



**TIME
STARTS
NOW**

By Hannah, Sophie, Lara, Ella & Jess

To Ms Gagen-Spriggs, we are eternally grateful.
Without whom, we would have been deprived of many chocolates, lollies and cups of tea.

To the kids who can. Just because you are different, doesn't mean you are delusional.
Be proud of who you are. You've got this.

Authors' Note: Please do not panic when the chapters start at nine, that's on purpose and you'll find out why :)

nine

Ash looked up the staircase and sighed impatiently. "Hurry up, Audrey!" They shouted up to their twin sister.

With her long, light brown hair swaying side to side in her long ponytail, Audrey pranced down the stairs.

"Why's your hair up?" Ash crossed their arms. "I thought you said you liked being, I quote, 'free,'"

Audrey rolled her eyes, sticking out her tongue. "I'm trying something new, leave me alone; plus, your hair never changes, it's just a messy haystack on top of your head"

"Oh, piss off,"

Ash and Audrey rushed out the door. They were about 10 minutes away from school when they spotted a bustling group of people standing in the middle of the street.

"What're they doing?" Audrey asked, slowing down so that she could see.

"Just leave them alone,"

Audrey was always the conspiracy theorist in the family. She was so energetic and bubbly and smart.

Ash, however, was the opposite. Ash never cared about anything, and they were sick of their sister constantly bugging them about things they should care about. *Ash this, Ash that. Ash, but why? Ash, but no! Ash, but it's important!*

Ash kept walking, but after a couple of seconds, they realised that their sister was no longer behind them.

"Audrey!" Ash grasped her arm before she could reach the crowd, but Audrey twisted her arm to release herself and sped away with wide strides, eyes sparkling. She reached the crowd and pushed past the people, not understanding why they were so tense. Soon enough, she took on the same expression. "Oh, no. Oh, my." Audrey's voice was small and rushed, laced with confusion and fear.

Finally catching up, Ash wiped the sweat off their forehead. "Jesus, Audrey. Stop running off, it's probably nothing! We'll be late for cla-" Ash stopped. Their eyes followed to where everyone was looking, and they felt their stomach drop.

A man's lifeless body was splayed on the asphalt road.

"He's dead," Audrey whispered under her breath, horrified, but somewhat intrigued.

"Let's go, Drey. NOW." Ash - once again - tightly wrapped their fingers around Audrey's wrist, this time so she couldn't leave, and yanked her away from the crowd. Ash felt sick. They tried not to think about it, but it was difficult. Soon enough, people were spreading rumours and theorising; Audrey was a big part of that.

By the time the twins got home from school, the story was already in the paper and on the news.

"No way of escaping it now." Audrey teased at Ash in a sing-song voice. She knew that whenever something remotely negative happened, they would try to ignore it as much as humanly possible. But that became impossible now... because it happened again.

eight

During school, Ash checked their phone... several times. Suddenly, as Ash was loading and reloading their Instagram page in boredom during break-time, a breaking news article came up as a notification.

Another death.

This time, a woman died in her sleep. She was young; 26 years old. Ash chewed their bottom lip in anxiety. They just have to keep Audrey from seeing this.

The bell interrupted Ash's thoughts. The next few classes flew by, just like this morning. Everything was passing by so quickly. Geography, then English, then Ancient History.

Audrey and Ash were walking home in silence. Ash had a feeling she found out about the second death, but they didn't want to bring it up in case she didn't know.

"Another death." stated Audrey blankly, hiding the smug smile on her face.

Ash cursed under their breath. They should've realised she was on her phone.

"So?"

"What do you mean, 'so'? You can't possibly think this is normal,"

Ash shook their head, turning around the corridor. "Don't be ridiculous, Drey. People die all the time..."

Ash wasn't so sure that was true. No one had heard of a death of natural causes or old age for- well, that's never existed in their lifetime.

"Ash, this doesn't happen anymore. Not since--"

"You can't be serious. Just drop it, okay?" With a huff, the twins parted and walked to their next class.

seven

Audrey and Ash sat uncomfortably on opposite sides of the room, glaring at each other intensely. Neither one of them was going to concede the fight; they both thought they were right. The sky outside was dark, perilously dark for an ordinary afternoon but the twins were already too riled up to notice when silvery frost began creeping its way along the windowpane.

