

"EVEN THE *IDEA* OF THIS BOOK GAVE ME CHILLS!
CREEPY AND ORIGINAL!" —R.L. Stine

NUMBERS

RACHEL WARD



NUM8ERS

RACHEL WARD

Chicken
House

SCHOLASTIC INC.

New York Toronto London Auckland
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FOR
OZZY, ALI, AND PETER

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CHAPTER ONE

There are places where kids like me go. Sad kids, bad kids, bored kids, and lonely kids, kids that are different. Any day of the week, if you know where to look, you'll find us: behind the shops, in back lanes, under bridges by canals and rivers, 'round garages, in sheds, on vacant lots. There are thousands of us. If you choose to find us, that is — most people don't. If they do see us, they look away, pretend we're not there. It's easier that way. Don't believe all that crap about giving everyone a chance — when they see us, they're glad we're not in school with their kids, disrupting their lessons, making their lives a misery. The teachers, too. Do you think they're disappointed when we don't turn up for registration? Give me a break. They're laughing — they don't want kids like us in their classrooms and we don't want to be there.

Most hang about in small groups, twos or threes, whiling away the hours. Me, I like to be on my own. I like to find the places where nobody is — where I don't have to look at anyone, where I don't have to see their numbers.

That's why I was pissed off when I got to my favorite haunt down by the canal and found someone had got there before me. If it had just been a stranger, some old dosser or junkie, I'd have gone somewhere else, easy, but, just my luck, it was one of the other kids from Mr. McNulty's "special class: the restless, gangly, mouthy one they call Spider.

He laughed when he saw me, came right up to me and wagged a finger in my face. "Naughty, naughty! What you doing here, girl?"

I shrugged, looked down at the ground.

He carried on for me. "Couldn't face another day of the Nutter? Don't blame you, Jem — he's a psycho. Shouldn't be allowed out, that one, should he?"

He's big, Spider, tall. One of those people who stand too close to you, doesn't know when to back off. Suppose that's why he gets into fights at school. He's in your face all the time, you can smell him. Even if you twist and turn away, he's still there — doesn't read the signs at all, never takes the hint. My view of him was blocked by the edge of my hood, but as he loomed up to me and I moved my head instinctively away from him, our eyes met for a moment and it was there. His number. 12152010. That was the other reason why he made me feel uncomfortable. Poor sod — he doesn't stand a chance, does he, with a number like that?

Everyone's got one, but I think I'm the only one that sees them. Well, I don't exactly "see" them like something hanging in the air; they kind of appear in my head. I feel them, somewhere behind my eyes. But they're real. I don't care if you don't believe me — suit yourself, I know they're real. And I know what they mean. The light went on the day my mum went.

I'd always seen the numbers, for as long as I could remember. I thought everyone did. Walking down the street, if my eyes met someone else's, there it would be, their number. I used to tell my mum people's numbers as she pushed me along in my buggy. I thought she'd be pleased. She'd think I was clever. Yeah, right.

We were making our way rapidly along the High Street, on the way to the Department of Social Security to pick up her weekly money. Thursday was normally a good day. Soon, very soon, she would be able to buy that stuff from the boarded-up house down our street, and she would be happy for a few hours. Every taut muscle in her body would relax, she'd talk to me, even read to me sometimes. She called out people's numbers cheerily as we hurtled along. "Nothing, two, one, four, two, nothing, one, nine!" "Nothing, seven, nothing, two, two, nothing, four, six!"

Suddenly, Mum jerked the stroller to a halt and swung it 'round to face her. She crouched down and held both sides of the frame with her hands, making a cage with her body, clutching so tightly I could see the cords in her arms standing out, the bruises and pinpricks more vivid than ever. She looked me straight in the eye, the fury clear on her face. "Listen, Jem." The words came spitting out of her face. "I don't know what you're going on about, but I want you to stop. It's doing my head in. I don't need it today. OK? I don't need it, so just...bloody...shut...up." Syllables stinging like angry wasps, her venom fizzing all around me. And all the time, as we sat there eye-to-eye, her number was there stamped on the inside of my skull: 10102001.

Four years later, I watched a man in a scruffy suit write it down on a piece of paper: *Date of Death* 10.10.2001. I'd found her in the morning. I'd got up, like normal, put my school things on, helped myself to some cereal. No milk, because it stank when I got it out of the fridge. I left the carton on the side, put the kettle on, and ate my Coco Pops while it boiled. Then I made Mum a black coffee and carried it carefully into her room. She was still in bed, kind of leaning over. Her eyes were open, and there was stuff, sick, down her front and on the covers. I put the coffee down on the floor, next to the needle.

