

Chapter One

I feel like god found me when I was a kid and I've been running away ever since.

When I say god, I don't specifically mean God. I'm not saying *the* God found me, that would be crazy. I just think that something of that nature did and I've been trying to get away since.

'I know we're not exactly on speaking terms, but I've got an EpiPen of stuff I shouldn't be talking about and two tenners in my pocket. If I gave you that and a semi used cinema gift card, would you hot step it down to Spring Road with me and stab me with it when I yell ay caramba, or something?'

I look at Gracey, really look at her – Gracey's the one I'm offering the gift card in lieu of a favour. She's standing in her doorway, totally confused by my presence. She hasn't seen me in months. Maybe the desperation on my face and the intensity of my stare will make her more likely to take the leap of faith and follow a panting ex-something when she needs her.

Her shirt collar pokes out at the top of her sweatshirt. The shirt's green – a nice green. She always loved earthy colours. Never any of that end of the colour spectrum fake bullshit. Neither of us ever liked purple. I guess we both had pre-emptive sense about it.

Come on, Gracey, you'll come with me, won't you?

She looks at me a little funny, I squint back at her.

I'm shrinking down the side of the doorframe into a puddle of a thing, wheezes the whole way down. I wouldn't follow myself anywhere, but I need this. She should be able to see that.

'I hate to ask – to ask you of all people. Believe me.' I tighten my clutch on the EpiPen and lean on the doorframe, try and pull myself back up to a proper standing position instead of the aforementioned near puddle of a thing.

I can't believe she opened the door at all. She has a peep hole for God's sake. Even by the unimpressed look on her face, her opening up – it wasn't an accident.

'I'm running out of friends, I mean, you know that. You've-you know me, and I-'

She shakes her head.

'You don't just want the EpiPen now?' Gracey asks.

I shake my head back and suppress a gasp. *She spoke?*

'No,' I say, 'it's not allergies.'

She shifts her weight onto her other foot. I'm watching eagle eyed – maybe too eagle eyed. Maybe she'll get freaked out by it and shut the door on me.

'You're dying on my doorstep right now.'

'It's the asthma.' I wheeze that one out.

Gracey cocks her head to the side, then sighs and disappears back through the door. I'm not sure if I should follow. Maybe this is her getting totally freaked and bailing. She just forgot to close the door after her.

She reappears and hands me an inhaler. 'Here'.

I blink at the blue thing and shrink a little bit further to the floor. I just about make out, 'You kept my inhaler?'

She hands me the thing and I take a puff. Hold. Breathe. Puff again for good measure.

Gracey nods and watches me uneasily. Maybe I smile.

‘Well, you’re not supposed to just throw them out,’ she says. ‘You’re supposed to dispose of them at a pharmacist, and the one in Olton isn’t really on my way anywhere, so.’

‘Oh,’ I say. ‘Right.’

Scratch that, I didn’t smile. I rap on my chest, stuff the inhaler in my jacket pocket and offer out the EpiPen in my other hand to her.

‘Betty,’ she says and doesn’t take it. ‘What is this?’

‘An EpiPen.’

‘No.’ Gracey shakes her head and motions between us. ‘*This*. You being here. What are you doing?’

I open my mouth to say something, but falter. I shrug and reach my hand out further. Gracey watches me for a moment, then looks to my hand and the EpiPen in it. She frowns.

‘Is it an Odeon or Cineworld gift card?’

‘It’s Vue, actually.’

‘What am I gonna do with a Vue gift card?’

I blink, then shrug again. I reach back into my pocket and fish out one of the promised tenners that is quickly revealed to be a fiver. I smile and offer that out to her too.

Her eyes crinkle, brows join right above them.

‘You’re kidding?’ she says.

I’m not. I give the fiver a shake in my hand and after looking at it for a moment, Gracey takes it.

The Ventolin inhaler doesn’t do much good if you don’t manage the regular upkeep of taking the preventative inhaler day in day out. I learn and relearn this lesson every

day that passes that I don't maintain that regular upkeep and get caught in situations where my only transport is my legs. It's even worse when there's a time limit.

Gracey's a few more steps ahead of me. I'm more speed ambling than hot stepping by this point.

'Grace... Gracey,' I wheeze out.

That stops her in her tracks. We're outside my childhood orthodontist now.

'What?' she says.

'What time is it?' I wheeze that out too. I stop next to her, lean on the wall of the hell place that straightened my teeth and pant for a second.

Gracey pulls her phone out of her pocket and holds it up to me.

'Twenty two hundred – ten, uh... ten hundred hours. Great,' I say. 'Great. We keep rolling and we're nearly on time.'

'That's not how you do military time. That wasn't even the *right* time,' Gracey says. 'You do the hundred hours, or you just say the time like normal. You don't do both. It's ten past ten.'