“Ash,” Audrey pleaded. “Don’t be stupid. Something is obviously up. People dying? Don’t tell me that’s a coincidence.”

Ash glared at her. “*I’m* being stupid? *Two* people have died. I’d hardly call that a pattern.”

“Oh, so you’re such an expert in patterns, now are you?” Audrey punched her pillow before setting her head down it, frowning. “When was the last time you remember someone dying?” She tossed, before muttering under her breath, “Idiot,”

Ash felt a rage creep over them. “I’m not an idiot! Don’t call me an idiot!”

“I’m not saying that you just have to face the facts. People are dying. The government is covering it up—”

“What?! What could the government possibly be covering up?! Huh?” Ash shouted. They were both standing up in the middle of the room now.

Audrey suppressed an anger inside her to yell but continued with her argument. “I’ve checked the internet, WikiLeaks, the paper, I’ve checked it all. I *know* there’s something wrong. People don’t just die, Ash!” she cried.

A chill went through the room and for a moment Audrey thought her words had won the fight.

People don’t just die. Ash mulled over. That makes no sense. Of course they die.

Don’t they? Audrey wasn’t making any sense. “I can’t believe you. You’re completely delusional!”

Ash’s words echoed around in Audrey’s head. *Delusional. Delusional. Delusional. She was the delusional one. Yeah right. Ash was just too stubborn. She had better things to do then convince them.*

Audrey made a decision. She gathered her stuff and headed to the door. She needed to prove herself - whether Ash listened or not.

Ash wanted to explain, they couldn’t let Audrey leave. Ash followed after her, grabbing her shoulder but failing at any attempts to be gentle.

“No, Audrey, please- wait. Just- have some tea. It’s cold, you’re not thinking clearly.” They cried, pulling their sister roughly.

Their words were loud and fast but they had no effect. Audrey turned back to her twin, her voice surprisingly firm.

“I’m *not* delusional. You’re being *lied* to and you can’t see it. Think for yourself.” She snarled.

Ash bit their lip. “I *am* thinking for myself. I’m being *logical*. This is *real life*. You’re running wild with some fantasy adventure and it’s not real, Audrey.”

“It’s not real?” She shrieked. “Stop lying to yourself. This isn’t some fairy-tale where everything is perfect, Ash! You need to grow up! Just grow up and start thinking for yourself already!”

Ash drew back, hurt. “Fine, just go on your stupid search! If you’re so convinced they’re getting killed, just join them! Go and die if you’re so convinced they are too! Go!” As soon as the words left their mouth, Ash froze. *Oh my god. How could I just say that?! Oh god. Oh god.*

Audrey’s face was a mask Ash couldn’t read.

“I need to go get dressed. Goodnight Ash.”

She left and closed the door behind her.

Hand a centimetre away from opening the door and following their sister, Ash felt like screaming at themselves, but they didn’t. They wanted to apologise, to forget about it. *Why can’t Audrey see?*

Standing outside the door, Audrey wanted to scream, but she didn’t. She wanted to apologise, to explain why she needed to prove this. *Why can’t Ash see?*

six

Rubbing their eyes, Ash sat up in bed. Blinking, they saw the crumpled bedsheets of the bed against the other wall. Squinting through the morning blurriness, Ash came to the conclusion that Audrey was not in it. *Probably left without me, fine. Saves me from the awkwardness after a fight, at least.*

Within ten minutes, Ash had gotten changed and grabbed a piece of toast, eating it on the way to school. Through the whole walk, they couldn't help but feel uneasy. *Where was Audrey?*

These thoughts pursued Ash all throughout mathematics, even Pythagoras' theorem couldn't cheer them up.

"Hey, uh... you," Ash awkwardly sidled up to the people they knew Audrey was friends with.

A girl with curly, dark brown hair looked up from her *arepas*, dark eyebrows raised.

"Is there a problem?"

Ash shoved their hands in their pockets. "Um, no, not exactly. Have you seen Audrey?"

The girl shook her head. "No, she wasn't in class..." her hazel eyes squinted suspiciously at

Ash. "Why?"

