



The Mind-Blowing Conclusion to the *NUMBERS* Trilogy

• **N U M B E R S** •

1 N F 1 N I T Y

RACHEL WARD

The background of the image is a perspective view of a tunnel. The walls of the tunnel are composed of repeating sequences of the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 0, which curve away into the distance, creating a strong sense of depth and infinity. The numbers are rendered in a light gray color against a white background.

• NUMBERS •
1NF1N1TY



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RACHEL WARD

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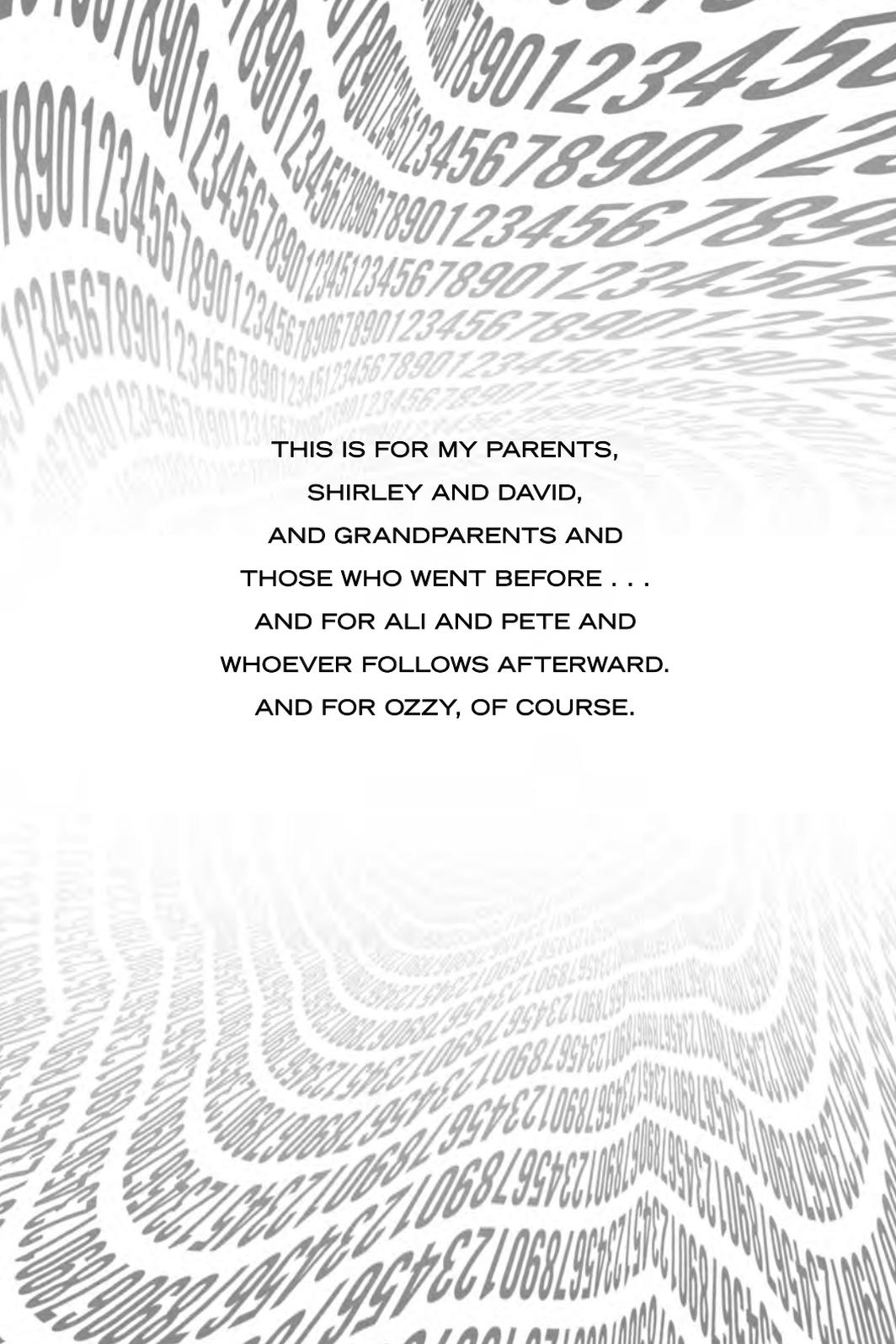
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THIS IS FOR MY PARENTS,
SHIRLEY AND DAVID,
AND GRANDPARENTS AND
THOSE WHO WENT BEFORE . . .
AND FOR ALI AND PETE AND
WHOEVER FOLLOWS AFTERWARD.
AND FOR OZZY, OF COURSE.

