



with  
**RACHEL WARD**

# THE CHAOS

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**NUMBERS 2**

**THE CHAOS**

**RACHEL WARD**

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For Ozzy, my soulmate

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## Chapter 1: Adam, June 2026

The knock on the door comes early in the morning, just as it's getting light.

'Open up! Open up! We've got an Evacuation Order on these flats. Moving out in five minutes. Five minutes, everybody!'

You can hear them going down the corridor, knocking on doors, repeating the same instructions over and over. I haven't been asleep, but Nan nodded off in her chair, and now she jerks awake and curses.

'Bloody hell, Adam. What time is it?' Her face looks crumpled and old, too old to go with her purple hair.

'Half-six, Nan. They've come.'

She looks at me, tired and wary.

'This is it, then,' she says. 'Better find your things.'

I look back at her and I think, *I'm not going anywhere. Not with you.*

We've been expecting this. We've been camped out in the flat for four days, watching the flood water rising in the street below. They'd warned everyone that the sea wall was likely to go. It was built years ago before the sea level rose, and it wasn't going to stand another storm with a spring tide to add to the swell.

We thought the water would come and then go, but it came and it stayed.

'S'pose this is what Venice looked like before it was washed away,' Nan said, gloomily. She flicked her cigarette butt out of the window and down into the water below. It bobbed slowly along the street towards where the prom had been. And she lit another fag.

The electricity was cut off that first night, then the water in the taps turned brown. People waded along the street outside shouting through loud hailers, warning us not to drink the water, saying they'd bring us food and water. They didn't. Instead we made do with what we'd got, but with no toaster and no microwave, and the milk going off in the fridge, we were starting to get hungry after twelve hours. I knew things were bad when Nan took the cellophane off her last packet of fags.

'Once these are gone we're going to have to get out of here, son,' she said.

'I'm not going,' I told her. This was my home. It was all I had left of Mum.

'We can't stay here, not like this.'

'I'm not going.' Statement of fact. 'You can bugger off back to London if you like. You know you want to anyway.' It was true. She'd never felt comfortable here. She'd come when Mum got ill, and stayed to look after me, but she was like a fish out of water. The sea and the rain made her cough. The big bright sky made her screw up her eyes and she'd scuttle back inside



like a cockroach as fast as she could.

‘Less of your language,’ she said, ‘and pack a bag.’

‘You can’t tell me what to do. You’re not my mum. I’m not packing,’ I said, and I didn’t.

Now we have five minutes to get ready. Nan stirs herself and starts putting more things into her bin bag. She disappears into her room and comes out with an armful of clothes and a polished wooden box tucked under her arm. She moves around the flat surprisingly fast. I feel a tide of panic rising inside me. I can’t leave here. I’m not ready. It’s not fair.

I get one of the chairs from the kitchen and lean it up against the door handle. But it’s not the right height to wedge the handle shut, so I just start grabbing whatever I can find around the building a barricade. I push the sofa over, pile the kitchen chair on top, then the coffee table. I’m breathing hard, sweating between my shoulder blades.

‘Adam, what the hell are you doing?’

Nan’s tearing at my arm, trying to stop me. Her long yellow fingernails are digging into my skin. I shrug her off.

‘Get off, Nan. I’m not going!’

‘Don’t be stupid. Get some of your things. You’ll want your things with you.’

I take no notice.

‘Adam, don’t be so fucking stupid!’ She’s clawing at me again, and then someone’s knocking on the door.

‘Open up!’

I freeze, and look at Nan. Her eyes show me her number: 2022054. She’s got another thirty years, near enough, but you’d never guess it. She looks like she could go any day.

‘Open up!’

‘Adam, please ...’

‘No, Nan.’

‘Stand away from the door! Stand back!’

‘Adam—’

A sledgehammer smashes the lock. Then the door itself is shredded. In the corridor there are two soldiers, one with the sledgehammer, the other with a gun. It’s pointing straight into the flat. It’s pointing at us. The soldiers quickly scan the rest of the flat.