"No reason," Ash walked away, not liking that they needed to lie. It didn't help that they

were good at lying. They tried not to, but when Audrey was always getting into trouble,

someone had to cover up her mischief.

Well. What now? Ash made their way to an empty lunch table, chewing their lip.

Should I go

looking for her? Is she actually in trouble? No, calm down, she's probably just in detention or something. Yeah. That's it.

They set their books down on the table and sat down. But as soon as they'd sat down, a loud, blaring alarm set off around the school.

Students all around the cafeteria looked up, exchanging identically confused glances with each other.

Ash blinked. *Did my butt do that?*

Murmurs filled the hall as the alarm continued sounding, echoing off the walls.

"Relax, guys," a boy said from one of the centre tables. "It's probably just a dr-"

"EVACUATE, EVACUATE," A computerised voice sounded across the PA system.

"THIS IS NOT A DRILL. ALL STUDENTS AND STAFF MOVE TO THE SCHOOL ENTRANCE IMMEDIATELY. THIS IS NOT A DRILL. EVACUATE, EVACUATE,"

Ash's mouth dropped, still with shock as hundreds of students started scrambling for the exits.

Somebody pushed past them, knocking their shoulder, and that physical contact shocked Ash back into action. They leapt up, abandoning their books as they rushed for the exit, bouncing between other students like a pinball machine in the panic.

"What's wrong?"

"Miss, what happened?"

"Why did we need to evacuate?"

"I heard that there was a rabid dog on the loose,"

"I heard it was a teacher who had rabies,"

Rumours, questions and demands flew around the front entrance of the school, thousands of voices trying to find out what's going on at the same time.

Their extremely short principal -- Mrs Jeffords -- stood up on a rock in an attempt to calm the crowd, but the attempt was ineffective as now she was only the same height as everyone else. "Everybody just calm--"

"EVERYBODY CALM DOWN!" The school captain bellowed, easily taller than everyone.

The students quieted, their eyes were filled with hunger for answers, but laced with fear at the captain. They waited for someone to speak. Nobody dared to breathe.

The principal took a deep breath. "I'm sure you've all seen the news... and I'm sure you've all heard of the epidemic by now."

Ash's eyes widened.

"James Lohan reports from Nine News. Another victim of the sudden epidemic, Jiayong Chen, twenty-seven, a teacher at the local high school, was found dead, just today."

Ash unlocks the back door, the sound of their Mum watching the TV crackling through the small living room.

"Ambulances are at the scene, Prime Minister Wong insists that there is nothing to be worried about it, the epidemic is under control..."

Ash stood behind the couch, trying not to look at the TV. "Hey, uh, Mum? Did you see Audrey before you left for work today?"

Eyes not parting the TV, Ash's Mum shook her head. "Last time I saw her was last night. She looked pretty stressed, ripping pages out of that notebook of hers. Looked a bit mad, honestly,"

"Thanks," Trying not to let her panic betray them, Ash rushed up the stairs and shut the door behind them as soon as they were in their room. *I just need to find that stupid diary. Where the hell could it be?* Clothes and objects flew to the floor, books askew along the ground. Ash was in the middle of stripping their bed of its covers, throwing her pillow aside, when they see a small slip of paper underneath it.

Furrowing their eyebrows, they sit on the bare mattress and turn the letter around the piece of paper.

Ash:

I know you're angry at me, but please read this before you get any angrier. You look like a baby when you get angry so don't try to argue.

I know you don't believe that anything's going on, so I know you won't understand. We've never been able to age before, Ash, the government is lying to us and I know there's a reason why. So I'm going after them. I'm going to get to the bottom of this, and there's nothing you can do to stop me.

If my friends ask where I am, tell them that I am singlehandedly heroically saving the world like the queen that I am.

I love you and I'll see you soon. Look after Mum.

Love,

Audrey.

Ash rubbed their forehead. "Audrey, what have you done this time?"

five

Ash glared at Audrey's diary that was splayed across the desk, massaging their temples. *What do I do now?* Half out of panic and half out of stress, Ash grabbed their backpack off the bed and prepared themselves for a long day of questioning anyone who could have possibly known anything about where Audrey had gone. As Ash stumbled out of the house, they wondered how they would get around during the day. Their only choice was... Audrey's bike. Ash despised that hot pink mess of a contraption, but it was their only choice.