FEBRUARY 2029

DRAGONS IN THE FOREST

The little girl sits in the dirt. She's been exploring the forest, but now her legs are tired and she doesn't want to walk anymore. Anyway, it's nice here. With all the stones and leaves and twigs around her, she could make a nest for birds, or a house for mice. Her fingers are busy—picking things up, putting them down, arranging them—and her mind's busy, too. She makes marks in the dirt with a stick—lines and circles—and her mouth moves as she sings herself the song that goes with her dust-pictures.

She hears the motorbikes before she sees them, a background whine that becomes a drone that turns into a roar. She holds her hands over her ears. She's never seen a motorbike before and now there are three, big and black and fast, belching out trails of dark smoke. The girl glimpses metal and rubber and leather between the trees.

"Dragons," she whispers, and the pupils in her blue eyes grow wide.

The motorbikes slow down. They stop. They're growling softly now, not roaring, but they're too near. The girl sits very still. She can see them. Can they see her? The dragon at the front takes off part of its head. There's a man inside. He scans the trees on either side of the road that cuts through the forest.

For a moment their eyes meet.

The man's face is pale, but his colors are dark, like his clothes and his dragon. A swirl of gray and purple and black. The girl doesn't like the colors. She's never seen people-colors like these before. And she doesn't like him looking at her. His eyes are dark, almost black, and they are hurting her.

She closes her own eyes quickly, and buries her face in her knees.

"Seen something, boss?"

"Just a kid. Let's go." His voice is hard and low.

The dragons' growl turns into a roar again, and then they're gone.

The girl squints through her eyelashes. There's nothing to show the dragons were ever there apart from a cloud of dust, which hangs in the air and then settles. Slowly she unwinds and leans forward, gathering in an armful of twigs and leaves, destroying her dust-pictures. If there are dragons here, she will need to build a big nest to keep the birds and the mice safe. Better make it big enough to keep *her* safe, too. She piles more and more stuff around her, snuggles in, and closes her eyes. Then she waits for the dreams to come—the colors and pictures that will send her to sleep.

She wakes when she hears someone shouting her name.

"Mia! Mii-aa! Where are you? Mii-aa!"

She doesn't move. She wants to see if her nest is a good one, if she can be found. She loves playing hide-and-seek.

"Mia! Mii-aa! Where are you? Where are you?"

The voice is getting closer. The girl curls in a tight little ball and buries her face in her knees again. It's fun, this game.

She hears footsteps crunching through the undergrowth. Closer, closer, closer . . .

"Mia! There you are!"

Feet are right next to the nest. Mia turns her head a little and peeks upward. The woman looks cross. The skin is creased between her blue eyes. Mia doesn't like it. She wants her to be smiling and laughing. But her colors are the same as always, a haze of blue and lilac around her, colors that mean one thing—Mummy.

Mia turns her head into her knees again. She doesn't want Mummy to shout at her.

Sarah bends down and grabs her daughter under her armpits. She lifts her up, still curled tightly in a ball, and holds her close.

"Mia," she says, "you must stay where I can see you. Are you listening?"

Mia puts her thumb in her mouth.