"Mum?" I said, even though I knew she wouldn't reply. There was no one there. She was gone. And her number was gone, too. I could remember it, but I couldn't see it anymore when I looked into her dull, empty eyes.

I stood there for a few minutes, a few hours — I don't know — then I went downstairs and told the lady in the flat below us. She came up to look. Made me wait outside the flat, like I hadn't already seen it, silly cow. She was only gone about thirty seconds, and then she rushed out past me and was sick in the hallway. When she'd finished, she wiped her mouth on her hankie, took me back to her flat and rang for an ambulance. Then all these people came: people in uniform — police, ambulance men, people in suits — like that man with the clipboard and paper; and a lady, who spoke to me like I was stupid and took me away from there, just like that, the only place I'd ever known.

In her car, on the way to God knows where, I kept going over and over it in my mind. Not numbers this time, words. Three words. *Date of Death. Date of Death.* If only I'd known that was what it was, I could have told her, stopped her, I don't know. Would it have made a difference? If she'd known that we only had six years together? Would it? Hell — she would still have been a junkie. There was nothing on this earth that could have stopped her. She was hooked.

I didn't like being there under the bridge with Spider. I know it was outside, but I felt closed in, trapped there with him. He filled the space with his gangly arms and legs, constantly moving — twitching, almost — and that smell. I ducked past him and out onto the towpath.

"Where you going?" he shouted behind me, his voice booming off the concrete walls.

"Just walking," I mumbled.

"Right," he said, catching up with me. "Walk and talk," he said, "walk and talk." Drawing level, too close to my shoulder, brushing against me. I carried on, head down, hood up, a blinkered patch of gravel and trash moving under my sneakers. He loped along beside me. We must have looked so stupid, me being small for fifteen and him like a black giraffe on speed. He tried to chat a bit, and I just ignored him. Hoped he'd give up and go away. No chance. Guess you'd have to tell him to piss off to get rid of him, and even then he probably wouldn't.

"So you're new around here, yeah?" I shrugged. "Got kicked out your old school? Been a bad gig, have ya?"

Kicked out of school, kicked out of my last "home," and the one before that and the one before that. People just don't seem to get me. Don't understand that I need *my* space. Always telling me what to do. They think rules and routine and clean hands and minding your p's and q's will make everything

all right. They haven't got a clue.

He reached into his pocket. "D'you wanna smoke? I've got some, look."

I stopped, and watched as he extracted a crumpled packet. "Go on, then."

He handed me a cigarette and flicked his lighter for me. I leaned forward and inhaled until it caught drawing in some of his stink at the same time. I moved back quickly, and breathed out again. "Ta," mumbled.

He drew on his cig like it was the best thing on earth, then blew the smoke out theatrically and smiled. And I thought, *Less than three months to go, that's all. All this poor bugger's got is skiving off school and having a smoke by the canal. Not what you'd call a life, is it?*

I sat down on a heap of old railway sleepers. The nicotine made me feel less edgy, but nothing calmed Spider down. He was up and down, climbing on the sleepers, leaping off, balancing on the edge of the canal on the balls of his feet, jumping back again. I thought to myself, *That's how he'll go the silly sod, jumping off something, breaking his bloody neck.*

"Don't you ever keep still?" I said.

"Nah, I'm not a statue. Not a waxwork like at Madame Tussauds. I've got all this energy, man." He did a little dance there on the towpath. Made me smile, couldn't help it. Felt like the first time in years. He grinned back at me.

"You got a nice smile," he said.

That did it. I don't like personal comments. "Fuck off, Spider," I said, "just fuck off."

"Relax, man. I didn't mean nothing by it."

"Yeah, well...I don't like it."

"You don't like looking at people, neither, do you?"

I shrugged.

"People think you're up yourself, the way you keep looking down, don't look no one in the eye."

"Well, that's personal, too. I've got my reasons."

He turned and kicked a stone into the canal. "Whatever. Listen, I'll never say nothing nice to you again, OK?"

"OK," I said. There were alarm bells going off inside my head. Part of me wanted this more than anything else in the world — to have someone to hang out with, be like everyone else for a while. The rest of me screamed to get the hell out of there, to not get sucked in. You get used to someone — start to like them, even — and they leave. In the end, everyone leaves. I looked at him jiggling restlessly from foot to foot, now scooping up some stones and chucking them into the water. *Don't go there, Jem, I thought. In a few months, he'll be gone.*

While his back was turned, I got up quietly from my perch on the sleepers and started running. No explanations, no good-byes.

