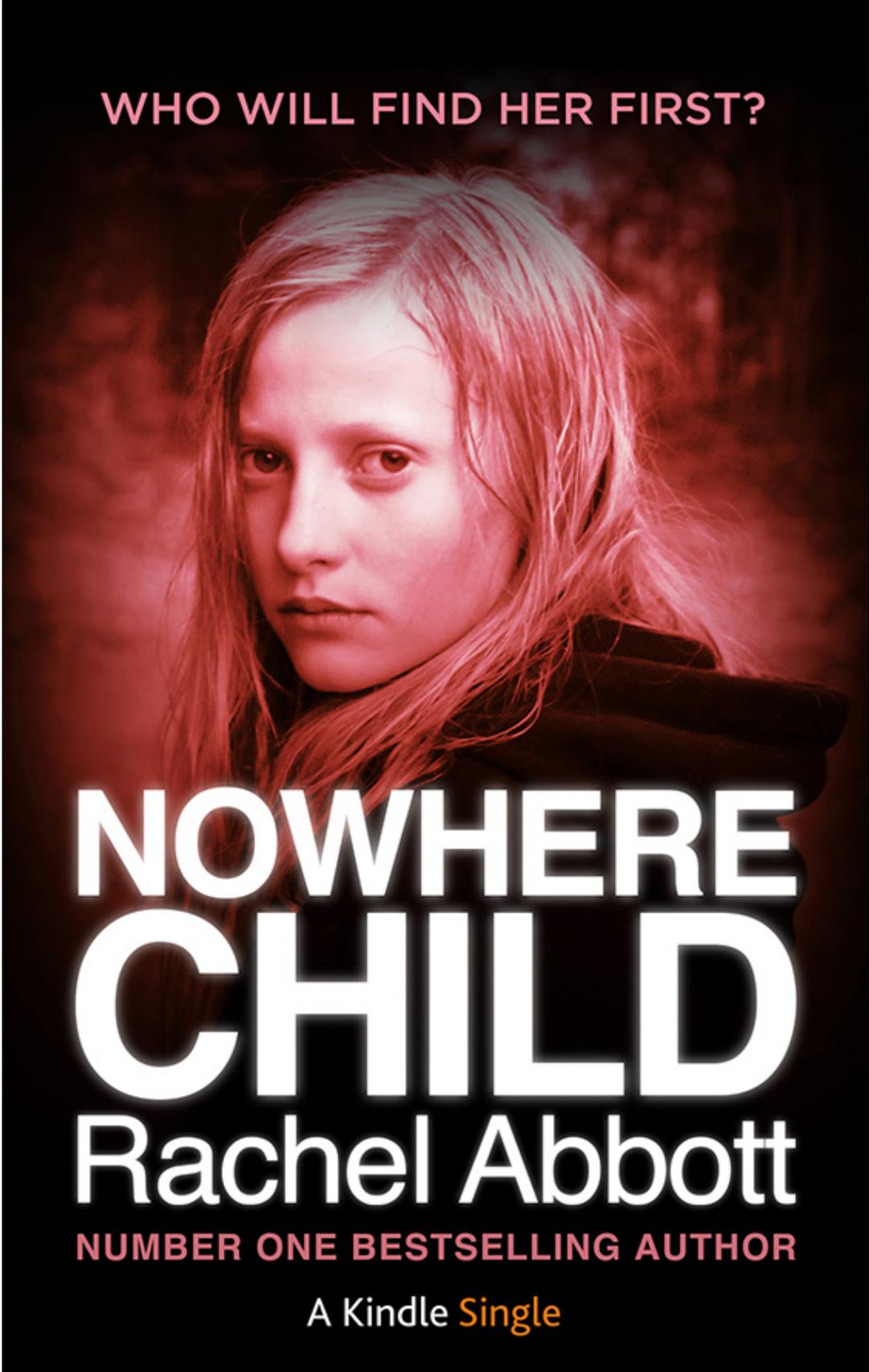


WHO WILL FIND HER FIRST?



**NOWHERE
CHILD**
Rachel Abbott

NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A Kindle **Single**

NOWHERE CHILD

RACHEL ABBOTT

Dear Reader,

Thank you for choosing to read *Nowhere Child*!

Some of you will be interested in this story because you have already read *Stranger Child* and you may be one of the many people who contacted me to ask what happened next to Tasha Joseph.

Others may be coming to Tasha's story for the first time, and if so I hope I have written this novella in a way that will satisfy you. But if this book leaves you keen to find out what happened to Tasha before the start of *Nowhere Child* and what led to her running away, the answers lie in [Stranger Child](#).