"I was just worried. I thought . . . I thought I'd lost you. I'm not cross."

Mia takes her thumb out of her mouth and looks up. Then she reaches forward to wrap her arms round her mummy. Everything's OK—there won't be shouting and tears this time.

"Dragons," she says. "Me see dragons."

Sarah looks toward the road. She heard motorcycles a few minutes ago. "Do you mean motorbikes?" she says, hugging her daughter close. She starts walking away from the road and back into the forest.

“Dragons,” says Mia. “Noisy.”

“Did you see wolves and bears as well?” Sarah says, smiling.

Mia shakes her head.

“Dragons,” she says again, firmly this time.

“Better get back to the camp, then. The dragons won’t come near our fire. We’ll be safe there.”

But Mia doesn’t feel safe, even now, holding on to Mummy.

The dragons she saw made smoke themselves. A fire wouldn’t frighten them away, she thinks. They’d *like* a fire.

Better to hide. Better to make a nest and hide from the man with the dark colors all around him.

ADAM

“I know you.”

I’ve watched the guy moving closer, picking his way through the ragged group of tents and shelters.

Here we go again, I think. It’s the same everywhere. That’s why I try and keep away from people. But that’s dangerous, too, ‘cause you’re vulnerable on your own. We ain’t got nothing valuable, but people’ll still rob you, take what little you got—food, clothes, even firewood. It’s happened too many times now. We have to stay near others. “*Safety in numbers,*” Sarah says.

Ignore him and he might go away.

I keep my head down, bashing the tent peg into the hard ground with a rock.

Just a few feet away, he crouches down beside me, leaning forward to get a look at my face.

“I know you,” he says again. “You’re Adam Dawson.”

I twist away. My fingers tighten around the rock.

He reaches across and touches my sleeve. He’s too close. I can see the dirt under his fingernails, the bits of sawdust in his straggly beard.

“Adam,” he says, smiling. He’s tipping his face, trying to get me to make eye contact. “Adam, you saved my life.”

My heart's thudding in my chest. I can't deal with this. I want him to go away.

"No, mate," I say, and my voice goes all croaky. "You got the wrong bloke."

"No, I've seen you. I'll never forget you, your . . . face."

He means my scars, my burned skin.

"You saved me, Adam. I was in London. My flat was in the basement, right by the river. I saw you on the telly and I got out. So did millions of others. You're a hero."

Same story. I've heard it over and over.

I was only on the telly once, but it was the last TV most people saw. There are no TVs or computers in England now, no screens or phones. The networks and transmitters never got put back after the quake, at the beginning of the Chaos. And so I'm stuck in everyone's memories as that mad-eyed, scar-faced boy, staring into a TV camera and shouting the odds about the end of the world. And they remember me because I was right. The world did come to an end—the world as we knew it, anyway.

Now everyone I talk to treats me like some sort of celebrity, some sort of savior. I don't want it.

"We've got some meat," the man continues, when it's clear I'm not going to talk. "Venison. Someone shot a deer, a big one. Come and join us. Come and eat with us."

I stop bashing the tent peg. Meat . . . Can't remember the last time we ate meat. It's gotta be better than the nettle soup we were going to have. I look over toward Sarah and Mia,

to Sarah's brothers. Marty and Luke are scuffing the leaves on the ground, looking for dry twigs, anything that would do for kindling. Mia's sitting in our handbarrow, watching as Sarah unrolls the mats we use for beds. She's tiny for a child who's two. Her arms and legs are as thin and tawny as the twigs the boys are looking for. She's almost like a little doll, with that mass of tight blonde curls, full lips, and eyes that don't miss a thing.

Sarah's pretending to be busy, but I know she's watching me out of the corner of her eye, waiting for my reaction. I know she's heard every word. She don't say nothing. She don't need to. She's hungry; we all are. My mouth floods with saliva at the thought of a square meal. But I know what's gonna come with it—the fuss, the backslapping, the questions.

