

The Beginning

This is Littlehaven. Nothing ever happens here.
No one famous was born here. Or lived here. Or even died here.

The high street has the same shops as every other high street in every other town.

Even when you walk and walk right to the edge of Littlehaven, there aren't rolling hills or mysterious woods, there are just flat fields, going on and on into the distance.

The most famous thing that happened here was hundreds of years ago. Someone, I can't remember who, invented a machine that halved the time you could harvest wheat, or something. We went to see it on a trip in primary school. All metal spikes and crushing wheels.

This is Littlehaven. Nothing ever happens here.

Until the spotlight hits my family...

**NOTHING
EVER
HAPPENS
HERE**

SARAH HAGGER-HOLT



USBORNE



Chapter One

In memory of my dad, who instilled in me
a love of language, story-telling and
classic Broadway musicals.

First published in the UK in 2020 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House,
83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. usborne.com

Text copyright © Sarah Hagger-Holt, 2020

The right of Sarah Hagger-Holt to be identified as the author of this work has been
asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Cover illustrations by Sara Mulvanny © Usborne Publishing, 2020

Author photo by Chris Pettit

Stonewall's "Get Over It" campaign used with permission from Stonewall.

The name Usborne and the devices   are Trade Marks of Usborne Publishing Ltd.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a
retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the
author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual
events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781474966238 JFMAMJJASO D/19 005347/1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

On my bedside table, the clock flashes 03.03. I'm
awake. I don't know what's woken me up, but now
that I'm awake, I'm hungry.

Mum always moans about the amount I eat: another
jar of peanut butter scraped clean, another packet of
Weetabix gone, another loaf of bread with only the crusts
left at the bottom of the bag.

"I don't know where you put it all," she says. "Leave
something for the rest of us, Izzy."

But Dad says, "Give her a break, Kath, she's just
growing, aren't you, Izzy? Everyone's got to grow." And
he crouches down to pretend he's smaller than me and
that I'm a giant towering above him.

Sometimes, I like it. Sometimes, it's just embarrassing.
I lie there for a bit, thinking perhaps I'll go back to

sleep 03.04. 03.05. No, definitely hungry.

I pull on my pink dressing gown and quietly head downstairs, thinking there might be some Rice Krispies left. Past Megan's room. Past Jamie's, with its tatty *Thomas the Tank Engine* poster still hanging on the door. Past Mum and Dad's.

I'm halfway down the stairs before I hear something. It's a kind of snuffling sound and a gasping sound and a hiccupping sound. It's so odd that I stop where I am to listen more closely.

Then I realize, it's someone crying. Not just a little bit. It's the sort of crying that stops you breathing properly, that leaves you all snotty and headachy and swollen-eyed.

There's light coming from under the living-room door. I can hear Mum's voice murmuring softly, but not what she's saying.

The crying continues.

It's Dad.

Of course I've seen Dad cry before. He sniffs all the way through *The Wizard of Oz* and *Marley and Me*, welling up long before the dog dies. But nothing like this.

My stomach turns in on itself. I'm not hungry any more.

I head back to my room and curl up tight under my duvet, thinking of something, anything, to try and get the sound of Dad crying out of my head; my twelve times table, the names of all the children in *The Sound of Music* in order, what I'm going to wear tomorrow on the first day of the summer holidays, the numbers on the clock blinking past: 03.07. 03.08.



Chapter Two



“**J**amie, come on, how long does it take to choose between Cornflakes and Rice Krispies? Pass the box over.” Jamie’s in rapt concentration, staring at the cereal boxes in front of him.

“I’m doing the puzzle. There are only two words left to find.”

“Pass them over. Come on. It’s nearly time to go. I don’t want to be late on the first day of term,” I snap, pouring juice with one hand and trying to force my new black shoes on with the other. “Grace’ll be here in a minute.”

“Isabel, leave your little brother alone,” says Mum. She looks me up and down. “Where’s your tie?”

“In my pocket,” I say with my mouth full of cereal,

rolling out the green-and-blue striped St Mary’s tie to show her. “I don’t want to put it on till I’ve eaten my breakfast, so it doesn’t get milky.”

Megan clatters down the stairs, skirt rolled up, black make-up visible round her eyes. “Where’s my portfolio? Which of you has taken it? It’s massive, it can’t just have disappeared.”

It’s always such a shock when the holidays are over. It’s as if in the last seven weeks off school, we’ve forgotten how to do the simplest things: get up, eat breakfast, put on our clothes and get out of the house. Instead, we’re falling over each other in the tiny kitchen.

Dad’s already gone. He works in a small architects’ firm in Ipswich, planning people’s loft conversions and extensions. People get out of Littlehaven as fast as they can in the mornings. He’s usually off early to beat the traffic.

The doorbell. It’s Grace. I shovel cornflakes into my mouth. I’m ready to go.

I used to hate school, well, not hate it, but not feel like I belonged there. I could do the work, I never failed anything, was never called in for a “little talk” with one of the teachers. But I was...lost, empty. Like a black-and-white outline of a person. Grace changed all that. Grace coloured me in.

