

**JUST
LIKE
EVERYONE
ELSE**

SARAH HAGGER-HOLT

For Esther and Miriam, super readers
and super writers.

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Four years earlier

The first time I ran away from home, I was nine years old. And no one noticed.

I didn't want to run away, not really. I just wanted to *be* away. Just for a little while. I wanted to feel like I was the only person in the world, not swallowed up by all the people and the noise and the busyness at home.

I was allowed to go to Jack's house up the road or to the shop on the corner by myself, but I always had to tell Mum or Dad where I was going. No argument.

But that day, I didn't tell anyone.

Mum had discovered Evie and Daisy drawing on the bathroom wall. It was impossible to know which of them started it – whenever one of them did something, the other always joined in. Mum was trying to prise the pens out of

their sticky little fingers as she explained in her “calm voice” why paper, not walls, was for writing on. All the while, Bells was screaming about how those were her new pens, the special ones she got for her birthday, and now they were spoiled. Dad was at work and, because it was Saturday, none of the kids that Mum child-minds during the week were there. And Chloe? I don’t know where Chloe was. She’s always hated people shouting. She was probably tucked away in a corner with a picture book, waiting in her small, serious way for things to settle down.

I needed to get away. I took a deep breath as the back gate clicked shut behind me. Everything was suddenly quiet.

I didn’t have a plan. I started walking up the street, past Jack’s house, past the shop, before crossing the road very carefully, looking right and then left and then right again about a hundred times.

Up the top of the hill, there’s a field that slopes away from the streets, down to the allotments. It’s the best place to sledge in the winter and you can see over the whole of the city right to the hills on the other side. I guess it must have a name, but we always just call it the Field.

Once I reached the Field, I began to speed up. I raced downhill, arms held out on either side like I was flying. The wind on my face, my legs stretched, my feet pressing

against the ground, pushing me onwards. I kept going once I reached the footpath at the bottom. It didn’t matter where I ran to. Running – that was the important thing, that made me feel free.

I ran until my chest was sore and my legs felt heavy. All I could hear was the blood rushing in my ears and my own breathing. There was no one around, apart from one old guy walking his dog. I felt amazing.

I walked back along the path, trudged up the Field and then slowly back home, no idea how long I’d been gone.

I didn’t want to run away any more, what I really wanted was some of Mum’s cake, if my sisters hadn’t eaten it all already.

My heart was pounding as I climbed onto the bins so I could reach over and open the gate into the garden. I was all ready for a telling-off from Mum for going off without asking and worrying her to death.

But all I could hear was Bells organizing the others into one of her complicated games. I could hardly open the door to the living room, the floor was so covered in cushions and duvets. Chloe sat piling up balled socks into neat stacks, while the twins knocked them down and threw the socks at each other.

“Aidan, tell them to stop,” Bells shouted over at me. “They’re not allowed to do that yet. They can’t throw the

ammunition till we've finished making the fort. Mum's no good, she says she doesn't care what we do as long as we leave her in peace for five minutes."

I sat down next to Bells, smiling because I was happy to be home. "Any cake left?" I asked.

The second time I run away, it's different. Then, everybody notices when I'm gone.



Chapter One

I pile three Weetabix into a bowl, pause, and then add another one. Why not? Earlier this morning, while everyone else was still getting out of bed, I'd already been running. I train every Saturday morning and once a week after school. I open the fridge to get out the milk. Every shelf is packed full of meat. Of course, I almost forgot, it's today.

Every year, on the first Saturday of May half-term, we have a barbecue. Not just any barbecue but, as Dad always says, the biggest and best barbecue in the whole of Sheffield. It's also the safest barbecue in the whole of Sheffield. Dad's a firefighter and is always telling us stories about things that have gone wrong with other people's barbecues – trees or clothes catching fire, grills being knocked over – things that he'd never let happen at ours.

This barbecue is special – it’s a Taylor family tradition. It means that summer has started.

Dad comes into the kitchen, whistling, and slaps me on the back. I choke on my Weetabix.

“Come on, Ade, get moving. I need your help out ’ere, son. Time’s moving on.”