I can't stand people looking at me, and I can't stand looking at them, seeing their numbers. . . .

Everyone, everywhere has a number—the day they're gonna die. I hate that I can see these numbers. I hate the feelings that come with them. Sometimes I could grab a flaming stick out of the middle of the fire and plunge it into my own eyes to stop me seeing. Stop me feeling the suffering and pain that's waiting for every single person I meet. I've been scarred by fire, it's nearly killed me twice, but maybe it would take away the thing that hurts me most.

The only thing preventing me is Sarah. I can't do that to her. I'm difficult enough as it is, moody, restless. I couldn't expect her to stay with me if I was blind as well.

She looks straight at me then, with those blue eyes of hers, and her number speaks to me, brings me the comfort and the warmth it always does—an ending full of light and love. 07252075. The promise that we'll be together, me and her, fifty years from now, when she passes from this life, easy as if she was slipping into a warm bath.

Sarah.

I turn back to the stranger crouching next to me, and I force myself to nod at him and smile.

“We will join you. Thanks,” I say. The words sound like someone else’s.

His face lights up. “Great. Cool. Come over anytime. We’re in the bender farthest from the path.” He points to a tunnel-shaped tent, pitched between two tree trunks. “I’m Daniel, by the way. It’s good to meet you, Adam. I’ve waited a long time for this.” As he strides off, I hear him calling, “Carrie, he’s here. He’s really here. . . .”

There’s anxiety bubbling up inside me. It was a mistake to say yes. I’m already regretting it. I raise my arm up and smash the rock down on the hook of the tent peg so heavily that the peg bends and I scrape my knuckles on the ground.

“Aargh! Fff . . . ow!” I’m trying not to swear in front of the kids. It’s fucking difficult sometimes. I drop the rock, brush the worst of the dirt off my fingers, and put them in my mouth, sucking hard to take the pain away. It don’t work. And it don’t take the anxiety away, neither, or the anger. Nothing does.

Sarah comes nearer. “Thank you,” she says.

I shrug, still sucking at my knuckles. I'm glad I've got my mouth full. It stops me saying what I want to say. *I don't want to be around people, Sarah. They're all the same. I can't handle it.*

"Hurt, did it?" she says.

I take my hand away from my mouth and inspect it.

"Be alright in a minute. Just took the skin off."

She digs in one of our bags on the barrow and pulls out a tube of antiseptic cream. The end's been rolled over and over, to squeeze out every last bit. There's not much left.

"Don't waste it on me."

"Shh."

She puts a tiny bit on the end of her finger and dots it onto my scrapes, then gently rubs it in. It's so intimate—her fingertip touching my skin lightly, only a few cells making contact. I feel my body relaxing, the anger dying away.

Me and her. It's all I've ever wanted. Even after everything we've been through—the quake, the Chaos, the fire, the gypsy life, looking after Mia and Marty and Luke—we're still together. I stare at her finger. And at this moment I'd give anything for the rest of the world to go away. I want to be alone with her, my arms around her and our faces close.

I hold her hands in both of mine. "Sarah, let's go," I beg. "Let's go somewhere else." I hate myself for sounding so desperate.

She presses her lips together, pulls her hands away. The moment's gone.

“We’ve just got here, Adam. We’re staying.”

And so we stay.

• • •

We sit on logs around Daniel’s fire. His venison stew’s pretty watery, but it’s so long since we had something like this that it’s almost overwhelming.

Marty and Luke wolf it down so the gravy dribbles down their chins. They wipe at it and lick their fingers, laughing. No one tells them to behave. It’s good to see them filling their bellies, their faces glowing with the warmth of it. They’re good boys. The fire that killed my nan took their mum and dad, too. They were so quiet at first, with a haunted look in their eyes all the time. They hated being outside, didn’t know what to do with themselves, cut off from their Xboxes and flat-screen TVs. But we’ve learnt stuff together: how to set a trap for a rabbit, how to make a fire. I’ve never had brothers or sisters before.