‘All right, ma’am,’ says the gunman. ‘I’ll have to ask you to move that obstruction and leave the building.’

Nan nods.

‘Adam,’ she says, ‘move the sofa.’

I’m staring at the end of the rifle. I can’t take my eyes off it. In the next second, maybe less than that, it could all be over. This could be it. All I have to do is make a move towards him. If it’s my time, my day to go, that’ll be it. *What is my number? Is it today?*

The barrel of the rifle is clean and smooth and straight. Will I see the bullet come out? Will there be smoke?

'Fuck off,' I say. 'Take your fucking gun and fuck off.'

And then it all happens at once. The sledgehammer guy drops his hammer and shoves the sofa into the room like a rugby player in a scrum, the guy with the gun tilts it up to the ceiling and follows him in and Nan smacks me, right across my face.

'Listen, you little bastard,' she hisses at me, 'I promised your mum I'd look after you, and I will. I'm your nan and you'll do what I say. Now stop playing silly buggers. We're leaving. And mind your fucking language, I told you about that.'

My face is stinging but I'm not ready to give in yet. This is my home. They can't just take you away from your home, can they?

They can.

The soldiers grab an arm each and carry me out of the flat. I struggle, but they're big and there's two of them. It's all so quick. Before I know it, I'm at the end of the corridor and down the fire escape and they've put me in an inflatable boat at the bottom of the steps. Nan gets in beside me, dumps the bulging bin bag by her feet and puts her arm round my shoulders, and we're away, chugging slowly through the flooded streets.

'It's all right, Adam,' she says, 'it's going to be all right.'

Some of the people on our boat are crying quietly. But most of their faces are blank. I'm still angry and humiliated. I can't understand what just happened.

I haven't got any of my stuff. I haven't got my book. Another wave of panic sweeps over me. I'll have to get out and go back. I can't go without my book. Where did I leave it? Where did I last have it? Then I feel the edge of something hard against my hip and my hand goes down to my pocket. Of course, it's there. I haven't put it anywhere – I've kept it with me like I always do.

I relax, just a little bit. And then it hits me. We're actually leaving. We're going. I might never see the flat again.

There's a big lump in my throat. I try to swallow it, but it won't go. I can feel the tears welling up. The soldier steering the boat is watching me. I'm not going to cry, not in front of him or Nan or any of these people. I won't give them the satisfaction. I dig my fingernails into the back of my hand. The tears are still there, threatening to spill out. I dig harder, and the pain breaks through everything else. I'm not going to cry. I'm not going to. I won't.

At the transit centre, we stand in line to register. There's one queue for people who have somewhere to go, and another one for people who haven't. Nan and I aren't chipped, so we have to show our ID cards and Nan fills in forms for both of us requesting transport to London. They pin a piece of paper with a number onto our coats, like we're about to run a marathon, then they herd us into a hall and tell us to wait.

People are giving out hot food and drinks. We queue up again. My mouth waters when we get nearer the front and I can see and smell the food. We're four from the front when another soldier comes into the hall and starts barking out numbers, including ours. Our coach is ready. We have to leave now.

'Nan ...?' I'm so hungry. I can't go without getting something to eat, just something.

'Scuse me,' I say, 'can you let me through?'

There's no reaction. Everyone's pretending they haven't heard.

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I try again, as the soldier repeats the numbers. Nothing. I'm desperate. I dart forward and shove my hand through a gap between two people, and feel around blindly. My fingers find something – it feels like a piece of toast – and I pick it up. Someone grabs my wrist and holds on so tightly it hurts.

'There's a queue,' he says firmly. 'We're British. We know how to queue.'

'I'm sorry,' I say. 'It's for my nan. She's hungry and we've got to go now.'

I look up into the face of the man holding me. He's middle-aged, about fifty. Grey hair and a grim face, you can see how tired he is, but that's not what shocks me – it's his number 112027. Only six months to live. I get a flash of his death, too, and it's brutal, violent, a blow to the head, blood, brains ...

