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opening extract from

Numbers

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NUMBERS by Rachel Ward – SAMPLE CHAPTER

There are places where kids like me go. Sad kids, bad kids, bored kids and lonely kids, kids who 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 allotments. 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 like that. 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? Do me a favour, they're laughing – they don't want kids like us in their classrooms, and we don't want to be there.

Most of them hang about in small groups, twos or threes, whiling away the hours. Me, I like to be on me own. I like to find places where nobody else goes – 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 favourite 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. 15122006. 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 a number, but I reckon 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, please yourself, I know that they're real. And I know what they mean. The penny dropped 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 DSS to pick up her weekly money. Thursday was normally a good day. Soon, very soon, she'd be able to buy that stuff from the boarded up house down our street and she'd be happy for a few hours. Every taut muscle in her body would relax, she'd talk to me, even read to me sometimes.

As we hurtled along, I called out people's numbers cheerily. "Two, one, four, two, nothing, one, nine! Seven, two, two, nothing, four, six!"

Suddenly, she jerked the pushchair 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 in hers.

"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, 10101998.

Three years later, I watched a man in a scruffy suit write it down on a piece of paper, "Date of Death: 10.10.1998." 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 Cocopops while it boiled. Then I made Mum a black coffee and carried it carefully in to 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 when I looked in her dull empty eyes I couldn't see it any more.

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 went 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, then she rushed out past me and was sick in the hallway. When she'd done, she wiped her mouth on her hanky, took me back to her flat and rang for an ambulance.

After that all these people came; ones in uniform – police, ambulance men; ones in suits, like that man with the clipboard and paper; and a lady, who spoke to me like I was simple 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 they meant, 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 seven years together? Would it hell – she'd 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 rubbish moving under my trainers. 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. Reckon you'd have to tell him to piss off to get rid of him and even then he probably wouldn't.

"So you new around here, yeah?" I shrugged. "Got kicked out your old school? Been a bad girl, 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 a bit of space. Always telling me what to do. They think rules, and routine, and clean hands and mind 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 fag? 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 leant 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," I mumbled.

He drew on his fag, 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 sagging 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 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 Madame Tussaud's. 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 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, to be like everyone else for a while. The rest of me screamed to get the hell out of there, not to get sucked in. You get used to someone, 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 explanation, no goodbyes.

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.”