As they wheeled the disaster of a bike out from its dark corner in the garage, a silver SUV pulled into the driveway.

"Hey, Mum. You're home early."

A young-looking woman rolled down the windows to the car. "Oh yes. Sorry, honey I can't stay long I only forgot my laptop."

"That's okay, I was just leaving anyway," Ash shrugged.

Their mum squinted. "Where are you going? I don't think it's very safe out and about at the moment, sweetheart,"

"Just over to a friend's place. Don't worry I won't do anything stupid."

Mind already elsewhere, their mum started rolling up the window. "Okay, just be careful. Love you!" She shouted as Ash rode away on Audrey's hot pink, glittery mess of a bicycle.

The only friend who's address I know is that one with the black curls, Audrey goes over there a lot. Maybe she went over there last night while I was sleeping?

Ash pedalled as fast as their body would let them, ignoring the burning pain of their under exercised legs.

Pulling up at the house, Ash realised that they were dripping in sweat from head to toe.

"Not a very good first impression of me for this girl is it?" Ash muttered, climbing off the bike.

Now approaching the front door, Ash realised that they hadn't really thought this through.

Do I knock? How many times do I knock: two, three times? Is four too much?

Taking a deep breath, Ash raised their hand to knock.

"Uhhhh, can I help you?"

They spun around to see the same girl from yesterday, her curly black hair falling over her shoulders as she hugged her arms close to her chest.

Clearing their throat, Ash awkwardly waved. "Ah, hi. Have you, by any chance, seen my sister - um, Audrey - since yesterday?"

"No. I still haven't seen her," she shook her head. "I'm Ana-Sofía, but everyone calls me Annie."

"Ash. And, sorry, I'm just worried. I won't bother you anymore." Ash stepped to the side so that they could walk past Annie and go back home. "Sorry, again."

"Come inside."

Ash blinked. "I'm sorry. What?"

Putting her keys in the door, Annie rolled her eyes. "I said come inside, idiot. Jeez. You're worse than your sister; I didn't think that was possible,"

"Ok. Fine then." Ash squinted, turning back around. "No need to be so rude."

"Nice bike, by the way." Annie said smoothly, walking into the house.

Face burning, Ash followed Annie inside. "Oh. That hideous thing. It's my sister's,"

"Shame. I really thought you were the type of person to adore pink and glitter." Annie glanced at Ash from the corner of her eye, smirking.

"Hmm. The sarcastic type I see."

"So, umm..." Ash bounced their knee, looking around Annie's small room. "Do you have any idea of where Audrey could...?"

"I'm going to look for her. Want to come?"

Ash's eyebrows flew up. Their knee stopped jiggling. "Wait. Slow down, dude. What do you mean *look for her*? Like, look for

Audrey?"

"What else would I mean?" Annie crossed her arms, raising an eyebrow.

"Well-" Ash struggled to find words. "Have-have you *planned* anything? Like, food and clothes and transportation?"

"Well..." Annie's hazel eyes floated upwards as she stalled. "...No, but that's why I asked you to come, so you can help me with that stuff,"

Sighing, Ash slowly shook their head. "I don't know... what about my mum, and school and..."

"Nah." Annie waved a dismissive hand. "You'll be right. It'll only be for a few days. Plus, don't you want to find your sister?"

"We don't even know where she's gone," Ash chewed their lip, not liking how quiet Annie became.

Suddenly, the girl snapped her fingers and pointed at Ash. "Did she say anything in her diary?"

The light in Ash and Audrey's room was off and the blinds were closed so that no light could seep in. Ash flicked the light switch and a loud click echoed through the room as the light turned on, revealing the mess that Ash had left behind earlier.

"Where should we stat?" Annie wondered aloud as she rifled through Audrey's desk draws.

Thankful that Annie had no sarcastic comment to give, Ash pointed. "What about her laptop?" They suggested.