I drop the toast back onto the plate and try to back away. The man lets go of my wrist, but he thinks he's won, but he must have seen something in me, too, because his face softens and he reaches across, picks up the toast and hands it to me.

'For your nan,' he says. 'Go on, son. Don't miss your coach.'

'Thanks,' I murmur.

I think about cramming the whole lot in there and then, but the man's watching me and so is Nan, so I carry the toast carefully outside, and when Nan and I are settled on the coach, I give it to her. She tears it in two and gives half back. We don't speak. I stuff mine in my mouth and it's gone in two bites, but Nan savours hers, making it last 'til we're out of town and heading east along the main road. The road's on a raised-up strip of land with miles and miles of flooded fields all round it. The sun's come out at last and it's turned the water into a sheet of silver so bright you can't look at it.

'Nan,' I say. 'What if the whole world floods? What will we do then?'

She wipes a smudge of butter off her chin with her finger, and licks it.

'We'll build an ark, shall we, you and me? And invite all the animals?' She chuckles and picks up my hand with the one she's just licked. There are deep red crescents on my skin where I dug my nails in on the boat.

'What you done there?' she asks.

'Nothing.'

She looks at me and frowns. Then she gives my hand a little squeeze.

'Don't worry, son. We'll be all right in London. There's flood defences there, and everything. They know how to do things properly there. We'll be fine. Good old London Town.'

She puts her head back, closes her eyes and sighs, happy to be heading home at last. But I can't relax. I have to write down the man in the queue's number before I forget it. It's shaking me up. You get a feeling for people's numbers, when you've seen them all your life. And his number didn't seem to match him. I'm feeling edgy. I'll be better once I write it down.

I get my book out of my pocket, and record all the details I can remember: description (it's better when I know the names), today's date, the place, his number, how he's going to die.

write it carefully, and every letter, every word makes me calmer. It's all in there now, safe in my book. I can look at it later.

I put my notebook back. Nan's starting to snore gently. She's well away. I look at the other passengers. Some of them are trying to sleep, but some are like me – anxious and watchful. From where I'm sitting I can see six or seven people who are still awake. We catch each other's eyes and then we look away again, without saying anything, like strangers do.

But just one moment of eye contact is all I need to see their numbers, a different number for each one – the different dates that mark the end of their lives.

Except these numbers aren't that different. Five of them end in 12027 and two are exactly the same: 112027.

My heart's pounding in my chest now, my breathing's gone shallow and fast. I reach into my pocket 'til my fingers find my notebook again. My hands are shaking, but I manage to get the book out and open it at the right page.

These people are like the man in the food queue – they've only got six months left.

They're going to die in January next year.

They're going to die in London.

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## Chapter 2: Sarah, September 2026

‘You know why you’re here. It’s not what you’re used to, but we’re running out of options. They won’t tolerate you playing up here – being late, or truanting, or answering back. This is a chance for you to start again, do it right this time, knuckle down. Please, Sarah, don’t let us down. Don’t let yourself down.’

Blah, blah, blah. Same old same old. I let it drift over me, too tired to listen. I hardly slept last night, and when I did I had the nightmare again and I had to wake myself up. I lay awake then, listening to the noises a house makes at night, until it got light.

I don’t say anything back to Him, not even ‘goodbye’ as I get out of the Merc. I slam the car door and in my head I can see Him wince, hear Him curse me, and it makes me feel better, just for a second.

The Merc has turned people’s heads, like it always does. It’s not every day you see a car of the school run, never mind a gas-guzzler like Dad’s. Now people are checking me out. Great. I’ll be marked out as different before I even start. Still, what do I care?

Someone whistles and purrs, ‘Niiice,’ long and low at me.

A group of lads have stopped to stare, six or seven of them. They’re looking me up and down, licking their lips like wolves. What am I meant to feel? Intimidated? Flattered? Screw that. I show them the finger and walk in through the gates.

