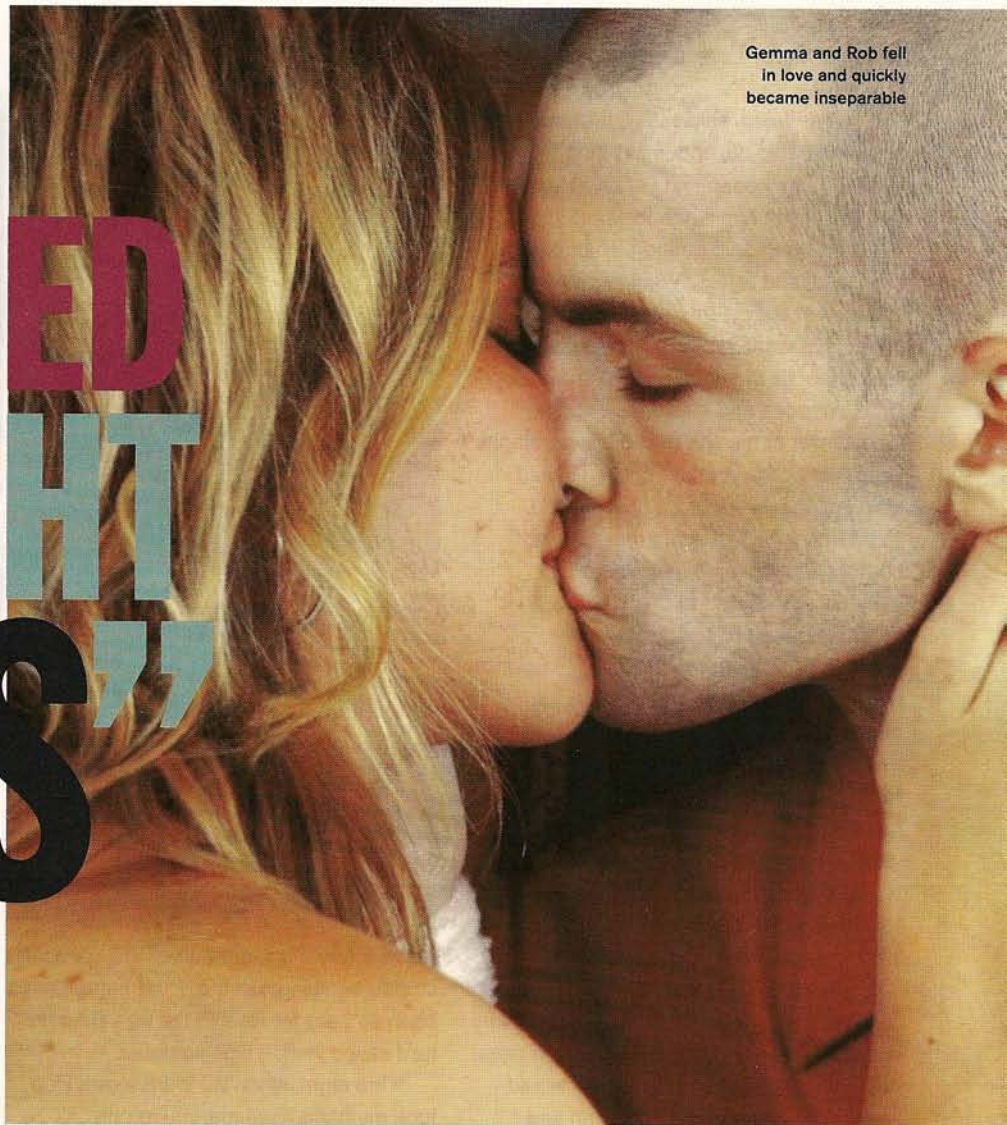


“WE WERE MARRIED FOR JUST EIGHT DAYS”

Gemma Bendelow, 21, proposed to her boyfriend Rob, 27, knowing that within days of becoming his wife, she would be a widow

Gemma and Rob fell in love and quickly became inseparable



“It was a hot, lazy afternoon in August 2004 when I first saw Rob. My friends and I were soaking up the sun in my local pub garden in Liskeard, Devon, when I spotted him, swinging around the corner in his car. He was tanned and cute and as I did a double take, our eyes met.