This morning Grace whirls into our kitchen at top speed, and almost collides with Mum. But Mum doesn't mind, she just laughs. People never seem to get cross with Grace. There's something about being around her that means you can't stay serious for too long.

So all Mum says is, "Whoa, slow down. You must be excited about the first day back."

"Sorry, Mrs P!" says Grace, using one of the nicknames only she uses for my parents – Mr and Mrs P, instead of Mr and Mrs Palmer. I try and avoid calling Grace's mum anything. I'm not sure I even know her first name and coming up with a nickname wouldn't feel right. In my head she's always just "Grace's mum".

"Hey, Jamie." Grace stops, looks over his shoulder and points at the back of the cereal box. "Look in that corner, you'll find 'crocodile'. And now, Izzy..." She grabs me, twirls me round, and gives me two huge theatrical air kisses – *mwah, mwah* – and strikes a pose. "Let's go and meet our fate. Wish us luck."

"Bye, Izzy," says Mum, stopping to smooth down my blazer and kiss me on the cheek. She looks very serious for a second, her eyes tired and sad, but she quickly snaps back to normal. "Have a good day, my grown-up girl. Have a good year."

"Oh, god," says Grace, as the door slams behind us. "Yesterday was a nightmare. I mean it. My mum made me go to church *all* day. Like, hours and hours. It was a special welcome service for the new pastor, and I thought it was never, ever going to end. And then there was a lunch, that was okay, I suppose, but I couldn't even message you because my phone was out of battery."

I think Grace's church is great, even though I've only been once. In the spring, Mum and Dad went away to a hotel for their wedding anniversary and I went to stay at Grace's for the night. In the morning, we went to church with her mum. It wasn't what I thought church was like. It was in this warehouse on the edge of Ipswich. It looked so plain from the outside, but inside was full of colour and music.

The man at the front went on and on, but I didn't really listen to what he was saying – I was too busy looking round. It was like going to the theatre or watching a musical, but with all of us in the chorus. There were women in their stiff, coloured dresses, the band playing, the choir singing, and everybody dancing and swaying, some even shaking and crying. But I think Grace was a bit embarrassed by it, and she never asked me again.

I haven't got much news for her in return. It's not like

we haven't been in and out of each other's houses all summer, and messaging most of the rest of the time. But with Grace, you never have to worry about not having enough to say. She simply goes on talking.

When we're almost at the gates, she stops and clutches my arm. "This year's going to be a good one for both of us, isn't it? I feel it, I feel it in my bones." She high-fives me, and I high-five her back, and we run laughing up to the gates, where everyone is jostling and shouting and ready for the year to begin. "And what's more," she whispers right into my ear as we go in, "this year is going to be the year that Sam Kenner notices me."

I don't doubt it. Not at all. Grace knows how to get noticed.

It's good being back and being in Year Eight. The Year Sevens in their too-big blazers and too-long skirts look bewildered. But we know what we're doing.

That was us last September, Grace and me. A whole year ago. Sitting in alphabetical order in that first assembly: Grace Okafor, Isabel Palmer. And after that we were barely apart.

All of a sudden, I stumble forwards, almost tripping over. Grace grabs my arm just in time before I hit the ground. Someone has shoved right into me as they run

past, knocking me off balance. I look up to see Lucas Pearce and a couple of his mates a little way ahead, laughing and messing around.

"Hey, Lucas," shouts Grace after him. "Mind where you're going!"

"Mind where you're going!" mimics Lucas in a squeaky voice that sounds nothing like Grace's, but still makes Amir and Charlie laugh like they've heard a really funny joke. "Not my fault Izzy's got such big feet that I nearly fell over them."

I look down. "Don't worry," I whisper to Grace. "It doesn't matter."

Lucas laughs. "You got nothing to say for yourself, Izzy, or do you just let Little Miss Big Mouth do all the talking for both of you?" The boys run off, pushing and grabbing each other's bags.

"That's one person I haven't missed over the holidays," mutters Grace. "I hope he keeps out of our way for the rest of this term."

"Hello, Grace. Hello, Isabel. Good summer holidays? Pleased to be back?" says a cheerful voice behind us. It's Mr Thomas, my favourite teacher. He runs Drama Club and I'm hoping we've got him for English again this year too.

“Yes, thanks, Mr Thomas,” we chorus.

Grace takes a deep breath, ready to describe her holidays in full and glorious detail, but Mr Thomas cuts in first. “I suggest you two have a look at the Drama-Club board when you get in,” he says. “You might find something there to interest you.” He smiles. “Unless you’ve got lazy over the summer...because this could mean hard work.”



Chapter Three

“*G*uys and Dolls?” says Grace with a shrug. “Well, I’ve never heard of it.”

Unlike me, Grace hasn’t grown up with Dad’s obsession with old musicals: *Guys and Dolls*, *Singing in the Rain*, *West Side Story*. Films so old they were made when Nana was a little girl. Films full of drama and music, like a doorway into another world.

Mr Thomas was right. There *was* something to interest us on the notice board:

Presenting...

St Mary’s one and only Years 7 – 8 Christmas Production

GUYS AND DOLLS

Singing, dancing, acting, crewing, designing.