From behind me I could hear him calling, "Hey, where you going?" I was willing him to stay there, not to follow. His voice faded away as I put some distance between us.

"OK, be like that. See you tomorrow, man."

CHAPTER TWO

The Nutter was cracking the whip. Someone must have rattled his cage — whatever, he was definitely on our case. No messing about, no backchat, heads down, English comprehension test, thirty minutes. Trouble is, when someone tells me to do something, I have this problem. I just wanna tell them to piss off, I'll do it in my own time. Even if it's something I actually want to do. Which this wasn't. Don't get me wrong, I can read, sort of, but I'm not very fast. My brain kind of needs time to sort out the words. If I try and read quickly, everything gets muddled up, the words don't mean nothing.

Anyway, I was trying my best, this time. I really was. Karen, my foster mum, had read me the riot act over bunking off school. You know how it goes, don't you? "*Time to knuckle down...important get some qualifications...life's not a rehearsal...*" She'd been talking to the school, to my social worker — all the usual suspects — and I figured I didn't need the hassle anymore. I'd go along with it all, keep my head down for a bit, get me some breathing space.

Everyone else was quiet, too, for a change. They'd picked up on the Nutter's evil mood and decided not to push it. There was a bit of shuffling about and sighing, but basically everyone was sitting still and working — or pretending to — when, without any warning, something exploded into the room. The door swung back on its hinges and crashed into the wall behind, and Spider burst in like he'd been fired out of a cannon, stumbling on his feet, almost falling over. Instantly the mood was broken. Kids started cheering and jeering, shouting out to him.

The Nutter wasn't impressed. "What do you mean by bursting in here like that? Go outside into the corridor and come back in like a civilized human being."

Spider slumped forward with an exaggerated sigh and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Ah, come on, sir. I'm in now, aren't I? I'm here."

McNulty spoke quietly, but with force, if you know what I mean, like he was just managing to keep a lid on things. "Just do what I say, and we'll start again."

"What you doing this for, sir? I don't need to be here, but I'm here. I'm ready to learn, sir." A wry, ironic look to the rest of us, met with an answering jeer. "Why d'ya have to give me all this grief?"

The Nutter took a deep breath. "I don't know why you've decided to join us today, but something has brought you here. Now if you want to join in, and I hope that you do, you need to go out, come back quietly like I've asked you, and we'll get on with the lesson."

There was a long pause, while they eyeballed each other. The rest of us went quiet, waiting to see how it would play out. For once, Spider was almost keeping still, standing there, staring at the Nutter with just one leg jiggling. Then he turned and went out, just like that. Every eye in that classroom watched him go and kept watching the empty doorway. Had he gone for good? There was a low murmur as he reappeared, drawn up to his full height, cool as anything. He paused on the threshold. "Morning, sir," he said and nodded in the Nutter's direction.

"Good morning, Dawson." There was a wary look in McNulty's eye, not sure how to take Spider's apparent backdown. Worried that victory had been too easy. He placed the comprehension sheet, some paper, and a pen on Spider's desk. "Sit down, lad, and do your best with this." Spider sauntered over to his desk, while McNulty returned to the front and stood there, watching us. "OK, everyone, settle down. Twenty-five minutes to go. Let's see what you can do."

But Spider's unexpected return had broken the mood. We were agitated now, a bit of a buzz going 'round. Everyone was fidgeting; there was backchat, chair legs scraping on the floor. McNulty kept picking away at people, trying to get back on top of things: "Eyes on the page, please." "Keep yo

hands to yourself.” He was fighting a losing battle.

As for me, the words in front of me swam and danced. They were meaningless, a pattern, nothing more, like Chinese or Arabic. Because I couldn't stop myself wondering if I was the reason Spider was back. Down by the canal I thought I'd felt the start of a connection, and it had scared me. I'd avoided him since then, but I'd no reason to think that Spider had given me a second thought, until now. Because I could have sworn that as he'd sauntered over to his desk, he'd winked at me. Bloody nerves. Who did he think he was?

After lunch, the Nutter had had enough. Against a background of noise, laughter, general chat, he suddenly stopped. “Right, books away, pens away, paper away. All of you. Now!” What was he up to? “Come on, get on with it. All your stuff away. We need to talk.” Rolled eyes, yawns — yeah, we got it. Here comes the pep talk. We put our things in our bags or stuffed them into pockets, and waited for the standard bollocking: “*Unacceptable behavior...Letting yourselves down...Lack of respect...*” But it didn't happen.

Instead he walked up and down between the desks, stopping and saying something to each of us before going on to the next one. “Unemployed.” “Checkout girl.” “Garbageman.” When he got to me, he didn't even pause. “Cleaning lady,” he said and carried on walking. He worked his way back to the front, turned and faced us. “OK, how did that make you feel?”

