

Praise for

Runaways

‘Extraordinary. I loved it’

Hannah Gold, author of *The Last Bear*

‘Gripping, heartfelt ... unforgettable. Explores what it means to be heard, to be safe and to find connection in the unlikeliest of places. Pulses with authenticity and emotional truth and will stay with you long after reading’

Jenny Pearson, author of *The Super Miraculous Journey of Freddie Yates*

‘A fantastic novel that doesn’t shy away from big emotions. I loved the different kinds of families represented in this book’

Maisie Chan, author of *Danny Chung Does Not Do Maths*

‘I LOVED *Runaways*. It has note-perfect voices, deft telling and two important stories at the heart of it all. I couldn’t put it down’

Joanna Nadin, author of *The Worst Class in the World* and the *Disaster Diaries* series

‘*Runaways* is gripping and deeply authentic and more than a bit brilliant’

James Goodhand, author of *Last Lesson*

Praise for
**FABLE
HOUSE**

‘An exciting, heartrending story with a magical twist’

Jacqueline Wilson

‘A thrilling, atmospheric fantasy’

Guardian

‘[An] exciting adventure ... the sense of family and belonging shines through’

Daily Mail

‘Fast-paced and full of heart ... a wonderful celebration of friendship, folklore and finding your place in the world’

Anna James

‘Unforgettable ... powerful and extraordinary ... Absolutely magical’

Zillah Bethell

‘PERFECT ... courageous, kind and wise. It’s heartfelt, thrilling, glistening with magic and adventure’

Sophie Anderson

‘Such a great story and premise. I loved all the characters and their interactions with each other’

Emma Carroll

OUTLAWS

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Fablehouse

Fablehouse: Heart of Fire

Runaways

Outlaws

OUTLAWS

E.L. NORRY

BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, DO2 AY28, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain in 2026 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-8651-0; eBook: 978-1-5266-8650-3

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typesetting by Six Red Marbles India
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



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'You can always give something, even if it is only
kindness' Anne Frank

*For Ed and Sam and Maisy: I wouldn't be me
without all of you*

CHAPTER 1

Robyn

Robyn Avery wriggled upright on the stool at the weathered workbench and rolled her shoulders, which cracked satisfyingly. She moved Grandad Bill's guitar to one side. These brake pads would *not* defeat her. *No way*. She'd show them who was boss.

Bill's Bikes, the Avery family business, was small, cluttered and dimly lit, but calming, especially the workshop area at the back of the shop. Bicycle frames hung from chains in the ceiling, tyres were stacked haphazardly and musty familiar smells mingled: grease and oil, rubber and metal; the place felt cosy, and ... safe.

'I don't get the point of school,' she'd grumbled, on more than one occasion, to both her dad and grandad. 'It's not fair! Why can't I learn the family business now?'

Grandad had struggled to hide his smile; Robyn knew he'd like nothing better than to have her help full-time in the shop. After all, he'd left school at sixteen and *his* dad had barely even gone to school.

'She's got a point, Ed. That Sherwood High ... full of snobs who think they're better than us ordinary folk. How's forking out fifty quid for a flipping blazer helping anyone's education, eh?'

Dad had given Grandad a very pointed look. 'Sherwood High is only selective *academically*, one of the few selective state schools in the country! It's not some posh private school that excludes us "ordinary folk", as you put it.'

'Hardly a level playing field though, is it? I know those types,' Grandad muttered. 'Throwing money around like they own the place.'

Her dad sighed. 'Robyn passed the exam with flying colours, and even though she's joining late, they want students from all walks of life. She should get the same opportunities as everyone else, don't you think?'

Grandad sniffed. 'Course, but why make us bankrupt in the process?'

'Well, the bursary helps with that, and you can pick up second-hand uniform at the Welcome Fair. You stick to mending bikes, Robyn'll stick to learning, and I'll be home before you know it, all right?'

Before you know it? That conversation had been three weeks ago, and he was still there, working in Puglia, in southern Italy.

Opposite her, Grandad muttered, 'Now, where's that spanner got to?'

