I've already forgotten? The waking world pulls me upwards, but Mum appears and holds out her hand.

'Want to keep dreaming, Jen-bear?' she asks. 'I've got something to show you.'

I nod. If I can be with her, I'd stay asleep forever.

'OK, baby.' The dark is lit by rays of sun and Mum steers me into our bright kitchen. She smooths out a set of blueprints on the dining table and the gem on her bracelet flashes green across her face. 'It's a smart bed. It can tell when the user needs something. See, here is a pad that measures your oxygen, and this sensor here will tell their doctor if they're stressed. I'm making it for hurt heroes.' The paper ripples as a breeze makes its way in through the open window. 'Just look.' Mum has her

hand on my back. She would always put her hand on my back when she showed me her work.

My throat is burning.

‘Mum, I don’t feel well.’ I glance away from her work and towards our dripping tap.

With a rustle of paper, Mum gathers up her plans and walks out of the back door.

I don’t try and call her back.

It never works.

I don’t want to stay here, but I know waking up will bring a whole new type of pain. With a last drip from the tap, the dream fades, leaving nothing but a familiar pang of sadness. My throat is dry and, somehow, so are my lungs. My eyelids feel like they’ve been glued shut.

‘She’s waking up.’ Megan’s voice is hushed, which is odd. My sister has never been one for the gentle ‘Good morning’, preferring instead to shout ‘Get up!’ at me on her way to the bathroom. I inch my fingers across the bed, hoping to find my water bottle. My sheets feel wrong; they’re stiff and they smell like soap.

‘Jenna?’ Dad says.

Megan and Dad swim into view as I manage to get my eyes open. They are sitting either side of me in plastic chairs. This feels strange until I realise that we’re all in a tiny hospital room. The night before crashes back into my mind: the heat of the fire, Blaze, the explosion. Did I die?

Two doctors pass the closed door, talking loudly about stool samples. This is enough to convince me that I’m still alive.

‘How are you?’ Dad asks. He’s sitting in front of the window. The sunlight streaming in makes me grasp at the memory of my dream, but it’s already gone, so I focus my prickling eyes on Dad instead. He’s dressed for work, with the top button of his neat pale blue shirt undone. He normally looks much younger than his age and shaves away any grey hairs that dare to grow on his smooth pale head. My chest aches as I notice a grey fuzz in the morning light. Today he looks every one of his forty-eight years. ‘Jenna?’ he says. ‘How do you feel?’

It feels like I’ve been wiped out by a wave of molten sand, but telling Dad that might age him even more. I open my mouth to say something reassuring and realise I won’t be able to do more than cough until I have some water.

‘You should drink.’ Megan presses the bed’s remote and passes me a squidgy plastic cup as I slowly rise to a sitting position. The expression on her face is much softer than I’m used to. She’s wearing a big red jumper over her leggings and her chunky box braids are tied back with one of her headwraps. I drain the cool water, feeling each refreshing particle as it’s absorbed by my parched body, and look around the small white room.

‘You got this cute little private room for some reason.’ Megan follows my eye to a painting of Nine Trees’s harbour that’s hung next to the TV. ‘Proper five-star treatment, although you were passed out for most of it. Nice little silver lining to the town burning down though.’

‘Megan!’ Dad looks appalled.

‘An upgrade is an upgrade, Dad.’

If Megan is making jokes about the town burning down,

maybe there weren't too many casualties? My forehead creases and I feel something stuck just below my hairline. I gently touch the bandage, causing a small stab of pain. My arm hurts too; it's laced with cream-covered scratches. I remember the rush of heat and glass as the Culture Complex exploded.

'There was a little girl,' I say, and they wince. I can't blame them. It sounds like someone has replaced my vocal cords with sandpaper.

'I don't know if she's here, darling. But I do know that no one died last night, no one at all. We were all so lucky.' Dad reaches for me but drops his hand, like he's afraid to touch me.

I hold out my arms and he shuffles over to give me a hug. My dad is always gentle, but now he embraces me like I'm made of glass. Megan gets involved and holds us both far too hard.

'Ow!' I chuckle as they spring back.

Someone must sit on the remote control because the TV that had been silently playing the news in the corner pipes up.

'—was struck by lightning multiple times—' The polished news anchor, Linda Morden, coughs, and I reach for my water in sympathy. I can't imagine having cameras trained on me after a night like last night. 'Excuse me. It was a smoky night for a lot of us.' Linda looks down at her notes and continues. 'The severity of the storm has been attributed to the EV—the accelerated evolution of the Earth, that is causing an increasing number of weather events, powered people and animal attacks. Luckily our new hero, foretold by the Diviner, emerged to save the day.'

A picture of the boy who saved me fills the screen and I get a proper look at his dark flicky hair, deep brown eyes and

dimples. He's smiling and the background is artfully out of focus. It's the type of photo you'd find in a magazine. He looks too perfect, it's like he's not a real person.

Dad frowns at the screen. 'How old is that kid?' He raises the remote to mute the story, but Megan bats his hand down as the hospital appears.

'*Sydney Jones is on the scene, coming to you live from Nine Trees Infirmary with the latest.*' The anchor smiles at the camera for a beat too long as we switch over to the reporter.