Rachel Abbott

1

It's quiet tonight in the tunnel. It's because we're so cold. We sit huddled in our little groups around fires that we know won't last long. Andy has lit ours in an old, rusty, catering-size tomato tin that he found outside a restaurant. With a couple of holes punched near the bottom it gives off a bit of heat, although it will soon burn the small amount of fuel we have. We can always get paper to burn, and the brief, bright yellow flame is comforting, but it only lasts a few seconds. Wood is harder to find. The freezing November wind is bouncing off the damp walls, hitting us in icy blasts as if someone keeps opening and closing a door. But there isn't any door – just a gaping black hole.

There are four or five groups of us down here, sitting in twos and threes huddled around our feeble fires. We keep to ourselves mostly. I can see the odd face, lit from below by the weak yellow flames, features hovering, disembodied, against the black walls, the eyes hollow pits. I can hear the occasional murmur of conversation but mostly I listen to the steady drip from the roof. It is relentless, and I'm not surprised when Andy says that dripping water is used as a form of torture. Another drop joins in, this time with a slightly different tone. There is a pause, and for a second I wonder if it's stopped. But of course it hasn't. *Drip-drop. Drip-drop.*

I pull the last bit of chicken from the bone with my teeth. It's another great find of Andy's. He hangs around outside the back of a posh restaurant most days and just dives in when food is thrown into the bins. People leave so much on their plates.

I shuffle a bit closer to the fire, and Andy smiles at me. We look out for each other, but he's a bit older than me, so I always feel I've got the better deal. However bad things get, he's always laughing and he mucks about, exaggerating his Scottish accent to make me giggle. Whenever he is puzzled by something, he rubs his hand backwards and forwards over his straight ginger hair, making it stick up on top. It's grown long and covers his ears now. He seems older than his years, but when he doesn't know I'm watching, he sometimes looks a bit sad and lost.

I don't know what his story is but I do know that at some time in his life he has broken his arm because it's set at a funny angle. Whatever happened, he can't have gone to hospital, or it wouldn't be like that. We don't ask each other questions, but he knows I'm not who I pretend to be, just as I know that something terrible has happened to him.

I haven't been to the surface for days, but there are some people down here and in other parts of underground Manchester who haven't been above ground for years. Andy says at one time there was a whole community – about eighteen thousand people – living underground in Manchester back in the nineteenth century. I don't know if I believe him.

I can hear a louder voice at the end of the tunnel. It must be somebody new, because there's something about this place that makes us all talk in low voices – or not talk at all. The newcomer is getting closer to us. He's stopping at each pitch, crouching down and asking questions. I look at Andy and somehow I know. So does he. I can't run, though – the guy would catch me in a flash.

Slowly, silently, I shuffle back from the fire into the shadows. The orange flames are still lighting Andy's face, but mine is hidden. My hoody is a bit big, so I pull the hood as far over my head as I can. I always wear boys' clothes now, and my hair is less than an inch long all over. When I can, I dye it – but it grows out quickly, and there are only so many places that I can nick the dye from. It's not good to keep going back to the same shop.

I can see the newcomer in the distance, and as far as I can tell from here he looks like a young bloke, maybe mid-twenties. He's tall, but he seems top heavy because he's wearing a dark-coloured puffa jacket and he's got skinny legs that look a bit bandy to me. I thought when they came for me it might be somebody I would know, but it isn't, and that's good. Less chance he will recognise me.

He's showing something to the people next along from us, and I feel myself start to sweat even in this icy cold.

Now he's moving towards us. If I keep my head down completely it will seem very suspicious, so with my hood as far over as is sensible I rest my chin on my knees, wrap my arms around my shins and pretend to be staring into the fire. Unless he lies down, he won't be able to see my eyes.

I desperately want to look at him, so I'll know him if I see him in the street, but I can't look up. All I see are his feet – newish trainers, navy-blue with white soles – and his jeans – tight and dark. Definitely not a homeless guy, then. And I was right about the legs.

'Hey,' he says to Andy. He fishes a piece of paper out of his pocket, and I know what it is. There are thousands of them flying around Manchester. It's a poster with a photo of me on it.

Andy grunts a response and carries on pretending to poke the fire with a piece of iron he found somewhere.

'Do you know this girl, kid?' he says to Andy. Andy pretends to look at the poster and pulls a face.

'Nah – she's not round here or I'd have seen her.'