It’s not bad for a state school, I suppose. At least it’s all new, not scruffy like I’ve been expecting. But it’s only new because the previous one was burnt out in the 2022 riots and it still got a bit of a reputation, Forest Green: tough regime, tough kids. My heart sank when Mum and Dad said they’d enrolled me, but then I thought, *What the hell. One school’s the same as any other. School, home – they’re all prisons, aren’t they? All there to make you conform.* It doesn’t matter where I am – my mind’s my own, they can’t control that.

And wherever they send me, I don’t plan to stay for long. I’ve got other things on my mind, well, one big thing, or at least a small thing that’s getting bigger. And it means that I have to start thinking for myself, planning, taking control.

I have to get my life back.

I can’t wait much longer.

I have to get away.

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## Chapter 3: Adam

I didn't start it. It wasn't me.

Nan told me not to get into trouble when I was setting off in the morning, and I wasn't going to. I was just going to turn up, register, do what I had to do and get back to Nan's.

I know there'll be a lot of twenty-sevens there, because there are a lot of twenty-sevens everywhere. All summer, I've been clocking them. The entries in my book show the same picture wherever I've been.

'Kilburn High Road. 84.'

'The offie, sherry for Nan. 12.'

There are so many I don't write down their details any more. I can't. I only record how many I've seen that time. I still keep proper records on people who are different, or if I know their names. And it makes me feel better, well, a bit better. At least it used to. But the longer I stay in London, the more I know we've made a mistake. We should never have come here. It's dangerous. A lot of people are going to die.

So I tell myself that for the time being I'll go through the motions, keep my head down and keep Nan happy, but only 'til I've figured out how to get out of here and where to go. I need to find a place where there are no twenty-sevens. If no one else there is going to die in January 2027, then it stands to reason I'll have a better chance of surviving, because I don't know my own number, see. I just don't know. The only way I'll find out is if there's someone else who can see the numbers – and I'm pretty sure I'm the only one.

There's a bottleneck by the door into Reception. I don't like crowds, never have – too many people, too many deaths – but I make myself walk through the gates and join the queue. In no time there's people crowding in behind me, penning me in, and I start to panic. The sweat breaks out under my arms and on my top lip. I look around for a way out. There's a number after number ending in 2027 and suddenly my head is full of it – the noise, the chaos, the trapped limbs, broken bones, darkness, despair.

I've got to get a grip. My mum taught me what to do.

'Breathe slowly,' she'd say. 'Make yourself do it. In through your nose and out through your mouth. Don't look at anyone else. Look at the ground. In through your nose – two, three, four – and out through your mouth – two, three, four.'

I make myself look down at the forest of legs and feet and bags. If I don't see the numbers then this feeling will go away. I'll be okay. My breath's uneven and shallow, there's not enough air getting in my lungs.

*In through your nose, and out through your mouth. Come on, I can do this.*

It isn't working. I'm getting worse. I'm going to be sick ... I'm going to faint ...

Someone behind me shoves into my back. I dig my heels in and stand my ground.

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*Breathe slowly.* Why isn't it working?

More pressure. The boy behind me is in my space, trying to push me around. He'll have me over in a minute. I'll go down and be trampled, kicked to bits. Perhaps that's what's meant to happen, but it's not how I want to go and I'm not going down without a fight.

That's it!

I swing round and catch him with my elbow, right in the ribs.

'Fuck! Watch it!' He spits the words out, a boy a bit smaller than me, with ratty teeth and crew cut. I've hurt him, and now the look in his eyes says he's going to hurt me back. I know that look – I've seen it too many times before. I ought to be on my toes, alert, ready for the first punch, but his number's burning into me. It's different, see, odd. He only has three months to go. 6122026. I'm getting the flash of a blade, the hot metallic smell of blood and feel sicker than ever. I can't move – his number, his death, has me in its grip. I shut my eyes to try and get it out of my head, break the spell. I open them again the split second before his knuckles hit my face.

