

CHRIS RUSSELL

Songs
About
a Girl

HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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For Pip, who can read me like a book

)

Olly Samson was a normal eighteen year old, in almost every way.

He used to live round the corner from me, on Marchwood Avenue, before he left school. He was easy-going, a nice guy, and always seemed to have plenty of friends. He was more into singing than football, which did make some of the boys wary of him, but other than that there was nothing that unusual about him. Just another face in the hall. Thing is, it didn't make sense that he would have noticed *me*, because he was two years above me and, in any case, I tend to go out of my way not to be noticed.

Dear charlie . . .

I stared again at his message on my screen, searching for signs it might be a prank. He didn't seem like the kind of person who would send this as a joke, but the things he'd written about me . . . I found them hard to believe.

Like I was saying, Olly was pretty much a normal eighteen year old. Nice to everyone, never caused any trouble, did his own thing.

He just also happened to be a member of the biggest boy band on the planet.

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NEWSFLASH: GABRIEL WEST IS BACK ON THE MARKET!!

Fire&Lights heart-throb breaks up with supermodel girlfriend

That's right, F&L fans . . . Gabriel West is finally single again!! Ella Mackenzie got papped leaving his hotel last night on her own, and today her press agent revealed that Ella and Gabriel have definitely broken up, and this time it's for good.

*This is amaaaaazing!! Gorgeous Gabriel is single,
AND it's less than two months until Christmas.*

On top of all that, after teasing us for over a year with singles and EPs, Gabriel, Olly, Yuki and Aiden are finally releasing their first full-length album SONGS ABOUT A GIRL on 13 December. So. SO. EXCITED.

Do you have tickets to the tour?? Comments below!! :) xxx

xox FIRE&LIGHTS FOREVER xox

The best Fire&Lights fan blog on the web!!



The usual crowd of Year Eight girls were huddled round their phones, squealing, their voices bouncing back and forth across the canteen. It was part of their daily ritual to read their favourite fan blog aloud over lunch, but today they were being particularly . . . well . . . squeally. I could hardly concentrate on my book.

‘She wasn’t good enough for Gabriel anyway.’

‘I heard all her pictures are Photoshopped.’

‘Gabriel’s definitely better-looking than her. He’s way out of her league.’

Thanks to Olly Samson, Fire&Lights fever had started early at our school. But even the fact that Olly had once worn a Caversham High tie wasn’t enough to make him the most popular member of the band around here. Like it did everywhere else in the country, that honour went to unofficial frontman Gabriel West.

‘His hair is *amazing*.’

‘I think it’s his eyes. Amber eyes are, like, *super rare*.’

‘Imagine holding his hand.’

More squealing. I fired off a message to Melissa.

Just finished lunch. Where are you?? xx

‘Emmy has tickets to their concert on Saturday,’ another girl was saying. ‘She’s made a banner just for Gabriel.’

‘God, he is so hot, it makes me want to die.’

Sighing, I closed my book and packed it into my school bag.

I swear, some days it felt like I was the only girl in the world who wasn’t in love with Gabriel West.

The little bird was hopping about on the edge of its nest, wings twitching. I adjusted the dial on my camera lens, shifting the focus, and zoomed in on its face. It was a sparrow, or a thrush, or something, and it came back to this spot every lunch break, around the same time. I could tell it was the same bird because it had a little orange spot on its back, just visible beneath the brown.

‘. . . I know, it’s like Crouch actually thinks we care about some war from, like, a hundred years ago.’

‘I don’t even listen, I just sit there.’

‘Yeah, me too.’

The voices passed behind me, and I kept my gaze fixed on the viewfinder. The bird twitched its little head.

There was a sudden peel of sharp laughter.

‘What’s she doing?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Same thing she always does.’

The back of my neck bristled. I went to squeeze the shutter, but the bird bolted.

‘Anyone got any fags?’

I lowered the camera and glanced over my shoulder. A group of girls were leaning against the railings outside the old science lab: Aimee Watts, Gemma Hockley, a few others. Aimee looked me up and down, and I tugged my hat over my ears.

‘Hey, Charlie!’ she called across the courtyard. ‘What you doing?’