We stared at our desks or out the window. It had made us feel exactly how he wanted us to feel. Like shit. We all knew what sort of futures were waiting for us after school, didn't need a puffed-up little tit like him to remind us.

Then Spider blurted out, “I feel fine, sir. It's just your opinion, isn't it? It don't mean shit. I can do anything I want, can't I?”

“No, Dawson, that's the whole point, and I want you all to listen. At the moment, with the attitude you've all got now, that's where you're heading. However, if you apply yourselves a bit more, concentrate, make the best of your last year here, it could be different. If you get some certification, get a good report from school, credits toward a degree, you can achieve so much more.”

“My mum works on the checkout.” That was Charmaine, two seats along from me.

“Yes, and there's nothing wrong with that, but, you, Charmaine, could be the store manager if you wanted to. You all need to look a bit further, realize what you can achieve. What do you see yourselves doing? Come on, what are you going to be doing in a year, two years, five years? Lauryn, you start.”

He went 'round the room. Most of the kids hadn't got a clue. Or rather, they knew his first assessment had been pretty accurate. When he got to Spider, I held my breath. The boy with no future, what would he say?

Of course, he rose to the challenge. He sat on the back of his chair, like he was addressing a crowd. “Five years' time, I'm gonna be cruising the streets in my black BMW, got some vibes on the sound system, got money in my pocket.” The other boys jeered.

McNulty looked at him witheringly. “And how, Dawson, are you going to do that?”

“Bit of this, bit of that, sir. Buying and selling.”

McNulty's face changed. “Theft, Dawson? Drug dealing?” he said coldly. He shook his head. “I'm almost speechless, Dawson. Breaking the law, peddling in misery. Is that all you can aspire to?”

“It's the only way any of us are going to get any cash, man. What do you drive, sir? That little red Astra in the parking lot? Teaching? Working for twenty years? I'm tellin' you, I ain't driving no Astra.”

“Sit down on your chair, Dawson, and shut up. Someone else, please. Jem, what about you?”

How could I possibly know what was going to happen to me? I didn't even know where I was going to be living in a year's time. Why was this man torturing us, making us squirm like this? I took a deep

breath and said, as sweet as I could manage, "Me, sir? I know what I want."

"Oh, good. Carry on."

I made myself look him right in the eye. 12252023. How old was he now? Forty-eight? Forty-nine? He'd go just around the time he retired, then. On Christmas Day, too. Life's cruel, isn't it? Christmas spoiled for his family for the rest of their lives. Serve him right, the cruel bastard.

"Sir," I said, "I want to be exactly...like...you."

He brightened for a second, a half smile forming, then realized I was taking the mick. His face shrank down, and he shook his head. His mouth was a hard line, you could see the bones sticking out as he clenched his jaw.

"Get your math books out," he barked. "Wasting my time," he muttered under his breath. "Wasting my time."

On the way out of class, Spider high-fived me. I didn't do that stuff normally, but my hand went up to meet his like it had a mind of its own.

"Like your style, man," he said, nodding his approval. "You got him good. Result."

"Thanks," I said. "Spider?"

"Yeah."

"You don't do drugs, do ya?"

"Nah, nothing heavy. I was just winding him up. Too easy, innit, sometimes? You walking home?"

"No, got detention." I needed to hang back for a couple of minutes, let the crowds of kids thin out. Karen would be waiting outside the gate. She was walking me to and from school at the moment, just until I'd "earned her trust." No way I was going to let any of this lot see me with her. "See ya around then."

"Yeah, see ya." He drop-kicked his bag through the classroom door and swung out after it, and as I watched him I thought, *Stay away from drugs, Spider, for Christ's sake. They're dangerous.*

CHAPTER THREE

It was one of those gray October days when it never really gets light. The rain wasn't exactly falling — it was just there, hanging in the air, in your face, blotting everything out. I could feel it soaking through my hoodie, starting to make my shoulders and the top of my back go cold. We were 'round the back of the shopping center, where the concrete slabs of its walls met the dull green streak of the canal.

"We should go in the shops, at least it's dry," I suggested. Spider shrugged and sniffed. Even his movements were subdued today, like the weather had sapped his energy.

"Got no money. Anyway, those security guys are on my case."

"I'm not staying here. It's cold and rank and boring."

Spider caught my eye. "But apart from that?"

"It's crap."

He snorted in appreciation, then spun 'round and started off down the path. "Come on, let's go mine. It's only my nan there, and she's OK."