"Good idea,"

The positive feedback charging her into a sense of confidence, Ash sat down at Audrey's desk, opened her laptop and began scrolling through her search history, looking for anything that might give them a clue about where the hell Audrey was. Meanwhile, Annie was underneath Audrey's bed, only her legs sticking out.

"Holy crap!"

Surprised, Annie jerked, whacking her head on the bed frame. “*Jesus*, Ash,” she swore.

“Annie, come look at this!” Ash yelled, staring at the computer screen.

“What, what?” Annie jogged over to Ash, rubbing her head. “What is it?” She repeated, placing a hand on Ash’s shoulder, leaning down to peer at the screen. Ash felt a flutter in their stomach and tried not to look at Annie’s hand that was in such close proximity to her. “I- I uhh... I found this,” they stammered, pointing at a website headline.

“*“Prime Minister Wong says all is under control, considering the newly found deaths of twelve more people.”*” Annie read out loud. She shook her head, and whispered, “holy crap...”

All went silent in Audrey’s room.

four

"She was right," Ash said quietly.

"What? Right about what?" Annie demanded, looking concerned.

"About everything," Ash put their head in their hands. "I didn't believe her, I told her she was being stupid. But... it's true, the government is hiding it,"

Annie rubbed the bridge of her nose, flashing her matte black nail polish. "Show me the diary,"

Wordlessly, Ash handed over the small book.

"...Did you see this?"

"What?"

Annie leant over to Ash, tilting the book so that they could both read it.

"An address,"

Ash chewed their lip. "Is it mentioned anywhere else?"

After flipping through the book, Annie's eyebrows raised, crinkling her forehead. "It's mentioned on like, every page."

"Well," Ash rubbed their face and then took a deep breath, their brown eyes meeting with Annie's hazel ones. "At least we know where to find her, now,"

Annie nodded gravely.

"Let's go."

"Now?"

"Now."

three

As they both walked down the street, Ash watched as Annie's hair bounce with each step, racking their brain for things to say. *How the hell do you strike up a conversation with someone who likes your twin sister who is your complete opposite?*

Unable to settle on saying anything that came to mind, Ash decided to remain quiet, the rest of the walk to the town's border spent in somewhat awkward silence.

After about thirty minutes, the pair reached the start of the long road that leads to the forest surrounding the town; the forest that conceals the location from Audrey's diary.

"Wait, what?" Annie whispered, confusion colouring her tone.

Before they could ask what was wrong, Annie shoved a hand in front of Ash and put a long finger to her lips. When Ash opened their mouth to protest, Annie silently pointed at the roadblock sign and the guards ahead. Quickly and quietly, Annie grabbed Ash's hand and darted behind a small shed.

What the hell is going on?! Ash tried hard to remain silent, watching as Annie crouched, peeking from behind the shed to spy on the guards. Why is Border Control here? There's NEVER been border control, ever! What the actual-

Pulling Ash out of their thoughts, Annie gestured to the beginning of the forest a few metres in front of the shed. Under the cover of the trees, they both crept silently towards the guards.

"...YOUNG FEMALE WAS SPOTTED TWO DAYS AGO, GOING THROUGH THE BORDER."

Ash felt their blood run cold. They looked over to Annie to see the look on her face, knowing she was thinking the exact same thing.

Audrey.

"VERY SEVERE SITUATION," the head guard continued. "VERY, VERY SEVERE. DO NOT LET THIS HAPPEN AGAIN,"

Leaning against a thick tree, Ash stood in stunned silence, too shocked to speak or think straight.

Annie shook Ash's shoulders. "Snap out of it and get your head in the game," she hissed. "We could *die* if we don't focus now,"

Ash blinked, confused. "I'm fine, what are you talking about?"

Shaking her head, Annie stared at Ash. "Ash, you're as pale as a ghost, you were hyperventilating, and you were biting your lip so hard I thought it might bleed,"

Ash didn't even know Annie was looking at her. "Ah, I... guess so,"

Through studying their face, Annie could easily tell that Ash wasn't doing well. She held their shoulders, forcing them to look her in the eyes. "Look, Ash, we'll get through the border, okay? We can do this. Audrey did it alone, and we have two people; that's even better! I have just the plan to get us through, but you'll have to listen very carefully..."