I throw my hand in the air to motion for her to keep moving. 'We don't have time to discuss who's right.'

She does. I give a glare to the orthodontist's and amble on, already paces behind Gracey.

'Nearly on time for what?' she calls back.

I don't say and she slows back down to more of a jog. I take another puff on my inhaler, call it an athletic enhancing drug, and force myself to catch up to her speed.

'Time for what, Betty? The train?'

I keep silent.

Gracey's hand pulls out in front of me and stops me in my tracks.

I nearly growl at her I'm so frustrated – I haven't done that before. I try and calm myself down but instead say, 'We're not gonna make it.'

'You don't have to be so cryptic, Betty.'

'Grace,' I say a little more firmly this time. 'We're gonna miss it.'

Gracey makes no move. I shrug in a very angry fashion.

'I don't care if we miss the train, Betty,' she says. 'Can you tell me what the hell this is about?'

I shake my head and push her hand out of my way. 'We're not getting the train. Why did you agree to come if you needed to know every detail so bad?'

She looks at me, dumbfounded for some reason.

I groan and prepare myself to launch into my almost jog again.

'Betty,' Gracey says in a different kind of voice. Softer, concerns placed elsewhere this time. 'You're pale.'

Repeat. We. Do. Not. Have. Time. For. This.

I attempt to take a deep breath, try to secure some of that self-induced placebo and start jogging again, but the sky above the station takes any and all of my attention. I get sent off into a coughing fit instead and start spluttering everywhere.

I look at the station again, despite the asthmatic outbreak getting in the way, forcing me to keep doubling over to get some air in. Masses of magenta gather in the sky, pointing down to Spring Road station. Hints of pink try to join in but it's an unmistakably purple thing. Hues swirl together, looking more than anything like glittery purple bath bomb water spinning down the drain in the tub after pulling the plug.

'What?' she says again and tries to follow my eyeline.

I nod to the sky. *She has to see this.*

'Betty,' she says. I'm losing hope quickly. 'What?'

I point at the sky. She looks right at it, but nothing. She looks confused but not at the humongous something in the sky – no, the confusion is undoubtedly aimed at me.

Gracey gives me a shrug. I shake my head back. *Do you really not see it, Gracey?*

She doesn't. Of course she doesn't.

Worse has officially come to worst. There's no chance this can be a one-person job. I always end up looking like the crazy one. *I'm sorry, Gracey, but this is for the greater good.*

I look at the EpiPen in Gracey's hand, then back at her and jog onwards.

Gracey groans behind me and I fear this is when she'll take off and head home, but her footsteps hitting the ground start up behind me.

'10:15,' I say, racing down the steps.

'You're saying the time normally now?' Gracey barrels behind me.

I hiss some noise back at her and land at the bottom of the stairs onto the platform.

'Geez,' she says from a few steps behind. 'Betty, can you slow down? *Breathe.* Take your inhaler or you'll choke.'

I don't respond. Maybe I let out another one of those wheezes. I'm not sure I could respond any other way if I wanted. I stand for a moment and look at what I feared but knew would be here.

There, on the far end of the platform, the colours from the sky concentrate on one growing point. The bath has been unplugged and something's climbing out of the drain.

I let out a cough, the definite biggest yet, and rap on my chest before I stagger towards it.

'Betty,' she says, landing on the platform. I turn to look back at her, then back at the purple.

Still, nothing. No reaction. She sees the platform; I see the end of all good.

There's no choice. I nod to the EpiPen still in Gracey's hand.

'Give me that for a sec.'

Confused, Gracey steps towards me.

'I thought I was gonna stab you with it?'

Gracey, I look at her and frown.

I needed help and I knew you wouldn't let me down. I know you won't.

'Yeah,' I say and beckon for her to hand the thing over. She does. I hold it for a moment and look at her. She raises an eyebrow.

'Well?' she says.

'I'm sorry,' I say and give her an apologetic look. She shakes her head in confusion.

I shake my head back and really, really emphasise the apologetic look. I am apologetic, but it's out of my hands now. That god I was talking about that found me when I was a kid? I need him gone and I need someone to help distract him long enough so I can sneak round the side and stab him in the back.

'Ay caramba, Gracey,' I say and lurch forward, jamming the EpiPen in her arm. She shouts something and tries to push me off, looking angrier than she has ever looked at me before, angrier than anyone has ever looked at me before. Eyes bulging so big they look ready to roll out of her head and onto the floor between us.

But then she sees it. What I need her to see. What I knew no one else could help me with. Anyone else wouldn't have left their house to follow a panting ex-something.

No one's like you, Gracey.

She looks past me. I'm no longer the target for anger and that realisation dawns on her quickly.

She sees it. The glowing purple something. She sees the drain and the figures starting to climb out of it.

10:15pm. Right on time.