“Mmph,” I say, still coughing. “Get Bells to do it. I need a shower, I’ve just come back from running. Anyway, no one’s coming for hours.”

“Bells is *already* helping,” says Dad. “And Chloe. But we need all hands on deck. Team Taylor, remember.”

“It’s just a barbecue...no big deal...” I say to wind Dad up.

“What?” he shouts. “*Just* a barbecue? Just? It’s *just* the biggest and best—”

“Barbecue in the whole of Sheffield.” I finish for him. “Yeah, I know.”

“Well then,” says Dad. “Good. Now, shift yourself. And don’t be so cheeky. You know people fight over invitations to an event like this. It’s like one of them royal garden parties.”

“Yeah right.”

Dad’s already wearing the apron that we got specially printed for him for his birthday. It says “Team Taylor: Captain and Barbecuer-in-Chief” in white on a black

background. It was Bells’s idea. Of course.

“Anyway, how was running this morning? Good turnout?”

“Yeah, not bad, lots of downhill today. All about building up speed.”

“Rather you than me. Now, I’ve got a challenge for you, do you reckon you could be that fast at making me a cup of tea?”

“Ha ha,” I say, but I still get up and put the kettle on for him.

Mum comes in, holding her phone in one hand and a bowl of potato salad in the other. She gives me a kiss as she passes. I shrug her off. Why is it impossible in this family to have five minutes without anybody touching you? I should be grateful that one of the twins hasn’t come in and sat on me yet, although they probably will before I finish my breakfast.

Mum wrinkles up her nose. “I hope you’re planning to have a shower before people start arriving,” she says to me.

“Yes,” I sigh. “I am. But when I got home, Daisy was in the bathroom, and now I’m making Dad a cup of tea. If some people wouldn’t keep asking me questions and getting me to do stuff while I’m trying to eat my breakfast, then I’d be in the shower already.”

“Okay, point taken, sorry,” says Mum soothingly.

I look up and see her mouthing “hormones” at Dad over my head.

“It is *not* hormones...” I start to say.

“Never mind,” says Mum, putting down the potato salad on the table in front of me. “Listen, Pete, Jo’s bringing someone. She’s just texted. Is that okay?”

Auntie Jo is Mum’s younger sister and one of my favourite people in the whole world. She lives by herself in a fancy flat in the city centre, where everything is smooth and neat, and there’s a sofa that she folds out into a bed when I come and stay. She never asks annoying questions about school or whether I’ve got a girlfriend yet or anything like that. She just talks to me the same as she would to anyone else. She works in marketing. When I was little, I used to think that meant she had a stall down the market, selling veg or something, till Mum laughed and told me it didn’t mean that at all. Instead, she works on her laptop, helping companies sell things online.

“Of course she can bring someone,” says Dad. “More the merrier. Who is it? A bloke?”

“I *think* so,” says Mum, grinning. “She hasn’t said, but I think it must be. I’ve got a feeling.”

“About time,” says Dad. “She’s what, thirty-three now? Clock’s ticking. She deserves to find the right guy. And, she should have no trouble, I mean, she’s such a looker.”

Mum pushes Dad gently, pretending to be offended.

“Not nearly as gorgeous as you, of course,” he adds. I can feel my ears going red. I gulp down my final mouthful of Weetabix.

“What if she doesn’t *want* a boyfriend?” I say, standing up. My voice comes out high and squeaky and then drops low. I hate it when it does that. It’s happening more and more, especially when I get upset or annoyed. “What if she *likes* living by herself, and not having to change nappies all the time and look after boring babies? Have you thought of that?”

I don’t stick around long enough to see Mum raise her eyebrows at Dad, or Dad smile back at her. But I know they will.

“Oi, what about that cuppa?” shouts Dad after me. But I hear him opening the cupboard where the mugs are, so I know he’s finishing making it himself.

But I’m right, I tell myself, as the hot water flows down my back. I’m right. Just because *they’re* married with kids and all their friends are married with kids doesn’t mean everyone else has to, or wants to, be like that. It’s like they can’t imagine anyone wanting anything different.