'What about your pal here?' He starts to move towards me.

Casually, Andy holds out a hand and takes the paper, distracting the man.

'What's all the fuss about this wee lassie anyway?' he says. 'I've seen lots of these bits of paper in the wind. What's the story?'

The man's attention is diverted from me for a moment.

'She's just another runaway, but there are people that want her found – and they're offering a reward.'

I freeze. This is a new development. If there's a reward, people are going to be far

more interested. It's only natural.

'Yeah? How much?' I hear Andy ask. *Oh no, not you, Andy.*

'Five grand,' the man says, 'and if you help me find her, you can have a cut too.'

'Fifty fifty?' Andy asks.

The man laughs. 'We'll see – just find her first.' He looks towards me again.

'It's no use asking Harry,' Andy says. 'He's not been above ground for months and he don't speak much. I just look out for him. He's only a bairn – just eleven last week.'

The man loses interest in me, and I feel a stab of guilt that I ever doubted Andy. I'm not eleven, of course, but I'm very thin so I could easily pass for younger than I am.

'Well, just keep your eyes open and let me know if you see her – I'll give you my number.'

'Ah, right. I'll just be using my brand new iPhone to call you, will I?' Andy's humour is not lost on the man.

He laughs. 'There's phone boxes, thicko, and you can always nick enough to make a call, I'm sure. Here, I'll write it on the flyer for you.'

He scribbles the number on one of the sheets of paper he pulls from his pocket.

'I'll be back in a day or two – see if anybody's seen her.'

With that, the man moves off further in the tunnel.

We wait in silence until he is well out of earshot.

'Do you want to tell me what's going on?' Andy asks. 'You don't have to if you don't want, but there's always people looking for you. The woman who hands these out, for one.' He waves the piece of paper at me. 'She's been looking for you for months. The cops were asking around, too, though that was a while back. And now this guy today.'

'I ran away.' Andy wants an answer, but it's all I can give him. 'I'm just a missing kid like you are.'

Andy laughs. 'You don't see nobody offering a reward for me, do you?'

I just smile at him. I want to tell him, but how can I? How can I say that the woman looking for me is my stepmother, Emma, and she's looking for me because I stole her baby? My own brother.

2

The visitor last night scared me. I don't know what to think. I need to know if Emma has got some daft notion in her head that she can offer a reward for me. Surely she would realise that it could be dangerous – that the wrong people would be interested? But she doesn't know what the streets are like and what people might do for money. I don't understand why she would do it now, though, after all this time. It doesn't make any sense. But I need to know, so when I woke up this morning I decided I had to leave the tunnel and try to find out what's happening.

I've seen Emma before, watched her from the distance, but she's never clocked me. I don't think she would recognise me now. No more straggly blonde hair. I look like a boy, and that's the plan – I don't want anybody to know who I am.

I don't know how often she comes into Manchester but I know she doesn't always go to the same part of town. Sometimes she's up in Piccadilly, other times she's in King Street or Market Street. She carries a yellow plastic box with her, upends it on the floor and stands on it to make her taller than the passers-by. And she always has Ollie with her; lovely Ollie, with his round, smiling face and his pudgy cheeks; the very same Ollie that I stole from her.

The thought makes me shudder.

I start looking for her in Piccadilly Gardens. She's not here yet, but I know she often stands on some steps that lead up to a statue, so I move over to the far side so she won't be able to see me.

I can smell pizza, and it's nearly killing me. My belly doesn't rumble any more – it's way past that stage – but the longing for a huge meal that would make me need to lie down and nurse my bloated belly is sometimes overpowering. A boy walks past, eating a burger, cheese and grease oozing from the bread bun, and I want to steal it out of his hands and run. But I can't draw attention to myself.

After an hour I give up and start to make my way down Market Street, past the trams and into the pedestrian bit. That's when I hear her.

'Tasha! Tasha Joseph,' she's shouting. 'We miss you. Ollie misses you too.'

Then I hear Ollie's squeaky little voice. 'Tasha!' He can make the 'sh' sound now. He used to call me Tassa. My eyes fill with tears, but I brush them quickly away.

Emma looks great. She's got a bright-blue coat on over jeans tucked into flat boots and a stripy scarf round her neck. Her dark hair is shorter, just resting on her collar, and it suits her. I can't see Ollie because he's in his pushchair – I can just see the tops of the handles. I want to get closer, but I daren't.

I listen to her shouting about how she's trying to find me, and how she wants me to come home, and it's so very tempting. But she can't mean it – not after what I did. People are looking at the hand-outs and then just dropping them on the floor.

