MO FARAH
Twin Ambitions

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My Autobiography

with T. J. Andrews

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For Rhianna, Aisha and Amani

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PROLOGUE
THE LOUDEST NOISE IN THE WORLD

11 August 2012. 7.41 p.m. Olympic Stadium, London.

THREE laps to go in the final of the 5000 metres, on a warm summer's evening in Stratford, east London, and I am 180 seconds from history.

I've been here before. Seven days ago, in fact, on Super Saturday, when first Jessica Ennis, then Greg Rutherford and then me won three Olympic gold medals in less than an hour, adding to the two golds won earlier in the day by the rowing team at Eton Dorney and the women's pursuit team at the velodrome. The feeling is different now. Going into the 10,000 metres final I had so much pressure on me it felt like I was lugging around two big bags of sugar over my shoulders. People were desperate for me to win that race. When I crossed that white line as the winner, this immediate sense of relief washed over me. Now the pressure is off. I'm running free. I have one gold medal in the bag. Whatever happens out here tonight, I'm an Olympic champion. No one can take that away from me.

Don't get me wrong. I still want to win – more than

anything. But this time I'm able to go out there and race and actually enjoy it: the competition, the stadium, the occasion. And the crowd. The pulsating, deafening roar of the British fans.

I'm in second place. Ahead of me is Dejen Gebremeskel, the Ethiopian runner. At the start of the race I'd figured he was one of my main threats going onto the home straight. But Gebremeskel has kicked on early, moving out to the front and pushing the pace. Big surprise. But for me, that's perfect. He's gone early for a good reason: he thinks that I must still be feeling the effects of the 10,000 metres in my legs. Figures I must be tired. That if he pushes the pace quite early on, he can wear me out on the last couple of laps, taking me out of the equation when it comes down to the sprint finish. If I was in Gebremeskel's shoes, I'd be thinking the same thing. I've done more running than anyone else in the field, with the exception of the Ugandan, Moses Kipsiro, and my training partner, Galen Rupp. But Gebremeskel hasn't taken into account my secret weapon: the crowd.

Everyone is roaring me on. The noise is unbelievable. Like nothing I've ever heard before. The crowd is giving me a massive boost. I think about how many people are crammed inside the stadium – how many millions more are watching on TV at home, cheering me on. Willing me to win. None of the other guys out there on the track are getting this kind of support. Everyone is rooting for me. The noise gets louder and louder. The crowd is lifting me. Pushing me on through the pain, towards the finish line.

Every athlete has five gears. That night, in the cauldron of the Olympic Stadium, I like to think the crowd gave me a sixth gear. They played a huge part in what I went on to achieve.

With two laps to go, I pull clear of Gebremeskel. The crowd goes ballistic. I'm getting closer, closer, closer to the line. The crowd is getting louder, louder, louder. Then I hit the bell. I'm still in the lead. One of the other guys tries to surge ahead of me. I hold him off. As I go round the track on that last lap, the entire crowd rises to its feet, section by section. It's almost like a Mexican wave is chasing me around the stadium. I will never feel something like that again in my entire life. I can't describe how loud it is. Without a doubt, it's the loudest noise I have ever heard in my life. The crowd physically lifts me towards the finish. I remember Cathy Freeman describing the atmosphere at the 400 metres final in Sydney in 2000, the euphoria of the crowd almost carrying her across the line. As I head down that home straight in the lead, I start to understand what she meant.

Two hundred metres to go now. I'm still out in front. Somehow the crowd is growing even louder. Gebremeskel tries it on going into the home straight but I hold him off and cross the finish line in first place.

For a few moments I can't believe what has happened. 'Oh my God,' I think. 'Oh my God, I've done it.' I keep repeating it to myself, over and over: 'I've done it. I've won.' All around me the crowd is going wild. Suddenly it hits me: I am a double Olympic champion. I have gone where no British distance runner has gone before.

I sink to my knees. The roar of the crowd booming in my ears. Getting here has taken a lot of hard work and sacrifices. I've had to come a long, long way and go through so many highs and lows. Looking back, it's been an amazing journey.

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TWIN BEGINNINGS

People often ask me what it's like to have a twin brother. I tell them: there's this special connection that the two of you have. Like an intuition. You instinctively feel what the other person is going through – even if you live thousands of miles apart, like Hassan and me. It's hard to explain to someone who doesn't have a twin, but whenever Hassan is upset, or not feeling well, I'll somehow sense it. The same is true for Hassan when it comes to sensing how I feel. He'll just know when something isn't right with me. Then he'll pick up the phone and call me, ask how I am. Or I'll call him. From the moment we were born, on 23 March 1983, we were best friends.

We come from solid farming stock. My family has always been based in the north of the country, going back generations. My great-greatgrandparents on my dad's side were farmers in a remote village called Gogesa, in the Woqooyi Galbeed region of northwest Somalia, not far from the border with Ethiopia. It's a rural area with fertile land, so farming is the main occupation for the local people, and if you drive through Gogesa, you'll see farms and open countryside full of grazing animals. My great-greatgrandparents owned cows and sheep and camels and farmed the land. After they died, my great-grandfather, Farah, inherited the farm. He was well

known locally because part of the farmland he owned contained a natural spring that pumped fresh water to the surface. Water was scarce in the region at the time, and soon many locals were collecting water from the spring. My great-grandfather was the guy with the water.