Robyn glanced up. 'You're literally holding it, Grandad!'

He looked down at his hand. 'Oops. So I am! That's what happens when these tools are a ...'

He trailed off and Robyn finished his sentence, as she often did, knowing exactly what he was going to say.

'... a natural extension of your own hand!'

They smiled at each other and Grandad raised his mug of tea in a 'cheers' gesture.

'Why are you faffing with that now?' he asked, peering at a nut he'd worked loose from a rusty frame. 'Don't you need to get a shift on?'

When people spoke, Robyn heard not only their words but the spaces *between* their words, what they didn't always say, and the feelings their voices gave her usually corresponded to a colour and season. Not *everyone* slotted neatly into one of the four of course, but her system was pretty tight. Grandad Bill's voice was a late summer-early autumn – deep, rich, reassuring – and made her think of maroon and russet, burnt orange, brown and gold.

'Just. Need. To. Fix. This.' Robyn grunted. 'Won't take a second.' She stuck her tongue out of the side of her mouth, to concentrate, and loosened the grub screw. *Everything can be fixed if you just try hard enough.*

Grandad turned his phone screen round towards Robyn. 'Seen the bargain I got on Facebook?' He loved a bargain combined with the convenience of online shopping more than anything.

'More junk?'

'It's not junk! It's a miracle,' Grandad enthused. 'I was looking for replacement bike parts but then this guitar ad popped up. This old Martin is a beaut *and* a bargain.' He waved his screen at her.

If the workshop was dominated by bicycles,

upstairs reflected Grandad's other passion: guitars. The flat above the shop was a small two-bed, but on any – every – inch of wall that didn't have photos was a wall-mounted guitar. Eight by the last count.

'Another one? Where are you going to put it?'

Grandad tapped the side of his nose, meaning, *Mind your own business*. 'Let me worry about that.' He gazed at the phone. 'Now that the laptop's dead, it's good that I can get Facebook on this thing, but otherwise it's not *that* smart ... it's annoying! My old Nokia was fine.'

'But with this one, you don't even need a new laptop. It does everything.' Robyn laughed. 'That Nokia was a brick, Grandad.'

'Ugh!' He jabbed at the buttons on his phone. 'I'd get more sense from a brick!'

Robyn put down her rag and went round to lean over his shoulder. 'What are you trying to do?'

'I want to send your dad the photos from that Welcome Fair, but I can't do it!'

The Sherwood High Welcome Fair had been anything but welcoming. Grandad insisted on taking photos every five seconds and most were of Robyn

grimacing. She wasn't a fan of having her photo taken but Dad wanted to see how she was getting on, so she'd let Grandad click away.

'The photos have gone kaput!' He waved the phone. 'Every time I press this button, all I see is my own giant noggin.'

'Here, pass it over.'

Grandad handed her his phone and Robyn opened WhatsApp. 'See this little paper clip, where you usually send a message?'

Grandad huffed.

'Stop grumbling and listen, or you won't know how to do it next time,' she said, which was what he always said to her if she didn't understand an instruction about repairing a bike.

Grandad nodded, eyebrows creased.

'Press that and then choose *Gallery* – that's where the photos are.'

'Gallery?' he grumbled, stabbing at the buttons.

'Yeah. Has Dad said when he's coming home?' Robyn wanted him back with her and Grandad. She missed him; he had a way of putting everything into perspective. She didn't want to burden Grandad with

her worries about finding lessons too long and the canteen being too bright, too crowded and too noisy.

‘Nope, not yet.’ Grandad shook his head. ‘There. Done,’ he said, satisfied, putting the phone on the workbench and picking up the spanner again. ‘All your dad’s had from you is radio silence lately, so ring him later, eh?’

Was a radio ever silent? Maybe Robyn hadn’t called him as much as she could have done but she hated speaking on the phone or video – the signal was often delayed and Dad got easily distracted.

Grandad Bill pointed at the bike leaning against the wall by the entrance. ‘That Joe Connors’s bike?’

