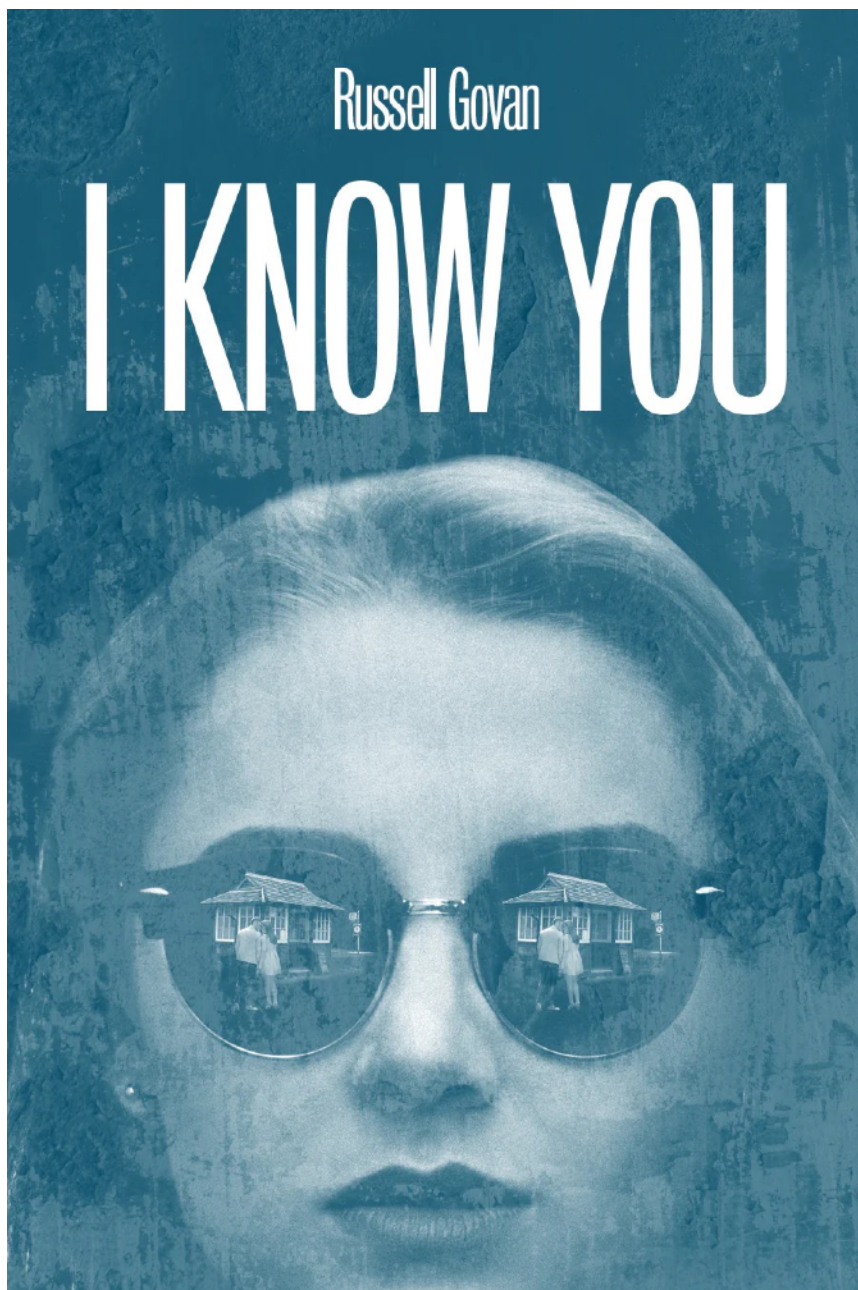


Russell Govan

I KNOW YOU



I KNOW YOU

GUERNICA WORLD EDITIONS 61

RUSSELL GOVAN

I KNOW YOU



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For my mother, Helen Govan

August 6, 2019

1.

MY PHONE BUZZES. I reach and grab it from on top of my bedside drawers. It's a WhatsApp from Alice on the group chat. *Anyone else awake?* It's ten past five.

An immediate response from Morag. *Me. Can't sleep.*

I respond. *Me neither. Been awake a while.*

There's a pause. The three of us are waiting to see if there's anything from Lindsey or Seonaid. Fifteen seconds—forever—passes.

Morag breaks cover again. *Guess it's just us three then.*

Alice: *How long have you been awake?*

Me: *Must be half an hour.*

Morag: *About ten minutes.*

Alice: *I've just woken. Are either of you actually up?*

Me: *Are you mental? It's ten past bloody five!*

Morag: *I'm still under the covers.*

Alice: *My mum said that if I got up before seven, she'd kill me.*

Me: *If I get up, it'll disturb Gran. My mum would go ballistic.*

There's another pause. We said everything we had to say to each other yesterday. Several times over. We all know that, and I know Alice and Morag will be thinking the same. We'll get our results by text at eight, with certificates coming in the post later today. The UCAS website will confirm whether we've got our places at nine.