Someone must have jostled him, because he only catches my ear, and not very hard, but it's hard enough to snap me back to reality. I bunch up both my fists and get him in the stomach. I hurt him, but I can't have knocked the wind out of him because he comes at me again, one, two, into my ribs. People around us are screaming and cheering, but that doesn't matter. It's me and him that matters.

I hit him back. I want to hurt him now. I want to make him go away. I want to make all of it go away – this boy, these kids, this school, Nan, London.

'All right, lads, break it up!'

It's a security guard, the size of a small mountain. He's come wading through the crowd and grabbed both of us by the scruff of the neck.

Rat-teeth tries to protest.

'I didn't do nothing! He just started laying into me! What was I s'posed to do?'

But all he gets is an extra neck-shaking and a 'Shut it'.

The crowd parts as we're hauled to the front. We're sent through the metal detector one at a time and searched on the other side. Then we're marched down the corridor to an office where the Deputy Head is waiting.

'Based on today's performance we shouldn't even be letting you into this school.' He's a shirt-and-tie kind of guy, the sort that can't talk to you without talking down to you. He's reading us the Riot Act now, but I'm not listening. I'm looking at the dandruff on his shoulders, the way the cuff of his jacket is frayed. 'It's a disgrace to be fighting on your first day, a disgrace. What have you got to say for yourselves?'

I guess Rat-teeth, who turns out to be called Junior, has been in offices like this before. He knows the code. We both stand in silence, and after ten seconds or so we mutter, 'Nothing, sir, sorry, sir'.

'Whatever it was between you, I want you to leave it in this room. Shake hands, boys.'

We look at each other, and again his number blots out everything else and I'm there with him as the knife goes in. I can feel his surprise, his disbelief, the searing pain.

'Take my hand, you moron,' Junior hisses at me.

I come back to myself, back to the room, the teacher and him. He's holding his hand out towards me. I take it and we shake. He squeezes so hard my knuckle bones crunch against each other. I don't show a thing, just squeeze back.

'Take them back to registration. I don't want to see either of you boys in here again. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

We're marched back down the corridor and join the end of the line. I'm in front of Junior. He leans in behind me and mutters close to my ear, 'You just made the biggest mistake of your life, Shit-brain.'

I move forwards a bit to get further away from him and nudge the girl in front.

'Sorry,' I say.

She half turns round, a girl about fifteen centimetres shorter than me with streaky blonde hair. She starts shooting me a dirty look out of the corner of her eye, but then she stops. Her tracks and her eyes go wide as two dinner plates.

'Oh my God,' she whispers.

I know people think I'm weird, the way I look at them and sometimes keep looking. I try not to stare, I do, but sometimes I get kind of locked in, frozen by their numbers, the way they make me feel, like I did with Junior. But I haven't been staring at this girl. I've only just joined the queue.

'What?' I say. 'What is it?'

She's turned round properly now, and she hasn't taken her eyes off me. They're blue, the bluest blue I've ever seen, but there are dark circles underneath, and her cheeks are pale and pinched.

'You,' she says, faintly. 'It's you.' She goes even whiter and starts stumbling away from me out of the queue, keeping her eyes fixed on mine as she walks slowly backwards, and suddenly it's as if the rest of the world has melted away.

Her number, her death, it totally blows my mind.

More than fifty years in the future, and there she is, slipping out of this life easily, bathed in love and light. I can feel it, all over me, and inside me, in my head. And she's not alone. I'm there with her – she's me and I'm her. How??

She turns away suddenly and starts running down the corridor. One of the guards spots her and shouts out, but she doesn't stop.

'Whoah! A runner!' Junior says behind me. 'She won't get far, not without registering,' and he's right. None of the doors will open. I watch her rattling one handle after another, desperate. The bugs in the ceiling track her movements. She's getting into a real state, banging her fist on the glass, kicking out. And then two guards grab her under the arms, one on each side, and carry her back towards us, and into a side room, next to the reception desk.