I hesitated. We'd kind of drifted into hanging out together, after school and on the weekends, since Karen had loosened the reins a bit. Not all the time — Spider sometimes went 'round with a gang of lads from school instead. From what I could tell, he'd run with them until they had a row, or even a fight, then he'd keep clear for a bit. There's always something going on with boys. It's like animals isn't it, monkeys or lions, sorting out the pecking order, who's the boss? Anyway, for whatever reason he wasn't with them this Saturday, he was with me, and we were bored as hell. There was nothing for us to do.

Going to someone's house was a big deal for me. I'd never been asked before. Even when I was little, I was never one of those girls who skipped out of the classroom in pairs, holding hands and sometimes, giggling, excited. Having friends over for tea parties didn't fit in with Mum's lifestyle.

"I dunno," I said reluctantly. Like usual, I was worried about meeting anyone new, not knowing whether to look at them or not. People think I'm shifty because I don't like looking at them, but really I'm just trying to keep out of their lives — TMI.

"Suit yourself," he said, sticking his hands in his pockets and setting off on his own.

The rain was getting in my face, annoying me now. "No, hold up!" I shouted, and ran to catch him up, and we walked along together, hoods up, heads down, in the filthy London drizzle.

It took about five minutes to get to his place, one of those maisonettes at the front of the Park Estate projects. It was in the middle of a row, on the ground floor, with a little square of garden at the front. The garden was something else — some grass and a few flowers and that — but the great thing was all these little statues and things: gnomes, animals. It was hilarious.

"Cool garden," I said, half taking the piss, half meaning it. Spider made a face.

"It's my nan," he said. "She's crazy." He vaulted over the low wall and picked his way through the concrete crowd. He swung his leg at the head of a particularly ugly gnome.

"No, don't," I called out.

He stopped midkick.

"They're nice. Don't hurt them."

"Oh, God. Not you as well." He shook his head and waited while I opened the peeling tubular metal gate and walked up the path. Then he pushed in the front door — it must have already been open — and shouted out, "Only me, Nan. I've brought a mate."

Nervous as I was, I clocked that, him using the word *mate*. And I liked it.

~~There was a narrow hallway and then straight into the front room. Every shelf, every surface was~~ covered with stuff: little china animals, plates, vases. Think of every garage sale you've ever been to — all the stuff left over at the end that no one wants, and you'll get the picture. The overpowering smell of cigarette smoke made the air thick. No windows open, obviously. A plume of it wafted through from the next room, and I followed Spider through there. His nan was perched on a stool at a breakfast bar, newspaper in front of her, cup of tea at hand, ciggy lit. She didn't look nothing like her grandson. She was small, white, like me, with short spiky hair dyed a dark shade of purple. Her face was lined, hard-looking. I watched as he stooped to peck her cheek, and thought that if you saw them in the street you'd never know they were family. But that's the way now, isn't it? The days of family photographs — Mum, Dad, two kids, all dressed up, all looking the same — did that ever happen? Is there anywhere that still happens? Not here, anyway. Families 'round here are what they are — just you and your nan, like Spider, or no one, like me — black, white, brown, yellow, whatever. That's how it is.

As Spider stood back up, his nan looked at me. "Hi," she said. "I'm Val."

I tried to keep my eyes down, but for some reason I looked up briefly and, instantly, she held my gaze. I couldn't look away. Her eyes were amazing — hazel, set in clear white, despite the smoke. And it wasn't like she was just looking, like anyone else. No, she was taking me in, she was really seeing me. I clocked her number, 02202054: forty-four years to go with a heavy smoking habit. Respect.

"Who are you, then?" she asked, the words sounding harsh, although I don't think she meant them to.

I couldn't think straight, couldn't even remember my name. I was like a rabbit trapped in the headlights of those eyes.

Spider came to my rescue. "Her name's Jem. We're gonna watch the telly."

"In a minute. Don't rush off. Sit here a minute, Jem." She indicated the stool next to her with a nod of her head.

"Na-an, leave her alone. Don't go off on one."

"You mind your attitude, Terry. Don't listen to him. Sit here." She patted the stool, her hands small and lined with massive curled yellow nails, and I clambered up meekly. Spider's nan wasn't the sort of person you argued with, and on top of that there was something else going on. I could feel it in the air, like electricity sparking between us. It was frightening and exciting at the same time. I still hadn't stopped looking at her, and as I shifted on the stool to get my balance, she put her smoke down and took one of my hands. You know that I don't like contact, but I didn't draw away. I couldn't, and we both felt it, a crackle, a buzz, as her skin touched mine.

