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Opening extract from

One of Us

Written by

Jeannie Waudby

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ONE
OF
US

A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

Groups, religions, teams . . . sometimes we all seem intent on attacking each other, misunderstanding what we believe in and blaming someone else for it! Jeannie Waudby drops us straight into a nail-biting thriller, a story that pulls and pushes us in different directions as the betrayals and suspicions build up. But in the end, love reaches out and finds the truth – it always will. Thank goodness. Thank Jeannie. It's a cracker of a book.



BARRY CUNNINGHAM
Publisher
Chicken House

Jeannie Waudby

ONE OF US



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For Pete, Rory, Kirsten and Cara.

'A plague o' both your houses'

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *ROMEO AND JULIET*

CHAPTER 1

I'm not afraid of spiders or snakes.

I'm not afraid of graveyards at night.

I'm not afraid of deep, dark water.

I'm not afraid of ghost stories or horror movies.

And stations? I make myself get on a train every day.

But I am afraid of the Brotherhood.

Normally you can see them – you know who they are, with their scarlet-checked clothes. They stand out. But today, as people hurry through the sleet to Central Station under umbrellas and raincoats and scarves, I can't tell the difference between us and them.

I keep watch through the slanting snow, because how can you face a danger you can't see? A person who looks

like any other person, but who secretly wants to kill you and everyone like you? I don't know why I'm thinking like this now, when I have to make this journey to school every day. What would the odds be, for me to be caught up in another bomb at Central Station?

Slowly the crowd funnels into the station. I look up at the sign looming over the door: *One City, Two Ways*. That's not how it is, though. Everyone knows this is a divided city. Under the cover of the doorway, umbrellas swish down and people pull rain hoods off and unzip coats. Now I can see everyone for who they are. Ordinary citizens, dressed in the usual dark clothes we all wear these days. And the Brotherhood. Dotted through the crowd in their signature check.

I edge into the station just as three Brotherhood boys are pushing their way out. One boy crashes into me, his hands fending me off. For a second his dark eyes stare into my face. Then he says something sideways to his friend. They all laugh. What did Grandma used to say? *Never make eye contact with a Hood, K. It's like dealing with an angry dog – if you turn away, it won't attack you.* So I turn away.

'Do not abandon your luggage at any time. If you see unattended baggage, move aside and alert staff . . .' *I hate these announcements*, I think as I shuffle into the station along with everyone else. *They make me jittery.* Steeling myself, I head towards the lifts that take us down to the tunnels.

Deep underground, the platform's already crowded, and a man elbows in front of me as he struggles to get two huge suitcases closer to the edge so he can be first on the train. Someone jumps on my foot, and I wince. It's a

little boy pulling on his dad's hand. He's looped the strap of his backpack over his forehead like a headband. That makes me smile.

It's then that I see the bag on the bench, brown paper with string handles. As soon as I notice it I look around for the owner. It's habit. But I can't see who it belongs to. That means it's alone – 'unattended'. And the more I look at it, the less it seems like just a bag. Who left it there? The Brotherhood boys upstairs flash into my mind. Should I pick up the phone on the wall and report it?

As I move towards the phone, the little boy points at the bench. 'Daddy!' he calls. 'The cakes!'

His dad turns, still holding his son's hand, and darts across to the bench. He grabs the bag and as his eyes meet mine for a second he half-smiles sheepishly. I hear someone tut.

Warm wind heralds the train, which rushes out of the tunnel and comes to a screeching halt: 'Mind the gap. Move right down inside the carriages . . .' The doors swoosh open, and the man with the suitcases starts heaving them on. I wait behind the boy and his father. The train's packed, like it always is at morning rush hour.

I could wait for the next one, but then I'll be late for school.

I put one foot on board.

A bone-shattering, chest-crushing bang lifts me into the air.

And everything slips away.

*

When I open my eyes I can't see or hear a thing. There's just a heavy, ringing silence and a terrible smell, a *fearful* smell, that hits the back of my nose. Smoke and something else underneath. I start coughing and my hand flies up to cover my face but hits a rough surface right in front of me. A wall? Where am I? I feel the panic rising, then stop myself. *Stay still. Take little breaths.* I feel something trickling down my face. Blood?

What happened . . . ? There was a noise, a blast, and I fell . . . Don't know where I am, but I have to get out . . . Get out, K!

I struggle to my feet, but there's no room to stand. Something solid's above me, forcing me to crouch. I try to move back, but there's no space there either. I reach up and touch a sort of metal ceiling, bulging in towards the rough wall in front of me, or is it not a wall . . . is it . . . is it the platform? I reach above me, and there's a gap. *Mind the gap* . . . That's when I realize: *I'm under the train.* At any moment it could tip over and crush me. Metal slides against the back of my hand. It's moving!

Now I'm panicking and screaming, screaming for help – I know I am, except I still can't hear or see in the darkness. My hands scrabble at the wall, at the platform edge, reaching up from underneath the train. There's smoke in my eyes, in my throat . . . The smell's in my mouth . . . *Please* . . . I can't move, I can't breathe. Every mouthful of air now is a choking cough, bringing poison, not oxygen, into my body, and all at once I see it clearly:

I'm going to die.

Then a hand clasps mine. A warm, soft, human hand. Strong and safe.

I feel my own hand close round it. I am never letting go.

Another hand reaches down and clamps itself round my other wrist, and little by little I am lifted up, up, squeezing through the gap and on to the platform.

I fall forward, my face smacking against the concrete. My mouth suddenly fills with blood and ash, dust mingling with iron, choking me. My eyes are streaming in the grey smoke.

Whoever lifted me out is still holding me, hoisting me to my feet. A man. I still can't hear anything, just the blood thumping in my ears. I clutch at his clothes but can't hold on: he's wearing something hard and slippery. Dim light now, and I can see the train is right in front of me, the doors buckled over the gap where I was thrown. That's what was moving above me. And there's the man with the two suitcases. But he's lying half in and half out of the carriage. His eyes are closed and his mouth is moving. There's a figure kneeling next to him. They're holding hands.

My head starts to spin and my legs go, and suddenly I'm being picked up and carried away. The smoke's fading, the smell too. The train never even left. It's still waiting at the platform but with blasted doors and twisted metal. We're climbing stairs, I think. *Yes, you can't use a lift in a fire. I should try to walk*, I think, and struggle to get my feet down, but that makes us both fall, hard, on to the steps.

Sound slams into my head: 'Evacuate the station. Move calmly to the nearest exit. Evacuate the station. Move calmly . . .' The ringing isn't in my head. It's the station alarm.