'*Thanks, Linda.*' Sydney appears, blocking the entrance to A&E and looking suitably serious in a designer raincoat.

'Those two hate each other,' Megan whispers. 'It's such good TV.'

Dad pointedly turns up the volume.

'*A cat. A listed pub. A cinema-cum-library-cum-restaurant. A bus full of innocent people. What do they have in common?*' Sydney leans slightly to the side as paramedics rush past. '*They were all rescued last night by a man—*'

'Boy,' Dad mutters.

'Shhh!' Megan says.

'*—sudden appearance meant the difference between life and a fiery death for many residents of Nine Trees.*'

'Blaze,' I croak. I still can't believe he wanted to call himself Ember.

Sydney cuts short her dramatic pause and clutches her ear. '*And we've got breaking news! Our source at the council has revealed that the name of this hero is Blaze! A truly fascinating choice of—*'

'Thanks, Sydney.' Linda is back, relegating Sydney to a corner of the screen, where she looks furious. Megan bursts out laughing as Linda continues. *'We can confirm that the name of our new hero is Blaze. There has been a lot of speculation over what the hero might call himself in the lead-up to the prophecy—'*

'You already knew his name?' Dad asks.

I nod, reluctant to use my voice.

'Did you meet him?'

Megan cuts in. 'We don't have to do this now. She can barely talk.'

'And here to talk to about lightning striking last night -' Linda gives a conspiratorial grin - *'is national treasure and head of the Heroics and Power Authority, our HPA, King Ron.'*

Linda beams as the screen switches to a double shot of her and her guest. King Ron, the heroes' hero. He looks impeccable, as always, with a precise side parting, neat white beard and blue pocket square poking out of his suit jacket. He is the reason people my age know what a pocket square is.

Even though the rest of the nation adores him, there's always the same sound in our house when King Ron comes on TV. It's a combination of Dad exhaling softly and Megan tutting as loud as she possibly can. It sounds like the brakes on a roller coaster. I'm not sure what's more annoying, King Ron's cheesy charm or my family's reaction to it.

They normally wheel him out to talk about prophecies or foreign affairs, and even though Dad is constantly muttering about the dodgy dealings of the HPA that the council have to

manage, it's weird to see King Ron on TV to talk about something that I was involved in.

'King Ron, it's a pleasure to have you with us.'

'It's a pleasure to be here, Linda.' He gazes at her above his steepled fingers. *'And I must say, Linda, despite the turmoil of the night you look as bewitching as ever.'*

'Keep it together, Linda,' Megan mutters as the anchor giggles.

'Well, I ... well, yes,' Linda manages. *'Yes. There's almost too much to talk to you about, King Ron. We will of course cover the news that the Nine Trees prophecy of the last Diviner has now passed, but let's start with the hot topic: Blaze. What can you tell us about him? Where is our new hero from?'*

'I'm not at liberty to divulge too much. But, Linda, it's been over two decades since I hung up my cape to take over the running of our HPA, and of course our other hero, the Controller, has been missing for almost as long. It feels good to finally have another British hero.'

Linda looks so excited she might be about to vibrate off her chair. *'Another exclusive; our new hero, Blaze, is homegrown! Eyewitnesses have confirmed that he has the powers of super-speed and flight. Is he from one of the families we know produces powered individuals?'*

'Shall I draw his family tree?' Ron chuckles. *'What can I say? One set of Blaze's grandparents are from a respected powered family in China. The other side of his family is British, with a smattering of powers through the generations. Blaze is a very special young man.'*

There's a pause as Linda waits for him to continue, then her face crumples into a look of frustration mixed with adoration when she realises he's done. *'Is there nothing else you can tell us, King Ron?'*

'It's just Ron King now, I'm not a hero any more.' He gives her a wink and Megan mimes throwing up.

'I think this country will always see you as a hero,' Linda replies.

'Too kind, Linda.'

'I sent you a link to his last opinion piece in the *National*, didn't I?' Megan turns to me, eyes burning with her familiar righteous outrage. *"The compassion of women. Why female powers are weaker."* Compassion? I'll tell him where he can shove my compassion. I honestly don't know how any woman can bear to speak to that patriarchal ball bag. You just keep repeating her name until she loves you, eh, Ron? Oh, Linda, Linda, Linda, Linda!"

'Shhh!' Dad snaps.

'I suppose what I can talk about are Blaze's heroics.' Ron leans towards the camera. *'At just eighteen, he is our youngest ever hero, but he still rescued twenty-eight people last night and the aid he gave to our valiant fire service saved even more homes and businesses. If you'll excuse the pun, Linda, the kid was on fire.'*

My family sighs.

'But maybe we should look at a different kind of spark.' Ron lingers over the word and Linda giggles obediently. *'Let's talk about—'*

Mother Earth.

I'm on TV.

A picture of me has appeared in a little square between Ron and Linda. It's my school photo from last year. I hate it. I'd decided to try liquid eyeliner for the first time, and it had smudged. Moments before a photo is not the best time to discover that tissue and water won't get that stuff off. My eyes look sort of smoky, which I'd been going for, but also quite red, like they're full of make-up.