The reek of stale smoke from her mouth was filling my nostrils. Made me feel a bit queasy. I like a cigarette as much as anyone, but someone else's, secondhand? Nah.

"I have never met anyone like you," she said, and I thought, *No, that's right, you haven't, but how do you know?* "Do you know about auras?" she asked. The question was met by a snort of derision from Spider, who'd wandered into the front room.

"Leave it out, Nan. Leave her alone, you old witch."

"Shut up, you!" She turned back to me, and her words, slow and carefully spoken, went deep into me, like I was listening with my whole body, not just my ears. "You have the most amazing aura I've ever seen. Purple and white. All around you. The purple shows your spiritual energy, and the white that you're able to concentrate that energy. It's quite remarkable — I've never seen anyone with an aura as strong as yours."

I hadn't a clue what she was talking about, but I wanted to know.

"Your aura, Jem, is the energy you carry with you. It radiates 'round you, all different colors. And the aura tells you more about that person than anything else. Everyone's got one, but not everyone can

see them. Just us lucky ones.” She narrowed her eyes. “You see them, too, don’t you?”

“No,” I said truthfully. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“She’s talking bollocks, that’s what,” shouted Spider.

“I’ve nearly had enough of you, son! You shut your mouth!” She leaned in closer to me and lowered her voice. “You can tell me, Jem. I understand. It’s a gift, but it’s a curse, too. Tells you more than you want to know sometimes.”

The pit of my stomach lurched. She knew what it was like. The first time I’d ever met someone who understood. God, I wanted to tell her, ’course I did, but fifteen years is a long time to keep a secret. Not telling becomes part of you. And I knew deep inside that once I started talking about it, even to someone like Spider’s nan, everything would change. And I wasn’t quite ready for that. Not yet.

“No. There’s nothing,” I mumbled. I managed to wrench my eyes away from her piercing, searing gaze.

She leaned back and sighed — I could almost see her breath, it was that thick. “Suit yourself,” she said, lighting up another smoke. “You know where I am now. I’ll be here. I’m always here.”

As I slipped off the stool and went to find Spider, I could feel her eyes drilling into my back.

Spider was sprawled across an armchair, his long legs dangling over one side, feet twitching at the ankle. “Don’t take any notice of her. She lost the plot years ago. Didn’t you?” he shouted out. “Sport or something else?” he said as he flicked through the channels.

I shrugged, then spotted a black box on the floor. “PlayStation?”

He untangled himself from the chair and flopped down on the carpet, sorting through the heap of games. “Yeah, Grand Theft Auto?”

I nodded.

“You’ve got no chance,” he said. “Had a bit of practice. I’m so hot at this, I’m smoking.”

He was, too. I should have known. Boys like him all seem to know how to drive and shoot. It’s bred into them, isn’t it? I wasn’t going to let him psych me out or anything, but he had the knack — the quickness and aggression. He put everything into it, concentrating like his life depended on it, playing with his whole body. I put up a fight, but he beat me every time.

“Not bad for a girl,” he teased.

I gave him the finger. He smiled, and I felt like I was fitting in at 32 Carlton Villas just fine.

We watched the telly for a bit, but there was only crap on. Bloody *Britain’s Got Talent* or something. Thousands of no-hopers queuing up for hours like cattle, thinking they’re going to make it big. Retards. Even the ones who could sing. Do they really think the world is going to take them to its heart — fame, money, the whole lot? The Simon Cowells of this world just get as much money as they can out of them, and then spit them out, back to where they came from. It’s not a future, is it? It’s just an ego trip. Suckers. Still, we had a good time, laughing at them, Spider and me. Turned out we found the same things funny. Felt good sitting there — despite the smoke and that stale smell that Spider brought with him everywhere — although I was aware of his nan perched in the kitchen all the time, like one of those birds — hawks or buzzards or something. Vultures. Listening to us. Waiting.

“I’d better get back,” I said a bit later.

Spider unfolded himself from the chair. “I’ll go with ya.”

“Nah, s’alright. Won’t take long.”

“I could drive ya, if I had some wheels.” He paused. “I could get some wheels.”

I looked at him. He was dead serious, trying to impress me, I guess. I made for the door. I didn’t need to get involved in nothing like that. Didn’t need the hassle. I could hear his nan shuffling around in the kitchen, the microwave door slamming, buttons beeping as she set the timer.

“Your dinner’s nearly ready. I’ll see you around,” I said. “See ya!” I called out from the front door to his nan, not wanting to go in there and talk to her again. Her face appeared around the kitchen

doorway. Lightning breached the gap between us as her eyes met mine again. What was it about the woman?