Nobody gives me a second look.

I edge a little closer and duck into the entrance to a sports shop, trying to get a glimpse of Ollie. I can see him now. There's a black and white spotted blanket over his legs and tucked up under his arms. He's wearing a blue knitted hat that's pulled down over his ears, and his little cheeks are a bit pink with the cold. But he's getting a lot of attention, and loving it.

Suddenly his head swivels in my direction, as if he can feel my eyes on him. He can't recognise me, though. I've got Andy's black baseball cap on with the visor pulled down. I'm dressed like a boy and I look so different. He can't possibly know it's me.

Emma looks down at her son, and she follows his gaze. I'm sure she can't see me, but she starts to climb down from her box, her eyes fixed on mine, a puzzled expression on her face. I look away and stare into the shop through the open door, as if I'm waiting for somebody. I glance sideways at the window in the entrance, and it forms a mirror of the street behind me. I can see that Emma has grabbed Ollie's pushchair and she's coming towards me.

I've got two choices. I can either go into the shop or leg it up the street. If I go into the shop, the security guys will be watching me. It's the way I look – they will be expecting me to nick something. If I move out into the light, Emma will see me properly, and she'll know.

I hesitate for a moment too long, then push myself off the glass wall of the entrance and out into the street. I turn my head away so she can't see my face and run as fast as I can.

She starts to shout, telling people to stop me, but nobody does. One guy half-heartedly puts an arm out, but I push it out of the way and I can almost feel him shrug as if to say, 'I tried.' But he didn't really.

I know Emma can't chase me. She can't leave Ollie. I don't know if she can be sure it was me – but she saw my eyes. And, however strange I look, she will know there was something – some spark of recognition.

I shouldn't have come. It would have been better for everybody if Emma thought I'd gone away. Or better still, that I was dead.

3

'Tom – are you there? It's Emma. I need to speak to you. It's urgent.' There was a pause, as if she was waiting for the phone to be picked up. 'I've seen her, Tom. I've seen Tasha.' Emma spoke quickly, breathlessly, as if the excitement was too much.

There was a frustrated tutting sound. 'Come *on*, Tom. Pick *up*.'

Detective Chief Inspector Tom Douglas stood at the open door to the back garden, where he had been enjoying a quiet beer in the cold fresh air of a November evening, an infrared heater keeping the worst of the chill at bay.

He didn't move towards the phone. He needed to think about what he should say to Emma – what advice to offer her. She had always had a determined streak in her – an aspect of her personality that Tom had admired all those years ago when she had been engaged to his brother Jack. At times Tom had believed Emma was the only thing that had kept his brother's feet on the ground. She and Tom had grown close then, and since they had been back in touch in recent months they had become good friends again.

He knew she would be thrilled to have seen Tasha after all her efforts to find the girl, but she seemed to believe it was all going to be so simple, and Tom knew she was wrong.

In the eight months since her stepdaughter, Natasha, had gone missing, Emma had been relentless in her search for the girl. For the first few weeks, or maybe even months, Emma had travelled into Manchester or Stockport at least three times a week, handing out posters with pictures of Natasha – or Tasha as she was more generally known – begging people to help her find the girl.

Tom had tried to warn her that even if she found Tasha, it might not be possible for her to adopt the girl. Emma may have been married to David – Tasha's father – for a few years but Tom didn't think that would count. Had he still been alive it would have been a different matter, but David was dead, and Tasha probably didn't even know it. Given their history, who knew what the courts would say?

His thoughts were interrupted by a disappointed sigh.

'Okay – you're obviously out. I'll call you back – but please, if you get this message will you call me? I really need to speak to you.'

The line went dead, and Tom felt a stab of guilt. Emma needed him. But he had to work out what to say to her before calling her back. He didn't want to quash her enthusiasm or put a dampener on things, but he had been begging her to think this through for months. Her answer was always the same.

'I know she ran away – but we have to look at it from her point of view. We'd only had her back for a few days – and what a terrible few days they were. I'm sure she thought she had no other choice but to run. She'll have assumed I'd never forgive her

for taking Ollie. I've got to find a way to let her know that she's wrong.'

Tom went to grab his beer from the garden, turned off the heater and came back inside. He pulled out a stool and sat at the central unit, resting his elbows on the work-surface. He took a swig from the bottle.