She's struggling and screaming, her face screwed up in a fury, but when she opens her eyes for a second and sees me again, there's something else, as clear as her number.

She's terrified.

Terrified of me.

---

## Chapter 4: Sarah

They want to know what's wrong with me, why I was trying to run away. What can I say? What can I tell them without sounding mad? That I've just met the boy I see in my nightmares? That night after night we're trapped together in some sort of inferno, and he grabs the baby, my baby, and takes her into the flames?

And suddenly here he is, at my new school. This devil. This person who only exists in my head – he's here.

And now I know it's not a nightmare. It's something else, something real.

Yeah, that'll go down really well. Dad's told them all about me, my record of suspension, expulsions, exclusions. Now they'll think I'm mad as well as bad. So I say nothing. No explanation. No apology. I get the standard bollocking. They know all about my history, which schools have kicked me out, the sorts of things they've kicked me out for. I'm privileged, apparently, to be given a place here. I should treat it as a chance to start again, turn over a new leaf.

I stand there and I think, *You don't know jack shit about me*, and I feel the skin of my belly pressing against the stiff material of my skirt. *Nobody knows. Nobody knows the whole truth.*

Then they take me back to register, pair me up with some earnest-looking kid who's there to make sure I get to my tutor room and don't go AWOL again. I scan the corridors for the boy, the nightmare boy. I stand in the doorway of my tutor room checking out the kid before I go in. If he's there, in my tutor group, I'm not going to stay. But he isn't. I'm okay for a while. So I find a desk, and I sit there, eyes front, while my tutor drones on. I don't hear a word he says. All I'm thinking is, *Is he real, this boy? Who is he? Why's he here?* And after a while, I'm half-sure that I made him up, that I really am mad and my mind's starting to mess up my days as well as my nights.

Then at break-time, I see him again.

He's sitting on his own on a little wall by the science block. Where I'm standing, I can watch him without him knowing I'm there. I try to empty the madness from my mind and look at him like a normal human being would. I study him.

He's one of those people who can't sit still to save his life. All the time on that wall his legs are jiggling. Every now and again, he nods his head as if he's listening to music, but I can't see any earphones.

I'm not surprised he's on his own. There's something odd about him, something different in the way he moves, the way he is. What am I scared of? He's just an oddball, a freak, nobody.

After a bit he pulls a notebook out of his pocket and starts writing in it, bending forward with his arm curved round. Whatever he's writing, he doesn't want anyone else to see. So, he

has secrets, this boy – I kind of like that. And I like that he's got a book, he's writing on paper, because I like drawing on paper, the feeling of holding a pencil in my hand, and hard anyone does any more – it's all touch screens and voice recognition. He's different. Different okay. And I really want to know what he keeps in that book.

He twists round as he writes and the left side of his face catches the light. He's actually good-looking, no, more than that, beautiful: the shape of his face, his deep-set eyes, the firmness of his jaw-line, the curve of his lips. And his skin. It's a warm brown, almost honey coloured, and so smooth and clear ... that's not right. The boy in my nightmare, the one I'm scared of, is scarred, his face so marked you can feel the rawness.

It's not him.

It can't be.

I snort and shake my head. I've made a fool of myself and I've got into trouble for no reason on my first day. Nice work, Sarah.

He must have seen my movement out of the corner of his eye, because he looks round and sees me. He slams his notebook shut and shoves it back in his pocket, keeping his eyes on me all the time. He looks as guilty as I feel, caught looking. And yet I don't look away, and as we hold each other's eyes my stomach flips over. There's a connection between us.

I'm not mad.

I know him and he knows me.

Oh God, what's happening?

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## Chapter 5: Adam

‘Get on all right?’

Nan’s on her stool in the kitchen when I get home, where I expect her to be. Wherever she is – here, Weston – she finds somewhere to perch, somewhere that’s hers, and sticks to it drinking tea and chain-smoking her way through the day.