Aimee wore heavy eye make-up, and had a habit of tying her hair back into a tight, angry bun. This made her face look taut, and severe.

I clicked on my lens cap.

‘Nothing,’ I replied. Aimee folded her arms across her crinkled school shirt.

‘Doesn’t look like nothing.’

One of the girls fished a cigarette from her bag and lit it. They began passing it around, blowing the smoke high into the air. I turned to walk away, and my phone beeped at me.

Aaaargh so sorry!! A message from Melissa. In art studio with miss woods

‘Aw, she’s leaving,’ said Gemma, as I made my way out of the courtyard. Aimee called after me.

'Hey, Charlie, where you going?' I sped up my walk.
'Stay and have a smoke . . .'

Ducking down a narrow alleyway, I pressed my back against the wall and tapped out a reply to Melissa.

What are you doing with miss woods??

I could still hear the girls laughing round the corner.

Reorganising art cupboard. Dull as. She was like 'please, it won't take long' and i was all like 'I DO HAVE A LIFE U KNOW'

I smiled.

Sucks to be you

Anyway, I MISS U she wrote back. Also, i have a fun plan for ur birthday. Tell u after school xxxxxxxx

I frowned at the message. We had already made plans for my birthday.

Which meant Melissa was up to something.

'Did you see the fan blog, Charlie? Today's blog? Oh my god, he's single again . . . praise the lord.'

The main road through town was buzzing with traffic. Students flew across the street, ducking between cars and yelling at each other. Drivers honked as they passed.

‘I know that Gabriel West would never go for a geek like me,’ continued Melissa, ‘but just *imagine*. If he was your boyfriend. GOD.’

Melissa Morris was a bony whirlwind of arms and legs who almost never stopped talking. We’d been neighbours and best friends for years, ever since Dad and I first moved to Reading, and for as long as I could remember we’d walked to and from school together.

She had a teeny tiny obsession with Fire&Lights.

‘I mean, think about it. You and gorgeous Gabriel . . . it could totally happen. He said in *Teen Hits* that he likes long dark hair – *check* – and big brown eyes – *check* – and you’re easily pretty enough. Me, I’m a bit ginge, so I’d have to dye my hair. And get a new face. But, hey, medical science can do anything these days.’ She paused for breath. ‘Course, I’m saving myself for Aiden, as you know. Apparently he quite likes gingers.’

We stopped at the traffic lights, and I thought of Olly’s message, sitting secretly on my computer. It felt wrong, keeping something so huge from Melissa, but I had to get my head around it first. I had to decide what to do.

Then I would tell her.

‘Well,’ I said, poking at the crossing button, ‘Aiden would be lucky to have you. Ginger or otherwise.’

Melissa grinned, exposing her newly straightened teeth.

‘Ooh!’ she said. ‘I almost forgot. Your birthday.’

I eyed her from beneath the tattered brim of my hat.

‘What about it?’

‘I know exactly how we should celebrate.’

The lights turned green, and we stepped on to the road.

‘But we already have plans. We’re going for pizza.’

Melissa squinted at this, and raised a single finger.

‘Or,’ she said, ‘*or* . . . we could get dressed up and hit the school social.’

I cocked my head at her.

‘Erm . . . earth to Melissa?’

‘Come on,’ she said, throwing her hands in the air. ‘You’re sixteen in four days! That’s a huge deal. You can’t spend your biggest birthday yet just, like, sitting around with me scoffing garlic bread.’

‘Actually,’ I replied, ‘that sounds amazing.’ She stuck her tongue out at me. ‘Besides, you’re the only person I really want to spend it with.’

We reached the pavement, and Melissa stopped in front of me. She had a pained look on her face.

‘I know, and normally I’d feel the same way, but . . .’

A smile tickled the side of my mouth.

‘What’s this really about?’

Melissa chewed her lip. Her little cheeks turned pink.

‘OK, fine. There’s a boy.’

‘A boy? Since when was there a boy?’

We started walking again.

‘You see, *this* is why the school should never have separated us for double geography: it’s prime catching-up time. I miss you so much on Monday afternoons, Charlie, it’s not even funny. Plus Miss Walker makes me sit next to Snotty Barwick, and he smells of cheese.’