There are no dry towels. I nearly trip over a box of old plastic bath toys that someone’s left on the floor, trying to get one out of the cupboard.

There's a hammering on the door.

"It's my turn, come on," shouts Chloe. "You've been ages."

I wrap the towel round my waist and open the door. At least I got in before Chloe. *She's* the one who spends ages in there, not me, usually perched on the loo seat reading a book. She's only eight and already she's read loads more than me. It's like when she's reading she can shut out all the noise around her and disappear into her own private world. I wish that worked for me too.

Chloe's standing right outside the bathroom. She slips past me the moment I step out of the door. I can hear Bells thundering up the stairs. I'm not sure if she's after me or after getting in the bathroom, but either way, she's too late. I slam my bedroom door shut and push a chair, weighed down with piles of clothes, behind it so that Bells can't just barge in. The one good thing about having four sisters and being the only boy is that I don't have to share a room with anyone.

I could happily stay in my room all day today. I'd miss the food – Dad's barbecue sauce is amazing – and hanging out with Jack, I suppose. But there's always tons of leftovers and I can see Jack any day.

At times like this, I wonder if I'm adopted. I'm just not like Mum or Dad. They thrive on having people around

all the time. It makes them bigger and brighter and more themselves when other people are there. Maybe that's why they decided to have five kids, so someone's always around.

Not me, it just tires me out, all the chat and the smiling. It's like I'm a phone and my battery drains a little bit more every person I talk to, until I shut down. But Mum and Dad don't get that.

I never wonder for long about being adopted. All I have to do is look in the mirror at my sticky-out ears and compare them to Bells's and Chloe's and Evie's and Daisy's – and Dad's. Those are some powerful genes.

My phone vibrates. It's Jack, messaging to say that he's just coming round. Which means that he'll arrive in exactly one minute and twenty-five seconds – the time it takes to walk from his house to mine. Walk. Jack never runs because he thinks anything remotely to do with exercise is a waste of time.

I quickly throw on some clothes, find a pair of socks on the floor which don't smell too bad and kind of match, shut the door firmly then put a chair in front of it to discourage lost guests from wandering into my room, looking for the bathroom.

By the time I get downstairs, Jack's already in the kitchen, chatting to Mum and Bells about who's coming

to the barbecue. Sometimes it seems like he's more Team Taylor than I am, like he's part of the family. Although I suppose he is.

Jack grew up here. The first kid Mum looked after when she started child-minding. Three days a week from his first birthday to when we started school – Jack had his lunch and tea here, went on walks down the park or came to toddler group with me and Mum, napped in a cot upstairs next to mine, did finger-painting at our kitchen table.

Mum minded other kids too, back then, but none of them were like Jack. I always had the idea that it was my job to look after Jack, not just Mum's. I guess I've never stopped feeling that way. It's just not so straightforward now. Jack's always been a little bit different. It's tricky to say how exactly. His clothes are just a bit more unusual, his laugh a bit louder, the way he walks a little bouncier, than anyone else's. All things that make you stand out at school, that could make you a target. When I ask him why he doesn't just try and blend in a bit more, he just smiles, says it's all cool, and tells me to stop worrying.

Mum looks up as I come in and checks me over with a quick glance. She nods, satisfied that I'm clean and presentable now.

"Jack, Ade, your dad needs a couple of strong lads to

shift round some of the furniture in the garden. You two up for the job?"

"I reckon so," says Jack.

Just as Bells says, "Why's it have to be strong *lads*? That's sexist. I'm as strong as Jack, aren't I? Stronger. I mean, look at his tiny muscles compared to mine." And she leans over to squeeze his arm.

She's probably right too. Jack's skinny and not that well-built. Mr Evans, our sarcastic PE teacher, once described him in front of everyone as a "delicate bloom". It made all the boys laugh, but Jack didn't even blush. Just shrugged it off. It was me who worried for him, anxious about what someone might say about him next.

But I wasn't only worried about him. I was worried what they might say about me too, just for being his friend.