I shrug. ‘S’pose.’

Even though she never seems to move, she don’t miss a bloody thing, Nan, but I’m not ready to tell her everything about school. Not yet. She don’t need to know I’ve made an enemy and met a girl.

Junior don’t bother me, not his threats anyway. I’ve had knuckle-heads like him saying things like that to me my whole life. If he wants me to give him another pasting I will. I’m not scared of him. His number, though, that’s something else. I wrote it down at break-time but I still can’t get it out of my head. It’s a nasty death, and soon. And the feelings are so strong; they make me think things I don’t want to. Like maybe I’m there when it happens. Maybe I’m the one holding the knife ...

Even now, standing in the kitchen, leaning up against the bench, the sweat’s breaking out on my skin, and I think I’m going to pass out. What if my number’s the same as his? What if it wasn’t his death I was feeling, it was mine? Not knowing my own number bothers me more than anything. I’ve tried to see it. Done all the obvious things; looking in mirror reflections in windows, even in water. But nothing works. It has to be eye to eye and the only person in the world I can’t look at ... is me.

S’pose that’s what really worries me about the twenty-sevens. There are so many of them the chances are pretty high I’m one of them too. There are hundreds at school. There are thirteen in my tutor group.

‘Wake up, Adam, I asked you a question.’

Nan’s voice breaks through my thoughts and my mouth goes into action before my brain has time to stop it.

‘Thirteen.’

Shit! Have I really said it out loud?

‘Thirteen what, love?’ Nan asks.

‘Nothing. I was just thinking about something ... from Maths.’

She narrows her eyes, and blows a plume of smoke up towards the ceiling. I’ve got to distract her, so I ferret in my bag and whip out the palm-net they gave me when I finally registered. I’ve been trying to use it in lessons, but I’ve never had my own computer before. Mum wouldn’t let them in the house, so I’m way slower than everyone else. I could see

people watching me, sniggering – a hick from the sticks.

---

Nan glances at it, but she don't seem interested. She's locked in on me and it'll take more than some freebie IT to knock her off target.

'You like Maths, do you?' she says. 'Like numbers?'

Do I like numbers? *Like them?* She's watching me now, and all of a sudden, I'm not sure what she's asking me. I've never told anyone about the numbers except Mum, and our teacher at school when I was little, before I knew what they were. Mum always said they were our secret, something special between me and her. And I kept it like that. I didn't tell. When she died, I thought that left just me knowing. I was on my own. Now I'm not so sure.

'I don't think I like numbers,' I say, carefully. 'I think they're important.'

'Yeah,' Nan says. 'Yeah, they are important.'

We look at each other for a minute and neither of us speaks. The radio's on – some news report about the government coming clean over the Kyoto targets being missed by miles and next-door's dog is yapping away as usual, but the silence between us is electric.

'I know you're special, Adam,' she says, finally, and a shiver runs down my spine. 'I seen it in you, the day you were born.'

'What?'

'I saw, I see, a beautiful boy. They're there in you, your mum and your dad. Oh God, there's so much of my Terry in you. Sometimes, I swear I think he's here again ... it's like he never ...' She tails off. There's an extra shine to her eyes, and the rims are pink.

'What else, Nan?' I know there's something. She swallows hard, and looks deep into my eyes.

'Your aura, I've never seen nothing like it. Red and gold. My God, you're special. You're a leader. A survivor. There's courage, right through you. You're strong, you have spiritual strength. You've been put here for a reason, I swear it.'

I take a risk. I have to know.

'What about my number?'

She frowns.

'I don't see numbers, son. I'm not like you and your mum.'

So she does know.

'How do you know about them?'

'Your mum told me. I knew about her years ago, and then when she found out about you she rang me up.'

Suddenly, I've got to tell her, tell her the thing I've been bottling up all summer.

'Nan – half the people in London are going to die next year. I'm not making it up. I've seen their numbers.'

She nods.

'I know.'

'You know?'