“Bye, love,” she said. “I’ll see you again.” And she meant it.

CHAPTER FOUR

“I want you to write about your best day ever. Don’t worry too much about spelling and punctuation. Just quickly. Write it from the heart.”

Another example of the Nutter’s cruelty, to make us think about our sad and pointless lives. What was he expecting? *The day Daddy bought me my new pony? Our holiday in the Bahamas?* Me, I didn’t like to look backward. What was the point? The past was gone, nothing you could do about it now. Impossible to pick out one day and say that was the best one. Easier to pick the worst one, several candidates there — not that I’d tell the Nutter about any of them. None of his business. I thought about sitting there and refusing to write anything. There was nothing he could do. But then something flipped inside me and I thought, *No, I’ll tell him how it is, if that’s what he wants.* I picked up my pen and started to write.

“Time’s up!” Howls of protest. “Stop writing, please. Doesn’t matter if you haven’t finished. Now instead of handing them in to me, I’m going to ask you to read them out loud.”

Outright rebellion — cries of “no way” and “get lost.” I felt cold inside, knew I’d made a mistake.

“I want you to stand up and speak the words you’ve written. No one’s going to be laughing at you. You’re all in the same boat. Give it a try.”

The barracking subsided.

“Amber, you start. Come up to the front. No? All right, stand where you are, and read it out in a nice, clear voice so we can all hear.”

And so he went, ’round the class. Holidays, birthdays, days off. Kind of what you’d expect. The first one kid, Joel, described his little brother being born, and the room took on a different feeling. Suddenly, everyone was listening as he told us about helping his mum in their bathroom at home, wrapping up the baby in an old towel. A couple of the girls said, “Aww” when he’d finished, his friends high-fived him as he made his way back to his seat. Fair play to him, he’d done a good thing, but I felt sick inside — the thought of that vulnerability, the innocence, the knowledge that the end was written for them even on their first day — it’s too much. I don’t do little kids.

Spider was next. He shuffled to the front of the class, stood shifting his weight from foot to foot, eyes on the page in front of him. You could tell he wanted to be anywhere but there. “Ah, man, do I have to do this?” he said, flapping the page down to his side, stretching his neck back to look up at the ceiling.

“You do,” McNulty said firmly. “Come on, we’re listening.” And he was right. The class was quiet, everyone was getting into this.

“OK.” Spider drew the paper up in front of his face, so he couldn’t see us and we couldn’t see him. “My best day was when my nan took me to the seaside. It had a great name, like Weston-Super-Mare. Something. We went on the bus for hours, and I went to sleep. When we got there I’d never seen so much space in my life. The sea went on for miles and there was this huge beach. We had chips and ice cream, and there was donkeys. I had a ride on a donkey, weirdest thing ever, but great. We stayed somewhere, had a couple of days there, just me and my nan. Bloody brilliant.”

A couple of kids started braying in the back row, but in a good-humored way. Spider’s shoulders dropped a bit as he relaxed. Job done, he went back to his seat.

And before long, it was my turn. My skin was tingling, I could feel every nerve ending in my body as I waited for McNulty to say my name. Finally... “Jem, I think it’s your turn next.”

Inside my clothes I felt naked as I walked up to the front. I turned around, kept my eyes down

didn't want to see everyone looking at me. Perhaps I should have made up something there and then just pretended I was like everyone else, spun a cozy little tale about the perfect Christmas, present 'round the tree, that sort of thing. But I don't think that quick, not when I'm the center of attention. Are you the same? Is it only afterward that you think of what you should have said, the killer response, the put-down that would make them stay put down? Standing up there, scared, panicking, I didn't have any choice but to read out my words. I took a deep breath and started to speak.

"My best day ever. Got up. Had breakfast. Came to school. Bored, like usual. Wishing I wasn't here, like usual. Kids ignoring me, suits me fine. Sitting with the other retards — we're so special. Wasting my time. Yesterday was the same, and it's gone, anyway. Tomorrow may never come. There is only today. This is the best day and the worst day. Actually, it's crap."

There was a pause when I stopped speaking. I didn't look up, just leaned against the whiteboard, aching with embarrassment. The silence was filling my ears, deafening me. Then someone shouted out, "Cheer up, love. It might never happen!" and the familiar jeering and barracking started up.

A crashing sound made me look up. Spider was vaulting over the rows of tables and chairs. When he got to the joker in the back, a kid called Jordan, he drew his arm back and slammed his fist into the guy's face. The room erupted as Jordan fought back and the rest of the kids turned into a baying pack, gathering 'round in a tight, overexcited little knot. McNulty sprinted to the back of the classroom and barged his way through the crowd, wrenching shoulders apart and squeezing between bodies.