It was all so complicated. Since being abducted at the age of six, Tasha had endured a terrible few years in the care of a member of an organised crime gang, being forced to shoplift and ferry drugs. Now there was nobody left to assume parental responsibility for this child – to make decisions for her – and so it would come down to the local authority and what they believed to be in the child's best interests. She still had family on her mother's side, but when Emma had approached them to ask for help in finding Tasha, they had made it clear that she wasn't part of their family any more. Her grandfather had made the decision and instructed his family to abide by his wishes.

'We lost our granddaughter the day her mother died. The child is a criminal now,' he had said. 'Nothing is going to change the way she has been brought up during those formative years, and it's best she sticks to the life she knows.'

That was it – all he'd had to say on the matter. Emma hadn't spoken to Tasha's family since.

Tom picked up the phone and dialled a number. It was answered almost immediately.

'Becky, how up to speed are you in the details of the search for Natasha Joseph?' he asked without further introduction. Becky Robinson was a detective inspector on his team and had been closest to the Joseph family during the events eight months previously.

'Hi Tom. Just give me a sec while I turn the TV down.' There was a brief pause as the background noise came to an abrupt end. 'Okay – Tasha Joseph. I've been keeping an eye on progress – I had a look earlier today, actually. But we don't seem to be making much headway, I'm afraid. Not a peep from anybody. Why the special interest now?'

'I've just had a call from Emma. She thinks she's seen Tasha.' He heard an intake of breath from Becky.

'That's brilliant news, Tom, if it's true. Do you think it really was her, or is it wishful thinking on Emma's part?'

'She seemed fairly convinced.'

'Where was Emma when she saw her? It will help us hugely in focusing the search, and we're running out of time. We're lucky that we've had this long to try to find her.'

'I don't know where she was, because I'm ashamed to say I didn't answer Emma's call – I just listened to her message. I'm finding it hard to deal with her optimism about Tasha.'

Tom took a final mouthful of his beer.

'That poor kid.' Tom could hear the genuine sympathy in Becky's voice. 'I wonder what she's thinking?'

'God knows. I should imagine she's lost, lonely, scared and probably confused about why Emma is looking for her. I'll have a think about the best way to show Emma some restrained enthusiasm, and then I'll call her back and find out where she saw Tasha. I'll let you know, and let's hope we find her.' He ended the call and threw his beer bottle in the recycling bin.

He couldn't ignore the fact that they needed Tasha. She was a vital witness in a trial that was due to start just one week from today.

4

Andy has gone to try to find us something to eat. Neither of us has eaten a thing all day, but I don't feel hungry – just empty. There's a massive hole where my belly should be and it feels as if all the water I've drunk is just sloshing round in there on its own. I picture it like a washing machine, splashing the water from side to side as the drum turns.

I was supposed to get food for us. I was going to try the new Sainsbury's Local. It's always busy, and I've not nicked anything from there for a few weeks. The security guy was on to me last time, I'm sure, but the shop was packed, and I got away with it. I borrowed Andy's black baseball cap today, thinking I might not be recognised. It's getting harder, though.

As it was, I couldn't do it. I just had to get off the streets quickly after Emma saw me.

I wanted to talk to her – to tell her why I can't come back and explain why I left. She says she misses me, but I find that difficult to believe. I want her to understand why I ran away, though. If I hadn't I would have been arrested for taking Ollie. So how can I go back? It's hopeless.

I don't get why she's looking for me and why she says she wants me back. I don't know if I can trust her.

The only person I really trust is Andy, and I've let him down again. I'm always relying on him to feed me and I know it's not fair. I wouldn't have survived this long without him, though.

I met Andy a couple of months after I escaped – escaped from having to face my dad, the man who had betrayed me; escaped from the police, who were going to arrest me for everything I had done; escaped from the gang I had been living with for more than six years, who would kill me for grassing to the police – if they could find me. And escaped from Emma – the person who had done the least to hurt me, who I had hurt the most.

The weeks after I left felt like the worst of my life. They probably weren't; I've had my share of terrible times. But however bad things had been in the past I had always had a home – of sorts. When I walked away from my dad and Emma's house I had nowhere to go. No place where somebody would open the door and welcome me in – or even grunt an acknowledgement that I was actually there.

I made it to Stockport without too much bother – walking at night, keeping away from busy main roads as much as I could and finding somewhere to hide out during the day. When it was really late – the early hours of the morning kind of late – I had to dodge into gardens to hide when I saw a car coming because I knew the police would stop me if they saw me out and about at that time. But I got quite good at it. During

the day I would often hide in plain sight, hanging around where there were other kids or just going to a park, and I always managed to nick something to eat from somewhere. That was the easy bit.