‘Yeah, Jem told me about 2027. Warned me.’

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My hands go up to the sides of my head. Nan knew! Mum knew! I’m shaking, but I’m not scared, I’m angry. How dare they keep this from me? Why leave me on my own with it?

‘Why didn’t you tell me? Why didn’t she?’

The anger’s fizzing through me now, in my arms and legs. I kick at the board under the kitchen cupboards.

‘Don’t do that!’

I want to smash something. I kick out again, and this time the board thunks down onto the floor.

‘Adam! Stop it!’

Nan’s on her feet now, coming towards me. She makes a grab for my arms. I try to shrug her off, but she’s strong, much stronger than you’d think to look at her. We stand wrestling with each other for a few seconds. Then, quick as a flash, she lets go one of my arms and slaps me across the face.

‘Not here!’ she shouts. ‘Not in my house! I won’t have it!’

I come back to myself then, I see things like they’re happening to someone else, a teenage boy grappling with an old woman in her kitchen, and I feel the shame spreading through me like a blush.

‘I’m sorry, Nan,’ I say. I rub my cheek where she got me. I don’t know where to look, what to do with myself.

‘Should think so,’ she says, and she turns to put the kettle on. ‘If you’ve calmed down, you’ll *listen*, then we can talk about it.’

‘Okay,’ I say.

‘In fact you make the tea. I need a fag.’

She sits down and reaches for her packet, and her hand is shaking, just a little, as she draws a cigarette out and lights it.

When the tea’s ready I sit down opposite her.

‘Tell me, Nan,’ I say. ‘Tell me everything you know. About me and Mum and Dad. I’ve got a right ...’

She’s studying the table top or pretending to. She brushes a little bit of ash onto the floor and then she looks up at me, blows a long trail of smoke out of the corner of her mouth and says, ‘Yeah, you do have a right, and I s’pose now’s the time.’

And she tells me.

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## Chapter 6: Sarah

He's trying the door.

I hold my breath.

In the darkness, I can hear the handle turn, the scraping of metal on wood as the door pushes against the chair I left tipped up against it. There's a scuffling sound as He moves the door backwards and forwards, gently at first, then with more force. I can picture His face in confusion turning to anger – and I shift up further on the bed, sitting upright, knees up to my chin and I cross both sets of fingers.

The room falls quiet for a few seconds, and then He's there again. He can't believe it. He needs to check.

Then footsteps, and silence.

*It worked! It fucking worked!*

I hug my knees in closer and rock from side to side. I want to shout out, scream, dance, but I can't break the silence. I can't wake the others; Marty and Luke in the room next door, mum further down the landing.

I should sleep now. It's safe to sleep. I uncurl my legs and slide them down under the duvet. I'm tired, but not sleepy, and I lie there for ages, triumphant and scared at the same time. I've won a battle, but the war's not over yet. Rain starts battering against the window.

I ache for sleep, eight hours of blankness, but when I do drift off there's no rest. I'm back in the nightmare that waits for me every night.

The flames are orange.

I'm being burnt alive. I'm trapped, penned in by rubble.

The flames are yellow.

The baby's screaming. We'll die here, me and her. The boy with the scarred face is here too. He's fire and flame himself, scarred, burnt, a dark shape in the thundering, crackling, spitting heat.

The flames are white.

And he grabs the baby, my baby, and he walks away and is consumed.

The room's still dark when I force myself awake. The back of my T-shirt and my sheets are drenched. There's a date in my head, neon-bright, dazzling my eyes from the inside. The first of January 2027. I've never dreamt that before. It's new. He's brought it to me. The boy.

The boy at school *is* the boy in my nightmare. It's him. I know it is. He's found his way out of my head and into my life. How? How has he done that? It's bullshit. It's not real. Stuff like that doesn't happen.

I reach out next to me and switch on the light. I screw up my eyes until they adjust and then I see the chair wedged up against the door handle.

Of course stuff happens, I think, dully. Stuff happens all the time.



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