Alice: *I think I'll go back to sleep.*

Morag: *Good idea. Me too. Love you, gals. See you all later.*

Alice: *Love you both loads. And you too, sleepyheads!*

Me: 🥰👉👉👉

I put my phone down. There's no way I'll get back to sleep, and neither will the other two. The four of them are my besties. I've been friends with Alice and Seonaid since primary school. This last year, we've become closer friends with Lindsey and Morag. Those of us that stayed for sixth year formed new friendship groups after so many others went

off to uni last autumn. I might have gone then too, except I blew my exams. I was predicted straight As and ended up with four Bs and a C. The school said they'd support an appeal for upgrades on compassionate grounds and would write to the university. But I didn't want that. Mum was in bits about Dad, and so was I, if I'm being honest. Home wasn't in any fit state for me to leave it. And I wasn't in any fit state to leave.

So five of us ended up doing sixth year together. Seonaid had missed her place to do medicine by one grade. Alice wanted to stay on because her boyfriend was. Sensible Lindsey said she was too immature to leave home at seventeen. And Morag, in her own words, "made a complete arse of her exams the first time round." So that was us—"the dunderheads," we call ourselves. And now it's a year later. In just a few hours, we'll all have our separate paths determined for us.

It's another glorious morning. The sunlight arrowing into the room through the curtain gaps confirms it. The dawn chorus is fading, and the stillness that goes with the early quiet is returning. I slide my legs off the side of the bed and sit up. I reach into the drawer for the candle and place it on top. Then I reach for Dad's lighter, fire the wick, and sit back, looking at the flame. I used to do this a lot in the first few months after he died. Not so much recently. The minister said that some people find it a comfort. I was desperate and would've tried anything. I'm still kind of surprised I do it.

The flame's white and steady. I was a Daddy's girl. I still am, and I always will be. I was his favourite. He never said it, of course, but I know. The sly winks, the smiles, that time I overheard him boasting about me, the in-jokes we shared. The flame looks like it's fixed, almost solid but not quite. My eyes are moist. Today would've been important to him. He wouldn't have gone into his work until he knew my results, like he did when I got my National 5s. He'd want to be here to celebrate, or to comfort me. I wish he was here. So much. Tears roll down both cheeks, and the flame flickers ever so slightly. I watch it as it steadies and fix on it for long enough to see wax run down its length on all sides. Eventually, I know it's time to blow it out, even though I don't want to. *I love you, Dad.* A firm, gentle puff, and the flame is gone. The delicious smoke fills my nostrils.

I roll onto my back, head on pillow. I look up and see dust motes pirouetting in the sunbeams, energized by the draft from my movement. I hope there's a heaven, or some kind of afterlife. It's too painful to think that when someone dies, so does their love.

I've thought a lot about love this last year. Although my head said differently, my heart knew I'd never get over losing Dad. Then Findlay came along. He's not a substitute, obviously. But he's filled my heart and brought me joy and comfort and hope. I can still hardly believe we're an item. No, not that. We're more than an item. We're blessed to have met each other so young. We're perfect together. Perfect.

I've had a few boyfriends—well, seven to be precise, if we exclude anything before I was fourteen. None of them were serious, and the longest any of them lasted was a couple of months. I just get bored. They always seemed to become clingy or jealous or both. I got quite good at ending things without too much upset, mainly. Eventually, I'd get asked out by another boy that I fancied enough to say yes to and that would last as long as it lasted.

Anyway, Findlay had been going steady with Roxanne McAllister for nearly two years when they split up. She wanted to go to uni, and he wanted to stay on and do Sixth Year. And that was that. It was the talk of the school. They were the golden couple. She was beautiful and smart. A bit up herself, but okay to talk to when you got to know her. He was just heart-stoppingly handsome—tall, blond, and with a smile that melts glaciers. He captained the rugby and debating teams, and he was super smart to boot. He got five straight A's in his Highers. Too good to be true, except he was real, because I saw him every day.

Everyone was amazed when he and Roxy broke up. But not half as amazed as I was the following weekend when he asked me out. He just came up to me at the checkout on the Saturday afternoon and asked me what time I finished. Then asked if I wanted to go for a meal. And I said yes. We went for that meal. We kissed—and pow! That was it. I'd kissed boys before, but this was completely different. Within a few weeks, we were an item. We'd probably already fallen in love with each other by then.

Findlay had stayed on because he thought he'd have a better chance of getting in to study PPE at Oxford if he did Sixth Year. His heart was

set on doing what he called “the world’s most prestigious degree” there. But he’s given that up for us. For me. When he realized the prospect of us being apart was bringing me down, he volunteered to go to St. Andrews as well. He really did that for me. I would never get into Oxford, probably. And anyway, I don’t want to go that far south and be so far away from Mum and Gran, even my brothers. So Findlay said he’d stay in Scotland so we could still be together. That’s how much he loves me. Sacrificed his dream for us. Oh, and he’s great in bed! As in really, really great in bed. I mean I’ve never been with another guy to compare him against, and I never will. Because there’s no need. It simply couldn’t be better.

Now all I need is for my results to be good enough to get in, and we’ll spend the next three years together in St. Andrews. We’ll do the first year in halls. Findlay thinks it’s the best way to meet people. Then we’ll get a flat together for second, third, and fourth years. I just need to get those results.