‘No. He already picked that up.’

‘Did he?’

‘Yes.’ Robyn looked up sharply. ‘That bike is Mrs Howells’s. Remember?’

Bill huffed. ‘I can’t be expected to remember every customer who comes in and out of here!’

Grandad was usually very proud of knowing all his customers; he must have got out the wrong side of bed this morning.

‘You had breakfast?’

Robyn nodded. 'Crumpets.'

'Jam or cheese?'

'Jam, obviously.' She wiped her oily hands on the rag in front of her.

'And you finished your homework?'

'Mmn,' Robyn mumbled. *Time to go!*

'Good. But, unless you get a shift on ...' Grandad pointed towards the clock above the door.

Robyn glanced at the clock; she *was* going to be late!

'Don't forget, Mrs Howells is picking her bike up at 1 p.m. See you later!' She grabbed her rucksack off the counter.

'Not if I see you first!'

Cycling to school, whatever the weather, always lifted Robyn's mood; Grandad claimed that a healthy body equalled a healthy mind, and he was right. While her legs worked the pedals and the blood flowed round her body, she ran through an inventory of Sherwood High so far, as she cycled past Buttrums Mill.

Starting a new school in Year 8 had been ... well, if she was using a cycling metaphor, then wobbly, to say

the least. These past few months it was like someone else was steering the wheel of her life. When her parents' divorce was finalised, their house in Ipswich had been sold. She'd spent the summer in Galway in Ireland with Mum but living there permanently wasn't an option that anyone wanted, so Robyn had come to stay with Grandad in Woodbridge, half an hour away from their old house.

Everyone had agreed that it'd be best for Robyn to have some continuity, but Grandad didn't drive so getting to her old school wasn't possible. It was too far to cycle and there were no direct buses. The plan was that when Dad got back from Puglia, where he was fixing up an old villa, they'd find their own place near Grandad.

Three weeks at Sherwood High though and she'd barely spoken to anyone except the teachers. This suited her for now – there was a lot to get used to and the distraction of new people wasn't welcome – and she'd probably make friends eventually, but tons of Year 8s seemed to operate in a completely different universe. Not a universe she liked the look of either. Despite Sherwood's motto being 'Inclusive, Inspiring,

Innovative', so far the school didn't seem any of these; kids clambering out of Audis and Range Rovers which blocked the roads, and the canteen full of excited exchanges about summer holidays involving scuba-diving and safari or quad biking through the desert. How did a week in a tent at Clifden compare? It didn't.

Before Dad left, he'd said, 'I know it's nearly the start of term, but you don't *really* need me here, do you? You've totally got this.'

Robyn didn't 'get' anything, but she knew Dad needed to do this project, and the months of arguing and then Mum moving had been so stressful that she didn't want to admit how much she wanted him to stay.

No friendly faces at the Welcome Fair; it had been more like a church fete. A raffle, a stand recruiting for the PTA (Grandad called them 'cult members'), a bouncy castle and some lame 'Guess the ...' games. She hadn't met anyone, it had just been a chance for new pupils to buy second-hand school uniform, see the teachers in a more 'informal' setting, and finalise admissions paperwork.

Weeks one and two had been a big uphill climb; a

blur of getting lost down long white corridors, learning new rules – hundreds of them! – and becoming familiar with a two-week rotating timetable. The only positive thing had been getting her time-out card. Apparently there was a sensory room to go to if she got overwhelmed, run by a Mrs Patel. Robyn hadn't been so far but was glad to know it existed. At her old school, she'd head down the sports field to a massive oak tree and sit under it or pace around until she felt better.

The after-school activities were being listed this week, but despite Grandad and Dad's enthusiasm, Robyn wasn't sure she'd sign up for anything – she just wanted to help out in the bike shop after school, before closing time. It was her happy place.

She'd mentioned not feeling like she fitted in here to Dad, but he kept saying, 'Hang on,' while yelling in broken Italian to builders in the background. He told Robyn not to take things 'personally', but if you weren't supposed to take things personally, how *were* you supposed to take them?

