

NOWHERE 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.