The hard thing was being on my own. Even living with Rory and Donna Slater – the couple who had hidden me for more than six years after I was kidnapped – had been better than having nobody. Life there wasn't great, but there were other kids, and we helped each other. And I'd had Izzy – my friend. Thinking about her now makes me want to cry, but if I start, I won't stop.

Stockport was okay – there are some caves up above the town where loads of homeless are living. They tolerated me, but I don't think they liked me being around. I bet they were worried that if they were caught with a thirteen-year-old girl they would be accused of doing all sorts of stuff they hadn't done. So I told them I wanted to go to Manchester. I pretended to have friends here, and one of them said he'd help me – which was his way of getting rid of me, I suppose. I'm used to that now.

This bloke – Bartosz he was called – loved trains. He watched them all the time and he said there was a pattern to the times an inspector or guard or whatever they're called would board the local trains to do a ticket check. He told me which train to catch.

I was really scared, though. If I'd been caught, I'd have been done for. I bet there's pictures of me in all the police stations, because I'm a wanted criminal. I stole a *baby*. I picture a poster like the ones in old films – or maybe just like the one that Emma has produced.

The train was okay, though. I made it here to Manchester, although it wasn't much better than Stockport after all. I was still on my own.

I met Andy one day when the sun was shining. I remember that, because for once I felt warm. I'd just nicked some food from the express supermarket down in what I think of as the bottom end of Manchester. Where it joins on to Salford, I suppose. It was one of my favourite places, because the security guard was a fatty, and I knew I could run faster. But as I slid out of the door, hoping I hadn't been spotted but not really that bothered, I got the shock of my life. This young, fit, black guy was standing in Fatty's place, wearing a security uniform. He looked at my shocked face and knew exactly what I'd done. I set off running. I was quick and I dodged the people coming down the street – but he wasn't about to give up. Mostly these guys run for about ten metres to make a bit of a show and then turn round and go back, defeated once more by the dregs of Manchester. But this one was on a mission, and I was losing.

I raced across the road, down a side street and into some gardens I'd never seen before. People were out enjoying the sun and stared at me as I legged it over the grass and onto the path. He was getting closer.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a boy slouching on a bench, staring at a brightly coloured flowerbed in the centre where the paths met. It was so gaudy with its reds and yellows it hurt my eyes. The boy glanced at me as I ran past, and a couple of seconds later I heard a loud shout and a clatter.

'Jesus,' a deep voice yelled. *'You stupid kid – I nearly had him.'*

I dodged behind some shrubs and stopped to grab my breath. The man might not have seen where I'd gone, and I thought that if I was lucky I might be safe – thanks to the boy. I was running out of steam – I hadn't eaten for two days.

I peered through the leaves and saw the boy on the floor, the big black guy sprawled on top of him. The guy pushed himself up and started brushing fiercely at his trousers with the pale palms of his black hands as he ripped into the kid for getting in the way.

The boy managed to wriggle into a kneeling position, and I could see blood on his face – where his cheekbone jutted out from his skinny cheek. It must have hurt. This kid probably weighed about the same as the black guy's left leg, and his jeans hung off him as if he'd borrowed them from an older brother.

'Sorry, mister,' he said, his voice weak and shaking. *'I didn't see you coming. I didn't mean to get in your way.'* The boy looked petrified and the man stopped for a moment and looked at him properly.

'You're okay, kid. Sorry I shouted. I really wanted to catch that lad, though. It's my first day, and ... Here, let me give you a pull up.' He held out his hand, and the boy took it. He tried to look at the blood on the boy's face, but the boy pushed his hand away.

I couldn't hear them any more, because two women had come to sit on a bench in front of my shrub, and they were yattering. The security guy looked my way once, brushed at his trousers again, said a couple of words to the boy and walked off – back towards his shop, where no doubt he would get a hot cup of tea and a bun for his efforts.

I looked at the treasure I had managed to nick. A sausage roll. It was still warm because I'd taken it from the hot cupboard, and now that the danger was past my mouth was watering. I decided to sit where I was, hidden under a bush that had huge pink flowers and shiny leaves but which was somehow quite empty underneath, almost like a kid's den.

The boy was walking along the path and would pass me soon. I should probably have thanked him, but I was scared of showing myself in case the man came back.

'You can come out, you know.' The voice was totally unlike the weak, scared version I had heard minutes earlier. There was some sort of accent too, but I didn't know enough to be able to recognise then that it was Scottish. He told me that later.