“Two days later, when he walked into the bar where I worked, my heart lurched.

“‘I can’t find my phone,’ he announced. ‘Can anyone lend me theirs so I can ring it and track it down?’ I immediately offered mine. He introduced himself and mentioned that he was a part-time fireman. So when he returned my phone with a cheeky grin, I sneakily saved his number as ‘Fireman Rob’.

“Later that week he was back in the bar with a girl. As I watched them together I could have thought, ‘Too bad, he’s taken’ and forgotten about him. But something took hold. So I texted him, saying, ‘You can do better than that!’ I was terrified it would backfire, but it did the trick. He called me the next day to invite me to dinner and we

drove out to a quiet country pub. It was that easy – from then on we were inseparable.

“Within a month, I’d virtually moved in with him and we spent every night together. Rob was a joker but I soon discovered his romantic side. If he saw me look at a CD in a shop, I’d reach into the breadbin the next day to find he’d secretly bought it for me.

“He juggled a day job as a welder with his night job as an on-call firefighter. I hated it when he had to leave our warm bed to go out on a ‘shout’. Sometimes his work really affected him – if someone died in a fire it upset him for days. He had a big heart.

“When he first told me he loved me I pretended I hadn’t heard, so he’d have to repeat it. I couldn’t get enough of him and Rob seemed to feel the same. When we discussed the future, it was a future together.”

The first sign of trouble

“We’d been together for 10 months when Rob developed a cough. He wasn’t worried about it, but two weeks later, when he was

no better, his GP suspected pneumonia and he was admitted to hospital for monitoring. Five days later, when they wouldn’t let him home for the weekend, I felt uneasy.

“A week after he’d been admitted, I was sitting by his bed when the consultant came in with new test results. It wasn’t pneumonia, he said. It was lymphatic cancer. As he explained the recovery rates were good, Rob sat there, brave and calm. But when he said Rob would need chemotherapy, I couldn’t stop my tears. ‘It’ll be fine,’ Rob said. He was so ill, yet he was comforting me.

“‘Good recovery rates’ – I clung to those words. But a week later I turned up at the hospital to see his family outside looking upset. I didn’t want to intrude, so I went straight inside. The consultant told me there was bad news. The cancer had spread to Rob’s lungs and was the most aggressive form. I was stunned – Rob smoked, but no more than seven a day, and he was only 27.

“Part of me didn’t want to hear the answer, but I had to know. Did Rob have weeks, >

months? More? Less, the consultant said. Two weeks.

"I felt deflated, helpless. There was nothing I could do, nothing to stop this.

"Rob hadn't been told yet and I knew I had to be with him when they did.

"At first Rob said nothing. Then he looked up and asked, 'What are my chances of pulling through?' It's impossible to imagine what it must be like to hear that your chances of survival are 'slim' but Rob simply nodded and said, 'OK'. Then he looked over at me and asked if I was alright. But I was scared that if I spoke I would start crying and never be able to stop.

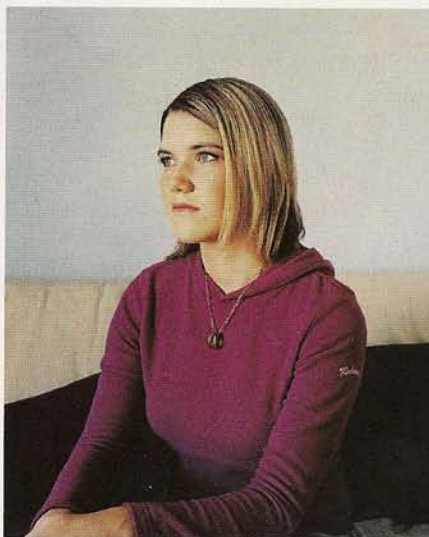
"At midnight, as I sat in the hospital corridor with my mum and dad, I knew what I wanted to do. Like that first night when I'd texted Rob in the pub, something took hold. I wanted to marry him. There, in the hospital, as soon as we could. If Rob hadn't been ill, I'd have waited for him to propose. But we didn't have time to wait. I was aware of what it would mean for me, that I would marry Rob then lose him. But I stopped myself thinking about 'afterwards' – I had to live for now.