Bells's comment doesn't bother him now, the way it would if someone said that about me. Instead, Jack plays up, flexing his muscles, then challenging Bells to do the same.

Mum shrugs. "If you *really* want to help with moving chairs, Bells, then don't let me stop you." So all three of us go to help Dad. We take turns sneaking handfuls of crisps from the bowl on the table till he spots us, pretends to be cross, and tells us to get out from under his feet.

Before long, the sun's blazing down and the garden's full. Dad's mates from work, the families of the kids that Mum's minded over the years and more families that she knows from being a parent-governor at the primary school. The music's pumping out, everyone's shouting their hellos and laughing too loudly at too many bad jokes. The cans of Coke and beers are disappearing fast.

"You all right?" asks Jack.

"Yeah, just all these people, you know."

"We could just go and play Xbox inside," he suggests.

"Nah." It's tempting, but I know he'd rather be here at the party. "Let's get a burger."

Suddenly I hear my name over the chatter. "Where's Aidan? I've got some news for him."

I spot Auntie Jo before she spots me. She looks a hundred times more glamorous than anyone else here. I tap her on the shoulder and she spins round, then air-kisses me on both cheeks. I like it because it feels like a very grown-up sort of greeting. Even if it's still a bit embarrassing.

"What news?" I ask, excited.

Then I wonder straight away if it's actually something boring, the sort of thing that only adults think is interesting. Maybe it's just about this bloke that Mum and Dad were talking about. That would be a big let-down.

"Here, let me show you." She gets her phone out of her

handbag, unlocks it and passes it over to me. It takes me a minute to read the email and take in what it says.

"No way!" I say. "No way, that's brilliant. You really got in?"

"Yup," she smiles. "At last. I got fed up of never getting anything in the ballot, so I'm running for charity. Now the real work begins. Hope I'm up to it."

"Course you are, easy. Anyway, I'll train with you." I stop, perhaps I'm getting too carried away. "I mean, only if you'd like."

"Of *course* I'd like that, you daft kid." She pulls a serious face. "Although I wasn't sure if you'd want to be seen training with me, I mean I know you don't think this is *real* running, but—" She laughs. Auntie Jo and I always wind each other up about running. She's a road runner, I'm a fell runner. I tease her that she's soft, and she mocks me for how often I come home soaking wet and covered in mud.

"What *are* you two talking about?" asks Jack.

"Auntie Jo's got a place in next year's London Marathon," I tell him. Even people, like Jack, who don't care about running, will get how exciting this is. If I could run any road race in the world, it would be that one. Only six years till I'm old enough.

"Are you going to dress up?" Jack asks. "You know, like

those people who run it dressed as Big Ben or a zebra or something? You could get in the *Guinness Book of Records* that way. That would be so cool.”

“Hmm,” says Auntie Jo, pretending to consider it. “I *could*. But I think running twenty-six miles will be hard enough without a huge, heavy costume as well, don’t you? I am running for charity though – new equipment for the maternity unit at the hospital.”

“Well, that’s your costume sorted then,” says Jack, clapping his hands together. “You’ve got to run dressed up as a giant baby! Like with a nappy, and carrying a baby’s bottle – you could put energy drinks in there – and—”

“Jack...” I interrupt, trying to get him to shut up. But Auntie Jo just laughs.

“Why the hospital?” I ask.

“Well, our family’s kept that unit pretty busy over the years, haven’t we? I mean, you lot were all born there. Luckily, you were all healthy, even with the twins being early, but imagine what it’s like for a family with a baby that’s sick and needs special help. Terrible. Anyway, they had running places and it seemed like such a good cause. I hope you’ll come to London and cheer me on.”

“Seriously?”

“Sure, why not?”

“I don’t know. What if Dad’s working that weekend?”

I look at my shoes. “And anyway, wouldn’t it be a lot of money for all seven of us to go down to London?”

Auntie Jo puts her hand on my shoulder. “I’ll talk to your mum. I’m sure we can make it work, okay? After all, it’s nearly a whole year away. Plenty of time to plan.”