Mia sits on Sarah’s lap, her wide eyes looking at all the faces lit up by the fire: Daniel, his partner Carrie, their neighbors. It’s like she’s trying to remember them.

I eat slowly, savoring each mouthful, trying to concentrate on the food, not the conversation. The backslapping and the fuss is over, and I’m waiting for the questions. The others are talking about the things people always talk about these days: food, water, fuel, cold, hunger, illness. Especially illness. It bothers me, can’t pretend it don’t. We struggle to find food, to keep warm, and we manage. But if one of us gets ill, what do we do?

The boys have both got good numbers—11212088 and

09032092—but numbers can change. Mia showed me that, the night of the fire, the night of the quake. She's got Nan's number now. It freaks me out when I catch it in her eyes. She's got a smoker's death, gasping for breath. It fitted right with Nan—it seems cruel now it belongs to Mia.

I don't know the rules anymore.

"It's not so bad here," someone says. "Dan's a doctor."

I look at Daniel. Dirty beard, long hair tied back in a ponytail, yellow fingernails. He don't look like a doctor.

"Used to be." He shrugs. "I worked in a hospital in London, before it was trashed by looters after the Chaos." He shakes his head. "You'd have thought people would respect hospitals, wouldn't you? But we became targets, raided for drugs, supplies, metal to melt down. I left after the Battle of St. Thomas's in March 2028. Four hundred people killed, most of my friends gone. The police, the army, the government—they all abandoned us. Where were they? Where the hell were they?" He pauses for a moment. His hands are clenched in his lap, the sinews taut like wires from his fingers to his wrists. Then he takes a deep breath. "So what brings you here?" he says, turning it back to me.

First question. Everyone's quiet, waiting for my answer.

"We're just keeping our heads down, moving around," I say, looking at the floor.

"You heading somewhere in particular?"

"Just away. From London, from the big cities. Too many people, too dangerous."

“There are people looking for you, you know. They’ve been here, asking.”

I stop chewing and look up. “People? Who?”

Daniel shakes his head. “They didn’t give names. Three of them, on motorbikes. The sort of people you don’t grass to. No one said a word.”

He puts a hand on my shoulder. He’s trying to be reassuring, but contact like that makes me edgy. Besides, the only people who can still get gas are the so-called government, or the gangs that have taken over the cities.

I was under arrest when the quake struck, charged with a murder I never done. The government had it in for me, tried to silence me. I assumed my criminal record would have been wiped in the Chaos. But maybe not. The thought makes my blood run cold.

If it’s the government looking, I definitely don’t want to be found. I got nothing to say to them or their spooks, and I won’t be banged up in a cell again. *I can’t be*. I don’t want nothing to do with gangs, neither, the armed thugs who own the cities now. Another reason to clear out, stay in the country.

“When?” My throat’s gone dry. It’s all I can do to get the word out.

“This morning. We had a drone up here, too.” He grins. “Shot it out of the sky.”

“I heard bikes this afternoon when I was looking for Mia,” Sarah says to me quietly.

I jump to my feet. “Shit, we gotta get out of here.”

Sarah frowns. "Not now, Adam. Not in the dark."

"Didn't you hear what he just said?"

She shakes her head. "It's *dark*. And we're all tired."

"We're going in the morning, then," I say. "First light." I sit down again, slowly, but I can't eat no more. The stew is sitting in my stomach like a stone. I can't keep still. My legs are jiggling, ready to run.

The buzz of conversation starts up again. "We can't keep on the move forever," Sarah says under her breath. "We've been at it for two years, Adam, and I can't walk miles anymore."

I look at her swelling belly. We don't know exactly how far gone she is but it must be seven or eight months.

"And what about my brothers?" she says. "Mia? They need to live somewhere. They need a home. We all do."