Be patient, love. Meeting new friends and settling in will happen. Everyone feels the same at your age.

Rubbish! Everyone was unique, so how could *everyone* feel the same about something? Sometimes Dad said completely the wrong thing, especially when he was trying hard to say the right thing.

Joining Year 7 at her old school, after primary, had been scary enough, but *everyone* had been new, so making friends was easier. But now? You only had to glance round the canteen to see how many friendship groups seemed set. Dad made it sound simple: find a seat and introduce yourself. That made sense for Grandad Bill at one of his OAP clubs, but who her age actually *did* that? No one. Not unless you wanted to be branded a massive loser.

Cycling round to the school's back entrance, Robyn hopped off her bike and wheeled it into the bike stands in front of the gym. As she locked it up, the chain snagged on her tights and ripped a hole just above her ankle.

A ladder rippled up her thigh. 'Great,' she muttered.

She jogged round to the front where registration line-ups were held, but except for a small queue of students lining up by the entrance gates, the place was deserted.

Some girls from the queue climbed on to a sleek white coach marked *Educational Tours* and a teacher consulted a clipboard.

Oh no! Was she supposed to be on that coach? She ran over to the back of the queue and tapped a girl on the shoulder.

‘Where are you all going?’

The girl glanced at her, unsmiling. ‘The history trip.’

‘Is that for Year Eight?’

‘I’m Year Nine, but it’s for any member of the History Elites.’

Robyn frowned, confused. ‘The *what?*’

The girl rolled her eyes so hard Robyn was surprised they didn’t fall out and bounce across the tarmac. ‘The school club?’

‘Never heard of it.’ History was one of Robyn’s favourite subjects. Why hadn’t she heard of this club?

‘Well, it *is* by invitation only, so ...’ The girl moved towards the gate.

Invitation only? Oh. Why hadn’t she been invited? Mrs Fenby, her history teacher, definitely hadn’t mentioned it. Why were there so many rules and ways of doing things that she didn’t understand? She’d ask

Mrs Fenby about the History Elites the next chance she got.

The girl called over her shoulder before climbing on to the coach. 'Shouldn't you be in class? You're, like ... *so late!*'

Robyn dashed up the stairs that led to the entrance doors two at a time. Mr Nottingham, the Deputy Head, short and stocky, with wispy sandy hair, was waiting at the top. She'd only seen him once, at the Welcome Fair. The way he'd preened and peacocked around, it was obvious he, as Grandad had put it, 'rated himself'. He sounded full of himself in the interview Grandad had pointed out to her in the *Woodbridge Gazette* too, boasting about the school's future ambitions and plans.

Now, staring Robyn up and down, Mr Nottingham adjusted his shiny gold cufflinks.

'Punctuality is highly valued at Sherwood High.' He smiled with his lips, but his eyes didn't do the same. 'Tardiness undermines one of our core values.'

Robyn couldn't help herself. 'I'm late by *seven minutes!*'

Mr Nottingham recoiled, blinking. Then he leaned forward, so close that she smelt his coffee breath. *Ewww.*

‘Seven minutes is seven minutes. Who knows when those seven minutes might be key?’

Robyn didn’t say anything, but her expression must have said loads because Mr Nottingham narrowed his pale greeny-grey eyes and snapped, ‘That’s a late detention.’

He turned on his heel and headed inside. ‘Report to reception.’

Detention! At Robyn’s last school, there’d been a ten-minute ‘grace period’ – this place was so unfair!

She scowled and followed him through the double doors. Mr Nottingham’s voice was definitely winter: cold, icy and slippery, even when smiling. Almost colourless too, if that were possible. Or was there a hint of steel grey?

Behind the glass-fronted reception desk, a lady smiled, tight-lipped, and pushed the late book towards her. ‘Sign in here, please.’

She glanced at Robyn’s name and form. ‘Year Eight detentions are downstairs in the science block

after school. Don't be late!

What a bad start to her fourth week. Unlike the broken bikes littering Grandad's workshop, she couldn't fix this.