I poked the top of her head.

‘Hello, Mel? Who’s the boy?’

She fiddled with a clip on her rucksack.

‘Khaleed, from Computer Club.’

I racked my brains. From what I could remember, Khaleed was a year below us and at least six inches shorter than Melissa.

‘Do you even like Khaleed?’

Melissa started to say yes, then stopped herself.

‘Well, sort of. Not really.’ She scrunched up her face.
‘He has nice ears.’

‘Ears?’

‘Anyway, that’s not the point,’ she continued, huffily.
‘You’d feel the same way if you’d just had your braces

taken off. I'm fifteen years and five months old, and I have never kissed a boy. It's beyond tragic.'

Tower Close was approaching up ahead. I took a deep breath, and grabbed Melissa's hand.

'OK, then,' I said. 'We'll go to the social. For you. But you'd better get that kiss.'

'Yay! You're the best,' she said, squeezing my fingers.

'Naah,' I replied, squeezing hers back.

'And we are gonna have a LEGENDARY night,' she said, with a little skip. 'I guarantee it.'

'When have we ever had fun at a social?' I asked. Melissa tapped a finger against her lips.

'Umm . . . how about two summers ago, when they had that epic sweet shop? That was fun.'

I stared back at her.

'We spent half that night watching Becky Bates spewing up pink gunk behind the bins.'

Melissa looped her arm through mine.

'See what I mean? Fun times.'

Arm in arm, we turned off the main road and on to our street, the sound of traffic fading away behind us. Tower Close was, as always, still and serene. Mown lawns, silent houses.

'So, if you had to save any member of Fire&Lights from a burning building,' said Melissa, 'which one would you pick?'

Regardless of how many times I told her I wasn't into them, Melissa would still ask me these questions. Every single day.

'I really haven't given it much thought.'

'Well, you should. You never know when you might unexpectedly bump into a pop star.'

I raised an eyebrow at her.

'A pop star on fire, you mean?'

'Exactly.'

She shrugged, matter of factly, and hummed a quick tune. We were nearly at our gates.

'You coming in for hot chocolate?'

'I can't. I've got that . . . chemistry homework.'

It was only a white lie, but I felt it in my chest.

'Oh god, yep. Fractional distillation.' Melissa clicked her gate open. 'Message me when you're done, OK?'

'You bet,' I said, watching her peel off down the garden path, singing as she went.

Dad was frowning over a pile of papers when I walked past his study. He worked from home on Mondays.

'Oh, hello,' he said as I drifted by his door. 'Good day?'

'Mm-hmm,' I replied, sweeping past him and disappearing up the stairs.

In the safety of my bedroom, I slid my laptop from its drawer and dumped my schoolbag under the desk. As the computer whirred to life, I tried to imagine what Melissa would do when she found out I'd been sent a private message by a member of Fire&Lights. She might actually explode.

Opening the browser, I went straight to Facebook, opened my inbox, clicked on Olly's message and took a deep breath.

It was time I wrote my reply.

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Dear Olly . . . many thanks for writing to me.

I sighed, and deleted my opening sentence for the fourth time. What did I think this was, a job application?

Hey, Olly, cool to hear from you.

That was even worse. One thing school had taught me was that I, Charlie Bloom, was a very long way from cool.

I dropped backwards on to my bed, arms folded. I had waited nearly two days to respond to Olly's message, and this already felt like two days too many. I scanned through his words again on the screen, trying to make sense of everything he'd said. There were two main things about his message that confused me:

Firstly, why on earth would he even remember who I was?

Dear charlie . . . you might not remember me, but . . .

(I might not remember *him*? Barely a day went by when I didn't see Olly's face smiling back at me from a rucksack, or a pencil case.)

. . . but i was a couple of years above you at Caversham High. Not sure if you follow Fire&Lights, but that's what i'm up to now, and i wanted to ask you something about your photography. I was looking through your gig pics, the ones you took of that school band, and they're amazing!! Thought you might be up for taking some backstage photos for us sometime . . .??