This doesn't make sense.

Why is my picture on the screen? Does the hospital have a new feature where it shows each person their worst photo ... on the news ...?

'You're on TV!' Megan yells.

Dad fumbles with the remote and accidentally turns the volume up to full.

'... *Blaze rescued* ...' Linda shouts.

I inhale too fast and choke on a lungful of air.

The TV is muted. 'Mother Earth!' Dad tries to turn the sound back on and changes the channel.

'Dad!' Megan snatches it off him and brings back Ron at a normal volume.

'... *the first person that Blaze rescued. He plucked her out of the flames of the burning Culture Complex.*'

'Your Love Interest, Kate, wasn't she the first person that you rescued?' Linda asks.

Ron nods. '*When I absorbed the power of that critical nuclear power plant, my Kate was the on-call technician, and I'll tell you, Linda, looking into the eyes of that first person you save is*

something special. Zhànshì pulled his Xiu out of a landslide at the start of his journey. The Sheriff first appeared to rescue his Nancy. I'm not saying that Jenna Ray from Nine Trees is Blaze's true love, but they're similar ages and, I'll tell you this, Linda, he can't stop talking about her.'

Dad's eyes are wide, mirroring my own shock. Blaze had said 'You're my number one'. Evidently, what he meant was – *You're the first person I rescued, get ready for a whole world of madness.* He'd been acting strange. Was he trying desperately to fall in love with me whilst I lay sweating on the concrete?

'What is happening?' Megan whispers.

My heart is thudding so hard I'm worried it might break out of my chest and hit my sister in the face. This shouldn't be happening to me. Sporty, secretly anxious, not remotely interested in a relationship, Jenna Ray is not someone who people fancy. She's not available – I'm not available. No one gazes at me the way that Linda is gazing at Ron and it's never bothered me. I don't need to sneak off behind the maths block with a boy or have dramatic arguments in public. I've got better things to do. Like whatever I want because I'm single. And I like it that way.

I can't do this. I can't have all these people looking at me and talking about me. Why is this happening to me? Why am I on national TV?

'We've got Sydney Jones at the hospital. Perhaps we'll even be able to get Jenna Ray's side of the story. Until then, with the Nine Trees prophecy out of the way, we should all now be focusing on the search for the next Diviner—' Linda turns back to Ron and suddenly she's mouthing again.

Dad tosses the remote down. ‘You were the first person he rescued?’

I shrug again. My throat aches. This is awful, so awful, and whatever I say next is going to set them both off. Dad is on the edge of a stress spiral and Megan has gone a strange shade of red.

They’re staring at me.

I don’t want to talk.

My voice is too weak to say what I want to say.

I open my mouth.

I close my mouth.

I cough.

‘THIS!’ Megan yells. **‘This is exactly the problem with heroes, the HPA, and that chauvinist dinosaur, King knobbing Ron.’**

She’s off on a stellar rant. It’s quite a lot louder than usual. **‘The whole “first” thing is completely inappropriate too. It has such sexual connotations.’**

My cheeks heat as Megan shouts about sex and I glance at Dad. He’s not listening to her. He’s ranting too.

‘... and I don’t understand exactly who gave them permission to broadcast my daughter ...’

‘... the last thing we need is something else reinforcing the belief

that this kind of interaction will somehow fundamentally change who a woman is ...'

'... I understand that he saved her life and of course I'm grateful, but heroism shouldn't be transactional ...'

'... part of this broken patriarchal system. How DARE they try to sweep my sister up in their knobbery ...'

'... not them. Not the HPA. Not after everything that happened. This is not happening ... You have no idea what they're capable of.'

'Did he even ask you?'

'Did you agree to any of this?'

It's gone quiet.

They're both looking at me again and it takes me a second to detangle their rage and find the questions they just asked.

I want to shout too, but my voice isn't working. 'No!' I manage.

'Of course!'

'This isn't happening!'

There's a knock on the door. 'Hi, Jenna, they said this was your room. It's Sydney Jones, *on the scene*.'

We all stare at the door. The handle wobbles, like Sydney's manicured hand is resting on the other side.

'Sydney Jones, from the Global News?'

I can't feel my heart any more, I think it's stopped.

'We want to hear all about your rescue, Jenna, in your own words.'

Even if I had a voice, I couldn't talk to her. If we invite her and the cameras in, the whole country is going to watch me have a panic attack.

'We all want to hear about your first impression of Blaze.'

Dad puts a hand on my shoulder, and I realise that I've been shaking my head.

'It's OK. I'll tell them to go away,' he says.

I nod.

'I'll tell them that you can't talk—'

I nod again.

'And that you've got no interest in being involved with this hero in any capacity.'

I nod decisively. It doesn't matter how tight he held me when he rescued me. I'm not interested. I don't want a relationship, especially one that will make me the heeled bait that's dangled off a cliff or the star of my own reality TV show.

I've spent a lifetime being trained to recognise what the HPA do to women. They chew them up and spit them out. I won't be a Love Interest. Not now, not ever. Blaze needs to find himself another girl.