"In Rob's room the radio was on low, but the DJs were just chatting, so it wasn't very romantic. But I took a breath and just came out with it. I wasn't sure how Rob would react, but he broke into a big grin and hugged me. 'Let's do it tomorrow,' he said.

"The next day Mum and I dashed around Plymouth, arranging a licence, rings and an outfit. Wedding-dress shopping is normally fun and exciting. But it wasn't like that for me. There was no fuss. Instead, I chose a simple strapless top and skirt.

"Although it was in the hospital, the ceremony was beautiful, with 25 close friends and family. Rob wore his fireman's shirt and was in a wheelchair throughout. He needed to wear an oxygen mask, but was able to take it off to say his vows and kiss me. Everyone was choked with emotion – we all knew what lay ahead. That night, the nurses made his room into a 'honeymoon suite'. They pushed two beds together so we could sleep next to each other, put champagne on ice and dimmed the lights.

"After that I barely left the hospital, except when Mum forced me to. I took time off work and at night I slept in a camp bed beside Rob. In all the hours I spent with him, I never heard him say, 'Why me?' The only time I saw a chink of despair was when



"Eight days after we married, Rob drifted off. It was the loneliest moment of my life"

we watched the aftermath of the London suicide bombings on the news. It must have been so hard for Rob. In the Fire Brigade he'd saved lives. It was so unfair.

"One night, when we were alone, Rob took my hand. 'Gemma, you're only 20,' he said. 'I want you to be happy. Promise me you'll move on and get married again!'

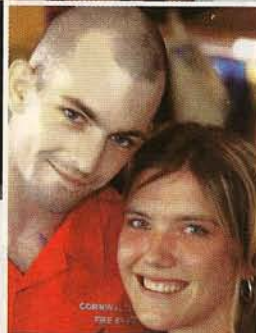
"'You can't get rid of me that easily!' I laughed. I knew he was serious, but I couldn't bear to think about the time when Rob wouldn't be there anymore."

A serious turn for the worse

"Eight days after we married, Rob deteriorated. They'd upped his morphine dose to ease the pain and it was making him hallucinate. We knew it was the end. The last thing he said was that he loved me, then he drifted off in a morphine daze. I sat holding his hand until, at 12.30am on 30 July, he tried to sit up and the effort brought the end. It was the loneliest moment of my life, although I was surrounded by his family.

"It sounds strange, but after that I shut down. Exhaustion overwhelmed me and I just had to sleep. When I got home from the hospital I slept for 24 hours straight.

"People didn't know how to act around me after that. When I met up with friends, the atmosphere was awkward. People sent



Above: Gemma and Rob exchange rings at their marriage ceremony in the hospital. He was able to take the oxygen mask off to kiss his bride. Left: Rob wore his fireman's shirt for the wedding. Far left: "I cherish every minute of the months we spent together. When you love someone, nothing else matters," says Gemma now

me texts saying, 'I didn't know what to say but I'm here for you.' They meant well but I wish they had brought it up – all I wanted to talk about was Rob, to keep him alive.

"The funeral was really special – we were escorted by fire engines and the police. When I got up to read a poem, *My Shining Star*, I was astonished to see how many people were there.

"It's nearly a year since Rob died. At times I've felt so angry about how unfair it all was. I still do. I drive to the beach, even if it's the middle of the night, to calm down. Sometimes I scream and shout to get it out.

"The worst times are when I wake up and, for one golden moment, I've forgotten that Rob's dead. I imagine he's out on a 'shout' and will be home soon. Then reality hits.

"I still wear my wedding ring and use Rob's last name, Bendelow. I'm only 21 and I'm a widow, but I don't tell people who don't ask. I don't want sympathy. I've moved back in with my parents and I'm working as a healthcare assistant. I'm trying to keep Rob's memory alive in a way he'd be proud of, so I'm running the Race For Life for Cancer Research.

"Someone asked me recently if I would have chosen not to meet Rob had I known what the future held. But I cherish every minute of the 11 months we had together. There was a moment when I was in the register office collecting the wedding licence that has stayed with me. I looked outside and there was a wedding taking place. That's how it could have been for me and Rob. But, as I learnt that day, when you love someone, nothing else matters." 