Secondly, and more importantly, did he really want *me* to come and take photos for *his* band? The chart-topping Fire&Lights? I wasn't a real photographer, for a start, I was just a school kid with a second-hand camera. And the shots I took at the Diamond Storm gig were all right, I suppose, but they couldn't be good enough for a professional band . . . could they?

I clicked through to my photo archive and scrolled down to July. There were about forty photos from that night, the night near the end of term when Diamond Storm had played the school hall. Everyone knew Diamond Storm were The Best Band At Caversham High, but they'd decided you couldn't be a proper rock band unless you had a proper photographer.

As it turned out, I was their only option.

And although Diamond Storm posted the photos all over their blog, and some of them even got used in the

school newspaper, I couldn't help but feel that I'd be out of my league shooting a world-famous band like Fire&Lights.

Way out of my league.

. . . Our management team have this new thing going on, read Olly's message. They have pro photographers taking all our concert pics, but they reckon someone closer to our age would be better at the fun stuff backstage . . . you know, for the fan page of the website.

I didn't know much about Fire&Lights, but I did know that their fans were obsessive, and fiercely loyal. If I agreed to this, what would happen if I did something wrong? What if they didn't like my pictures, or the fact that some random teenage girl – who wasn't even a fan – was getting to hang out with their idols? My name would be out there, on one of the biggest websites in the world, for anyone to see, and the idea of all those people knowing who I was . . . It closed up my throat just thinking about it.

. . . We're playing Reading Arena next Saturday, so i thought you might fancy coming along & giving it a go? P.S. Have sent you a friend request, hope that's cool.

One thing you could say about Olly was that he clearly hadn't let the fame thing go to his head. He was acting almost as if *I* was the famous one.

But I wasn't famous. And I wasn't really a photographer. Which meant there was really only one thing I could say.

Hi, Olly, thanks for writing to me. Great to hear from you, and congratulations on the band. That's a really amazing offer but . . .

I paused, and looked out of the window. Marchwood Avenue was only a stone's throw from my house. Olly would have taken pretty much the same route to school as me every day, dodging the crowds on the Peppard Road, or taking a shortcut through the golf course.

Apart from that, we lived in completely different worlds.

. . . but I don't think I can do it. I've got loads of schoolwork on and anyway I don't really think I'm good enough yet. It's nice of you to ask though. Good luck with everything, Charlie.

My finger hovered over the Send button. All I could do now was hope that I wasn't making a huge, huge mistake.

'You said yes. TELL ME YOU SAID YES.'

I had told Melissa about the message. She was taking it . . . badly.

'Well, it's not quite as simple as that, M—'

‘Not quite as simple? As what?! What?’

Melissa clenched her gloved hands, her frantic breath turning into steam in the frozen air. It was another chilly winter morning, very nearly November, and the trees on the roadside were tinged frosty white.

‘I’m just . . . I’m not ready for something like this.’

Melissa stepped in front of me.

‘Yo, time out. Time. Out.’ She peered into my eyes. ‘This is, let’s face it, the most exciting thing that has happened to any human being, ever. Agreed?’

‘Well, I—’

‘AND FURTHERMORE,’ she said, pressing a finger into my forehead, ‘it is happening to *my* best friend, which makes it my duty to ensure she doesn’t mess it up.’

I scratched the back of my head.

‘I’m not sure it would have happened anyway, to be honest . . .’

‘Hey, listen. When the second hottest member of the world’s hottest band asks you to go on tour with them and hang out with them and stare at their lovely faces all day, you always say yes. No-brainer.’

‘He didn’t ask me to go on tour with them, Mel. It was just one concert.’

‘Oh, just one concert? Just one concert with *Olly Samson from Fire&Lights*? Unless you message him back

and say you've changed your mind, I will never, ever, ever talk to you again.'

I sighed, pulling my coat tight around my body.

'And anyway,' continued Melissa, 'photography is totally your *thing*. It's your superpower. Aren't you bored of shooting flowers and insects all day?'

We stopped at the crossing, and I stared over the road at the school buildings, squat and grey in the frosty mist. Aimee Watts was leaning against the outside wall of the sports hall, her entourage buzzing around her.