I stopped, the sausage roll halfway to my mouth, and stayed silent.

A face appeared between the leaves. *'Can you spare a wee bite for your rescuer?'* He pushed his way through and sat down. *'Budge up,'* he said.

I gave him half the sausage roll.

He was even skinnier than I had first thought. As he reached out his hand to take his share of the food I noticed the bone of his wrist sticking out like a golf ball, and his fingers were ridiculously long and white with torn, chewed nails.

I realised straight away how clever the boy was, though. Despite his scrawny build,

I could tell there was nothing weak or shaky about this lad – voice or otherwise.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked. ‘I’m Andy.’

‘Harry,’ I said. He looked at me, his eyebrows raised, then took a bite of the sausage roll. ‘Right you are. Harry it is, then.’

*

I’ve stopped thinking about how much I’ve let Andy down and how I’m going to make it up to him. Better to think of nothing, so I stare straight ahead and try to empty my mind of bad thoughts. My attempt at peace doesn’t last long, though. I hear footsteps coming down the tunnel, walking quickly as if somebody knows exactly where they are going and tiny prickles of fear run up my arms. I’ve got nobody here to protect me.

I huddle down, pulling a blanket we found a couple of days ago around my shoulders. I tug the visor of Andy’s cap down as far as I can. It might be that man again – the one who says there’s a reward for finding me. But he’s walking quickly – so if it’s him, he knows where he’s heading – straight to me.

The footsteps stop, right in front of me. But I don’t look up.

‘Hey, Harry – it’s okay. It’s only me. I got us some grub.’

Andy.

I let out my breath.

‘It’s fresh grub, too. I was dead lucky. Some guy had all his shopping in one of those free carrier bags and the handle broke. Everything ended up on the pavement – so I helped him pick it up. When he wasn’t looking, I managed to grab a pack of sandwiches and shove ‘em in my bag. I felt mean, though, ‘cos he could see I was poor – probably homeless – and he gave me a quid for helping him. And I’d just nicked his bloody sandwich.’

It’s typical of Andy to bring me half of everything he gets. He could have scoffed the lot, and I would never have known. But he wouldn’t do that. It’s like he needs to protect me, to look after me. It seems to make him happy for some reason, and it feels good to me.

We don’t talk about the past. He pretends to believe I’m called Harry, even though everything he needs to know about me is printed on flyers lying all over the streets of Manchester, and Andy has got eyes. Even with my dark, cropped hair, my face is the same. I keep it dirty, and most people don’t bother to look at me: scruffy urchin boy with a filthy neck – why would anybody look twice? Unless it’s social services, and I can spot them a mile off. It’s the shoes.

So he knows I’m a thirteen-year-old girl; that my name is Tasha Joseph; that I’ve run away from home. But it was never my home. Not really. And the flyers tell only a small part of the truth.

Andy passes me an old a plastic bottle filled with water from a tap in a public toilet.

‘You okay now?’ he asks.

I’d told him I wasn’t feeling good and that’s why I hadn’t got any food. But I need

to tell him the truth. It's not fair to lie.

'I'm sorry, Andy. I wasn't ill – I just felt awful 'cos I saw Emma.' He knows who Emma is; I told him her name last night. Everybody's seen her because she's always shouting about Tasha Joseph, about how she wants her to come home and how her baby brother is missing her. I don't believe it. She's lying.

Andy's gone quiet. Does that mean he's mad at me? I don't want him to leave me. I need him. He's opening the sandwich packet, and my belly feels like it's doing backflips.

Silently he hands me one of the two sandwiches and I take a huge mouthful.

I feel my nostrils flare and my mouth pulls down at the corners. It's an automatic reaction, and I think Andy will be cross with me because I'm ungrateful. But he just laughs.

'Sorry – not my choice,' he says with his mouth full. 'It's mingin'. That guy obviously has weird taste in sandwiches.'

'What is it?'

Andy passes me the packet. 'Falafel, spinach and tomato,' I read from the label. 'What the hell's a falafel?'

He just shrugs, and we both take another mouthful, wishing it was cheese, or tuna or something we've tasted before. But it's food.

We don't speak again until the sandwich has all gone, and I wait. I know he's got something to say.

'I saw Emma in town today too. I was looking for her.'

I stare at him. I'm confused. Why would he go looking for Emma?

'I wanted to hear what she had to say about the reward – the five thousand pounds that's being offered for you.'

I say nothing. Does he mean he was going to turn me in – take the full reward himself?