Home. I had a home once. Seems like years ago, but it stopped being home once Mum died. And I had another one, with Nan, 'cept I never realized what I'd got 'til it had gone and so had she.

"Home's not a place, Sarah, it's people. We got all we need with us."

"We need *more* people," she says. "I'm going to have a baby, if you hadn't noticed. I had Mia on my own, on a grotty bathroom floor in the squat, and I want this to be different. Daniel's a doctor. We have to stay here. And we can't run faster than motorbikes. If they want to find us, they will."

She don't get it. Even after all this time, she don't

understand how bad it is to be handcuffed, thrown in a cell, completely powerless.

“I’m not going to be found, Sarah. No one’s going to take me away from you and lock me up again. No one!”

I’m shouting now. Everyone around the fire falls silent, looking at me or looking away.

“All right,” she says, keeping her voice low. “We’ll talk about it later.”

I take no notice of her and plow on. “Think about what staying means. I’m not being paranoid. There are people after me.”

“Yeah, after *you*.”

So that’s it. Her words sting like a slap on the face.

People begin to gather up their bowls and drift away.

“Come on, boys,” Daniel says to Marty and Luke. “I’ll take you back to your tent.”

The boys trudge off. The laughter and the warmth of the meal’s gone from their faces. Marty looks worried.

Then it’s just Sarah and me and Mia by the fire. “Do you want me to go?” I say.

Her eyes flick up to mine and then away. “We can’t keep running like this, Adam.”

“Do you want me to leave you here?” I say.

“Mummy Daddy cross?” Mia says in a little voice. Her eyes are fixed on us, missing nothing.

“I’m not cross,” Sarah says quickly. I force a smile at Mia, but I know she’s not buying it.

“I’m chipped,” I say, trying to carry on the argument.

“Mia’s chipped. That drone could’ve picked us up and sent our location back to wherever, whoever, it came from. Even if it didn’t, I’m so bloody recognizable.” Almost without thinking I put my hand up to my scarred skin. “If we stay it’ll only be days before they find us. Maybe hours. And then what?”

“We don’t even know what they want, Adam. They might want to shake you by the hand and thank you. Perhaps you saved them, too.”

There’s something about the way she says it, an edge. Like she’s mocking me. I can’t stand it. My hand finds a piece of wood, and I launch it into the fire with such force that sparks fly up. Sarah flinches and Mia jumps, but it don’t stop me. I pick up another log and do the same.

“I didn’t ask for this, Sarah. I didn’t ask for none of this. I never wanted to see numbers. I never wanted all this death in my head, all this pain.”

Mia’s eyes are filling with tears, and Sarah’s not looking at me. I know I’m ranting, but I can’t stop.

“I’m seventeen, with a girlfriend and three children to look after, a baby on the way, and no home and no food, and it’s *never gonna get better*. All I know is it’s gonna end one day because I see the end everywhere, in everyone, and I wish I didn’t. And even that isn’t certain because it could all *change*. It could all be over tomorrow, or the next day, or the next. Do you think I want this?”

“Do you think any of us want this?” she says.

And now my stomach's churning. If she's not on my side no more, then I got nothing.

But we have to go. It's not safe here.

SARAH

Adam shakes my shoulder before it's even light. He's a dark shape next to me. I can't see his features. Even inside the tent, the cold air is nipping at my face.

"Sarah," he whispers. "It's time to get up. We have to go."

I pull my sleeping bag up around my ears and turn my back to him.

"*Sarah*," he hisses. "It's time."

I take a deep breath in, and then push the air out—slowly, slowly, slowly. I'm scared of what I'm going to do next, but I'm doing it, anyway.

"I'm not leaving."

"What?"

"I'm not leaving."

"Yeah, you are. We're packing up this morning. Like I said. Moving on."

I wriggle around so I'm facing him again. My heart's thumping.

"I don't want to go. I want to stay here for the winter.