'The truth is . . . I don't think I'm good enough.'

'You what?'

'I'm not a good enough photographer.'

'That's crazy!' snapped Melissa. 'You've got to stop putting yourself down all the time.'

I itched at a freckle on the back of my hand, and the little green man beeped at us.

'Can we talk about something else now?'

'I mean, look at *me*,' she continued, dragging me across the road by the coat sleeve. 'I know what I'm good at.'

'This is true.'

'That computer programming thing we did yesterday afternoon was riDICulously easy. And everyone else was,

like, erm, what the flip is HTML, and I was all like, hypertext-markup-language *thanks very much.*'

'But you're an expert,' I said, as we passed through the school gates. 'You spend every single evening on your computer, doing . . . well, whatever it is you do. Me, I'm not even a proper photographer.'

'You're going to fix this, Charlie. I know it. You know it.'

'There's nothing to f—'

'Ah-ah-ah.'

She stopped, turned to face me and landed a hand on each of my shoulders.

'I'll only say this once, and then next time I see you we're going back to discussing who has the best hair out of Gabriel and Aiden. Even though it is obviously Aiden.'

I stared at my feet.

'OK.'

'You are my best friend, and you are always good enough.'

A few seconds of silence passed between us, and then she smiled, curiously, and waved a purple glove at me.

'See you in assembly!'

'Simmer down, please,' said Mr Bennett, from the stage, as students shuffled in their chairs, chatting with friends and

scuffing their feet against the wooden floor. He waited, casting an eye across the hall, and row by row, silence fell.

He closed his file.

‘Before we get started, as you are all aware, it’s the Caversham High social this Friday night.’

The room filled with whoops and jeering, and Mr Bennett waved a calming hand.

‘Yes, good – we’re all very excited, and the social’s always lots of fun. *But . . .* I would ask you to remember that, as the upper school, you are important role models for the younger ones, and when it comes to your behaviour on Friday evening, we expect you to set an example . . .’

Melissa leaned into my ear.

‘I’ve worked out what I’m going to wear on Friday,’ she said, in a harsh whisper. ‘My sparkly blue top.’

I gave her a thumbs-up, and she squeezed her chest together.

‘It makes the most of my frankly meagre breasts,’ she added, and I had to cover my mouth so I wouldn’t laugh out loud.

‘. . . Now,’ continued Mr Bennett, ‘you may recall that during last term’s event we had complaints from the local community over students drinking on the playing fields, and the police were nearly involved . . .’

Melissa leaned into me again.

‘Do you think Khaleed will like it?’

‘What?’ I mouthed.

‘My blue top.’

I smiled back at her, and whispered: ‘Definitely. You’ll be the Kanye and Kim of Computer Club.’

Melissa sniggered at this, and the sound vaulted high over our heads, stopping Mr Bennett mid-sentence. He waited two seconds, then continued.

‘... So ... let this be a reminder to you all of the school’s zero tolerance policy concerning drugs and alcohol. And this Friday night is no exception. I hope that’s understood.’

A commotion erupted a few rows behind us, and everyone turned round to find Aimee, Gemma and a handful of Year Eleven boys sharing a joke. Mr Bennett spoke above the noise.

‘Do you have something to add, Miss Watts?’

The group went silent. Aimee shifted in her chair.

‘Nah,’ she said, with a sniff. ‘Just talking about how pumped we are for Friday, sir.’

‘I’m sure you were,’ said Mr Bennett, watching her beneath lowered brow as he opened his file. And then again, almost inaudibly: ‘I’m sure you were.’

* * *

The television murmured at us from the corner of the room. It was an advert about cat food, the kind where the cat is very glossy and gets its dinner on a little cushion. Dad was sitting in his armchair and I was sitting in mine, toying with my laptop. He was flicking through a pile of papers.

‘Forty-four point . . . what? Well, that doesn’t add up, clearly . . .’ he muttered, irritably, over the festive jingle from the TV. A celebrity in a garish jumper was laughing at a Christmas tree.

In the kitchen, the oven dinged. I went to investigate.

‘Dinner won’t be long,’ I said, moments later, walking back into the room with a tea towel. Dad looked up, distracted, and rubbed one eye behind his reading glasses.