'Harry,' he says. 'Emma said nothing about no reward. She didn't mention it.'

'So?'

'So don't you think it's funny that if she's really offering a reward for you, she doesn't bother to mention it when she has a crowd of very likely customers for her money right in front of her? She offers cakes and all sorts if people will try to find you, but I asked around. She's never offered money.'

I look at Andy. He doesn't have to say it, but I know he will anyway.

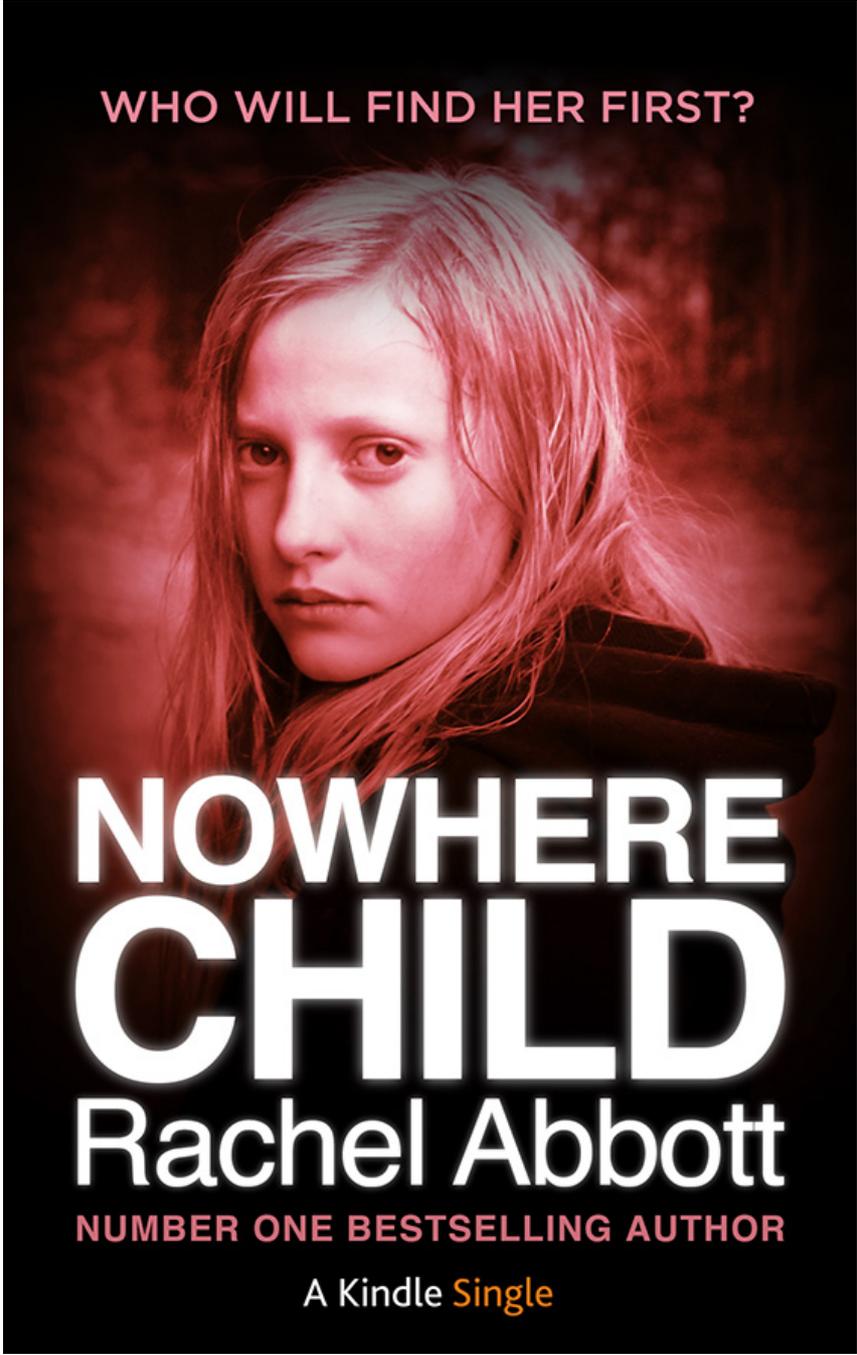
'If Emma's not offering the money, and we know it's not the police because they just wouldn't, who the hell is it, Harry? Who wants to find you so bad that they're offering five bloody grand for you?'

I say nothing. I know the answer; I just refuse to say the name out loud.

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