“How was that?” Annie panted, doubled over once they were a safe way into the forest.

Even more out of breath due to their lack of daily exercise, Ash glared. “All... we did... was run, what a... what about that plan... did I have to ‘listen... very carefully’ to?”

Despite the circumstances, Annie started to laugh. “We did it! Have you ever broken the rules like that, Ash?”

And, surprising themselves, Ash began to laugh too. “We did it,” Looking at the girl’s smile, Ash felt a blush creep to their face.

Overcome with exhaustion, they both collapsed to the ground, holding each other for support.

Annie started to move closer.

Ash felt their face heat up.

The two came closer.

Closer.

Right before they touched, Annie’s eyes drifted behind Ash, and she whispered, “Hey, look. We made it,”

two

There, in a clearance in the trees, was an expanse of concrete structure. That had to be it. Audrey had to be here. Suddenly, Ash felt very, very scared again. *What if what they found was bad? What if it was too late? What if Audrey was already- no.* They weren't going to think about that.

Annie took their hand from behind them. "Hey, it's okay. We'll find her." She whispered gently, giving Ash's hand a light squeeze.

Ash nodded, trying to believe her words as much as they could. They were going to find Audrey. They had to.

Ash and Annie walked around the building in almost silence. The air felt cold and rain covered everything, the moisture causing an eerie shine. The towering structure before them seemed so foreign; it was hard to believe there was a town of people not far from here, a town that had never changed until now, a town that certainly didn't know about this concrete fortress, here, hidden in the forest.

They walked around, eyes darting for a sign, any sign of Audrey. Ash's thoughts swirled. *Audrey, Audrey, Audrey, Audrey. Is Audrey okay?*

Annie was just as anxious to find Audrey, but her thoughts were different. *Ash, Ash, Ash, Ash. Is Ash okay?* She was scared, but for different reasons.

They'd been walking for a while now. Still no signs. Still just blank, grey walls of concrete. They turned the next corner and Ash's eyes flicked over it, trying hard not to lose hope. *Still no sign- wait.*

A small figure was hunched in the distance up against the wall and before their brain recognises what they're doing, Ash ran towards it.

"Wait, Ash! Where are-" Annie's voice trailed off, but then she saw the figure too. She hoped like Ash did that it was Audrey, that Audrey was still breathing and okay, that Audrey had single-handedly, heroically saved the world and made it back alive.

Is it Audrey? Is it Audrey?! Ash's mind screamed.

It is.

They saw familiar streaks of sun-bleached blonde hair matted within the light brown, her cream-coloured skin smeared. But Ash's heart stopped when they saw her eyes were closed.

Is she moving? Is she breathing? Please be alive!

"Audrey!" Ash cried, struggling to suppress a sudden sob. "Audrey!"

Ash collapsed in front of their sister, followed by Annie.

They stared at her in silence. *Should I check her pulse?* Annie wondered. Ash felt scared. *What if she's- what if she's...*

Audrey twitched and blinked her eyes open.

“Audrey! Oh my god, Audrey!” Ash sobbed, throwing themselves over their sister.

one

“Audrey, I’m so sorry. I should never have- I’m so sorry. Are you okay? Please just tell me you’re okay.”

Audrey’s glassy eyes stared at them, dazed. Wrinkles covered her face, her bones jutted out at weird angles.

“Audrey,” Ash said, beginning to panic. *Why wasn’t she saying anything?* “Audrey, are you okay?”

“I know what they did, Ashy,” the girl said, a small smile on her newly wrinkled face. Ash and Annie glanced at each other before looking back at Audrey, Ash putting a hand on her shoulder. “What’s happening, Audrey?”

Audrey looked Ash straight in the eye making the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. “Time starts now,”

...zero

**Every day is the same. Same temperature, same timetable,
same routine.**

Nobody changes.

Nobody ages.

Nobody dies.

Until they do.

**People are dropping dead left and right and no-one knows
why.**

**Audrey and Ash are twins. Convinced that the government is
hiding something from them, Audrey sets out to find out what,
leaving the skeptical Ash and Annie to find her.**

**Is this the epidemic the government claims it is or is there
something more to the story?**