I crumpled up the piece of paper and let it fall to the floor, then slipped out of the door and along the corridor. I had just one thought in my mind — to disappear, find somewhere I could be on my own. I never wanted to go back to that torture chamber again. I stayed out for hours, nowhere particular, all those places where nobody sees you and nobody cares, until I got tired of walking in the dark.

Back at Karen's, I went 'round to the kitchen door. I'd expected her to be in bed by the time I got home — it was gone midnight, after all — but she was sitting at the kitchen table, cradling a cup of tea, her face a washed-out gray. She'd had the lot, Karen: babies, little kids, "problem" teenagers like me. Twenty-two foster kids. Worn her out. I clocked her number again. 07142013. She only had three years to go.

"Jem!" she said. "Are you alright? Where've you been?"

"Out," I said. I didn't have it in me to explain everything. Where would I start?

"Come in, Jem. Sit down." She didn't seem angry just then, only tired.

"I just wanna go to bed."

She opened her mouth, like she was going to start in on me, then thought better of it, just let out a big sigh, and nodded.

"OK, we'll talk about this in the morning. We *will* talk about it." A threat, not a promise. "I'd better ring the police — I reported you missing. Here, take this with you." She handed me her cup, still three-quarters full.

I went upstairs, put the cup down on the table next to my bed, and climbed under my blanket without getting undressed. I propped the pillows up and reached for my tea. It was only when the warm, sweet liquid hit my bloodstream that I realized how cold and empty I was.

I was dog-tired, but couldn't close my eyes. So I sat there through the night, sheets pulled up to my neck, until the light seeped 'round the curtains and, somewhere between being asleep and being awake, I registered the start of another grim day.

CHAPTER FIVE

McNulty's class was still buzzing from all the drama. I had to face them on my own, as Spider had been suspended for three weeks. As it turned out, he never went back to school again. I guess if he'd known that, he'd have done more than give Jordan a black eye and a split lip. There were rumors flying around about him being interviewed by the police, all sorts, and what Jordan was going to do to him when they were both back in circulation. But for the time being, they enjoyed sticking the boot into me.

"What you gonna do without your boyfriend here? No one to defend your honor."

"Jem and Spider sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G."

Obviously, I told them where to go, but it didn't make any difference. They were like a pack of dogs with a bone.

I took it for a couple of days and then I couldn't stomach it anymore. I'd set off for school like normal, then cut off 'round the back of the shops, make my way across to the park or down to the canal, and hang out on my own. Don't feel sorry for me, it was just what I was used to. Been the same everywhere I'd lived, every school I'd been to. You can put up with a certain amount, but it gets to a point when you can't take it any longer, you just need to be away from it. Lots of kids feel like that but especially me. School lumps you in with so many people, like so many battery hens, and, as you know, I don't really do other people. Everything's easier if I keep myself to myself.

Those few days I did a good job of keeping out of Spider's way, too. I saw him a couple of times but I made sure he didn't see me. That whole thing at school had been, well, embarrassing. What did he think he was doing, wading in like that, making a scene of us both? Made me feel a bit sad when I thought about it. For a few weeks there, I'd had a friend, sort of. But like everything else, it'd got too complicated, it had to stop. If the Jordan incident had shown me anything, it had shown me what I already knew: Spider was trouble, the sort of trouble I didn't need. Kind of missed him, though.

And, what do you know? I couldn't keep him out of my life, anyway. Like a bad smell that follows you around, or a piece of chewing gum stuck on your shoe, Spider turned up again soon enough. You might say I couldn't shake him. You might say we were meant to be together.

Anyway, that Wednesday I'd taken my eye off the ball for a minute. I was watching someone, an old dossier. He'd bumped into me ten minutes before, asked me for some money, and I'd followed him along the High Street. Now he was digging about in a dumpster on the other side of the road, and I was leaning against a wall, watching, when a familiar sourness drifted into my nostrils and someone said in my ear, "Whatcha doing?"

My attention was all on the old bloke, so I didn't look 'round or nothing, just said to him, like we'd only seen each other five minutes ago, "Spider, what's the date today?"

"Dunno, twenty-fifth?"

The old bloke had pulled something out of the dumpster, half a burger in its wrapper. He looked around quickly, seeing if anyone else was after it, and our eyes met for a second. There it was again, his number: 11252010.

He tucked the burger under his armpit and crossed his arms, then started scuttling off down the road. I set off after him.

"Where you going?" Spider called out, puzzled.

"I wanna go this way."

He caught up with me. "What for?"

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