I nod. I hope she’s right. It would be brilliant, but such a hassle too. Just imagine trying to get the twins on and off the tube without them losing something or having to stop every five minutes for someone to go to the loo, or the whole tribe of us trying to find a big enough space at the front of the crowd. I wish I was old enough just to get on a train and go by myself.

There’s a man I don’t recognize hovering behind Auntie Jo. He’s carrying a bottle of white wine and, instead of wearing shorts and a polo shirt like all the dads, he looks a little bit over-smart in his light pink shirt and linen trousers. Is this her new bloke, then? I stare at him and he smiles back awkwardly.

“Oh god,” says Auntie Jo, clapping her hand over her mouth. “I’m so sorry, I got so excited about the marathon that I forgot my manners.” She turns to the man. Then I spot that behind him, there’s another man, this one holding a big bunch of flowers. So if this is Auntie Jo’s boyfriend, who’s *he*? Which one is it?

“This is my favourite nephew Aidan, and his best friend

Jack, who's kind of like an honorary nephew, aren't you, Jack?" She gestures at us both. "And this is Justin, my friend from work..."

"Nice to meet you, Aidan and Jack," says the first man, stepping forward. Jack grins and says hi, but I just nod. If he is Auntie Jo's boyfriend, I need to take my time to decide whether I'm going to like him or not.

"And this is Atif..." continues Auntie Jo, putting her hand on the other man's arm.

"Jo..." screeches Mum and, before she can finish the introductions, Jo's being squashed into a huge, overexcited hug. They all start exclaiming over how beautiful the flowers are and how lucky they've been with the weather and other boring stuff like that.

"Come on," says Jack. "I'm starving, let's get one of your dad's burgers."

I follow him in a bit of a dream, imagining myself crossing the marathon finish line together with Auntie Jo, being given my medal and wrapped in one of those foil sheets afterwards to keep warm. I've got the fastest time ever for a first-time runner. Mum and Dad are cheering and holding up signs by the side of the road, which say stuff like "Go Aidan" and "Team Taylor". Bells, Chloe, Daisy and Evie aren't in my dream, perhaps someone else is looking after them...

I turn round and catch a glimpse of Justin. His hand is resting on Atif's back. Atif turns to him and whispers something in his ear and they both laugh. There's something about how they look together. I can't stop staring. I mean, maybe I'm wrong. And they're not...but, are they?

Chapter Two

I'm distracted for the rest of the afternoon. I can't help it. I keep trying to glance over at Justin and Atif, without them – or anyone else – noticing me looking. It's not easy. So many people keep getting in my way. But I feel like if I let them out of my sight, even for a minute, I might miss something crucial. I'm just not sure what.

It must be obvious I've got something on my mind. Even Jack's impatient with me for not paying attention to what he's saying, and he can normally chat on for hours without needing much response from me.

"So, what do you think, Ade?" he asks, through a mouthful of burger. "Do you agree with me or with Bells? It's important."

Bells is only hanging out with us while she waits for her

best friend Lily to turn up. Lily's okay, but she's so loud. I don't mind that she's not here yet. Although, if Lily's coming, there's at least some chance Will, her brother, will come too. He's a couple of years above me and Jack, tall, curly-haired and kind of cool. Even though Lily's in and out of our house all the time, I've hardly ever spoken to him. I'm not sure he properly knows who I am.

"Er..." I say.

"You could at least *pretend* to listen."

"I was," I protest, even though I wasn't.

Atif's just sat down in a corner of the garden with Evie; it looks like she's showing him some of her toys. Justin's talking to Dad, and Dad's laughing. What are they talking about? Could it be about me, or is that just stupid? Jack's staring at me.

"So, who's right?" he asks again.

"You, Jack, you're right," I say at last.

"Why?" he asks, accusingly. "*Why* am I right?"

I sigh and force myself to focus on Jack. "Oh, all right, I give in, I *wasn't* listening. Whatever, I still reckon you're right. What does Bells know about anything?"

Bells sticks out her tongue at me. "Shut up, Aidan."

"We're talking about the set for the play," explains Jack, now he thinks he's got my attention. "Bells thinks it should be all silver and gold material and fairy lights—"