‘Thanks, kiddo.’

I slumped back into my chair. I had been staring at the same history homework for nearly half an hour now, and had only added about nine words.

‘How’s that essay coming on?’ asked Dad. I blinked in the glare from my laptop.

‘Um . . . OK.’

He slid off his glasses and buffed the lenses with a shirt corner.

‘I remember GCSE history. Bits of it, anyway. Mainly dictators and genocide, isn’t it?’

‘Yeah,’ I said, with a half-smile. ‘It’s pretty cheerful.’

Dad replaced his glasses.

‘You’re all right in general, though . . . are you?’

I frowned.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, just . . . Year Eleven. It can be pretty tough, from what I remember.’

I fidgeted in my seat.

‘I’m fine, Dad.’

I returned to my essay, but I could sense him, still watching me, from his armchair. I read the title again, three or four times, pointlessly changed a couple of words and then shut down the file.

Opening my photography coursework folder, I scanned through some shots I’d taken the previous week, down by the canal. I’d been using some graphics software to intensify the colours, trying to inject some life into the concrete office blocks and the flat, featureless skyline, but I was fighting a losing battle. The canal was one of the nicer parts of town, but even so, Reading was not an exciting place to look at. It was all one shade. A grubby, brownish-grey, the grey of multistorey car parks.

‘Looking forward to your birthday?’ said Dad, setting down his papers. I shrugged, with one shoulder.

‘I guess.’

‘Sixteen . . . It’s a big one.’ He nudged his glasses up his nose. ‘You’re sure you don’t want a party?’

I didn’t want a party. I wanted to go for pizza with Melissa and stay up all night watching bad movies and eating marshmallows.

‘We’re going to the school social.’

‘Oh, I see. Well, that’ll be fun . . .?’

Dad was waiting for a reply, but all I could think of was Becky Bates throwing up behind the bins.

‘It wouldn’t be Christmas without sausage rolls!’ announced the TV, over a plinky recording of ‘Winter Wonderland’. *‘And ours are half price until Ja—’*

Dad muted the sound.

‘Perhaps we should bring back Birthday Cinema Club, eh?’

I glanced up at the small, two-person sofa on the far side of the room. When I was little, if my birthday fell on a weekday and Dad had to go to work, he would get up really early, make a big bowl of popcorn and sneak up to my room to wake me. He’d carry me downstairs in the dark and then, with me yawning and still in my pyjamas, we’d sit together on the sofa, eating hot, buttery popcorn and watching *Toy Story* while the sun came up. Usually I’d fall asleep and not wake again until the end credits, but it didn’t matter. As the film played out, I would stir,

drowsily, and Dad would be tapping his slippered foot on the carpet and singing along to ‘You’ve Got a Friend in Me’.

We hadn’t done it for years.

‘I’m a bit old for that, aren’t I?’ I said, though I wasn’t sure whether I meant it. Dad’s eyes went wide for a moment, then he picked up his papers and smoothed them down with one hand.

‘Yes . . . yes, of course. Course.’

He cleared his throat.

‘We could do something on Saturday night, though? Slap-up meal in town?’

Something blinked at me from my laptop screen. It was a speech bubble in the top corner, telling me I had a new Facebook message.

Hey charlie

It was Olly Samson. From *Fire&Lights*.

‘Charlie?’

‘Huh . . .?’

Dad was leaning across the arm of his chair, trying to win my attention. My gaze stumbled from him, to Olly’s message, and back again. My mouth was hanging open.

‘Anywhere you like,’ Dad continued. ‘There’s that new Mexican place on the high street . . .’

I tried to keep my face blank, but my mind was a mess of questions. Why was Olly contacting me again? Hadn't he read my reply? What was I supposed to say to him?

'Um, yeah. That'd be . . . great,' I agreed, returning to my laptop. Straightaway, I noticed something I had missed before: there was a little green light next to Olly's name.

He was still online.

And while I was formulating an answer in my head – something that wouldn't make me sound like a dork, a stalker or a groupie – a second, longer message joined the first.

And what it said didn't make any sense. At all.