His daughter, Amina, my *ayeeyo* (grandma) on my dad's side of the family, spent time in Djibouti as a young woman. Djibouti is a tiny country that shares borders with Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. To the north you've got the Red Sea, and on the other side of the water is the Arabian peninsula, with Yemen, Oman and Saudi Arabia. A number of people from places like Gogesa made the same journey across the border as Grandma Amina. As a former French colony, Djibouti offered better prospects than an agricultural village. There were more jobs in Djibouti City, better education, and a higher standard of living. Even as a kid, I remember having this idea of Djibouti as a place where people wore nice clothes and earned good salaries. For much of the year, my grandma lived and worked in Djibouti City. When Djibouti got too hot in the summer, Grandma would travel back to Gogesa for the holidays. The details are a bit sketchy – this is all such a long time ago – but I believe that when my great-grandfather died, the farm was sold up and my grandma moved permanently to Djibouti. They pretty much settled there. Grandma was still living in Djibouti with my grandad, Jama, by the time I was born.

My parents met while my dad was on a trip back to Somalia from the UK, where he was studying and working.

They later settled down to married life and shortly after, me and Hassan were born. Hassan came out first. Twenty-nine years later, my wife Tania also gave birth to twin girls. Hassan even married a twin. You could say that twins are in our blood. My brother was named Hassan Muktar Jama Farah. I took on the name Mohamed Muktar Jama Farah.

I should explain something about our names. Everyone in Somalia belongs to a clan. Our clan was the Isaaq, the biggest clan in the north of the country. Your family name and your clan are linked together as a way of identifying not only who you are, but where you come from and what clan you belong to. Take my name. Mohamed is my given name. After your first name comes your father's first name (Muktar). Third is your grandfather's first name (Jama). The fourth part of your name is your great-grandfather's name (Farah). If someone stopped me in the street and asked, 'What's your name?' I would tell them, 'Mohamed Muktar Jama Farah, nice to meet you.' And then they would say, 'Ah, I used to know your grandad, Jama! I remember your dad, Muktar, as a little boy!' Usually it was the oldest guy in the village asking the questions. They could trace my ancestry that far back, they'd know what clan I belonged to and the names of distant relatives.

It's been written that I was born and raised in Somalia. Strictly speaking, this isn't true. While I was born in Mogadishu, the capital in the south of the country, I spent the early part of my childhood growing up in Somaliland, the area to the north of the country and although it's not recognized by the UN, to all intents and purposes, Somaliland

is an independent country and claims ownership of land roughly the size of England. Somaliland has its own currency – the Somaliland shilling – its own police force, and its own capital, Hargeisa. It even has its own flag (horizontal green, white and red stripes with Arabic script across the top bar). It also has its own national anthem, 'Samo ku waar', which translates as 'Long life with peace'.

Historically, people from Somaliland and those from the south of the country have struggled to get along. The tensions were inflamed by Siad Barre, the former military dictator who ruled Somalia. When he was deposed in 1991, the government in Somaliland declared independence, although it escaped much of the violence and chaos that engulfed the south of the country in the years that followed. I remember my childhood as a mostly happy time. For the first four years of my life we lived in Gebilay, a small town about an hour's drive west from Hargeisa and forty minutes from the border with Ethiopia. The land in that region is mostly desert scrub, though there are some hilly green areas and the occasional forest. In the distance you can see vast mountain ranges lined up along the horizon. The scenery is beautiful. The people are warm and welcoming.

Two years after I was born, my mum gave birth to another baby boy, Wahib. A fourth son, Ahmed, followed when I'd reached the grand old age of four and Wahib was two. Looking after four children was a full-time job for my mum, but she was only doing what Somali culture expected of her. Somalis are a strong, resilient people, and very conservative. The culture is big on tradition. The values haven't changed

much in hundreds of years. The men work, the women cook and clean. I'm not saying this is the way things should be. It's just that people in Somaliland grow up in a conservative environment and this is all they know.

People have described my childhood as poverty-stricken and surrounded by bullets and bombs. That's not really true. In the memories I have of Gebilay, there were no soldiers in the streets, no bombs going off. Whatever violence was going on at the time, as children we weren't exposed to it. Most of the problems were taking place far to the south. Around the time I was living in Gebilay, the government in Mogadishu was about to collapse. But we lived far from trouble. Although as it turned out, we had a lucky escape.

One day my mum sat Hassan and me down and told us both that the five of us, including Wahib and Ahmed, would shortly be leaving Gebilay to go and live with our grandma, Amina, and our grandad, Jama, in Djibouti. Our dad wouldn't be following us, however. He had to return to England – for his studies and his work, I believe. I accepted this decision without protest. Of course, every young kid wants their dad around. But I had seen very little of him while growing up in Gebilay. He always seemed to be away working and we didn't have a chance to build that bond. Besides, Hassan, my best friend as well as my twin, would be coming with me. That reassured me. Plus, I couldn't wait to see Grandma and Grandad. Living with them would be fun, I thought. I was sad about having to leave Gebilay. But mostly I was just excited about spending time with my grandparents, exploring a new country and getting up to no good with Hassan.

I wasn't aware of it at the time, but a year after we moved out of Gebilay, Somali forces under Siad Barre bombed Hargeisa and Berbera. The cities were flattened. Water wells were blown up. Grazing grounds were burned. Tens of thousands of people died in the bombings. Many more fled to Kenya and Ethiopia. It hadn't been the reason for our move, but we had a lucky escape all the same. If we hadn't moved out of Gebilay, we might have been caught up in the violence that followed. If you visit Hargeisa today, there's a war memorial in the middle of the city: a Russian fighter jet, like the ones that bombed Somaliland.

Grandma Amina and Grandad Jama had already been living in Djibouti for a number of years when we moved in with them. My grandparents had done okay for themselves in Djibouti City. My grandfather had a decent job working in a local bank. They had a good standard of living compared to Gebilay. Grandma looked after the family at home. Life wasn't a walk in the park, but it wasn't the struggle that some people have tried to make out. I guess by Western standards my grandparents might have appeared poor, but to us kids, we looked at Djibouti as a big step up from life in rural Somaliland.

Almost everyone in Djibouti lives in the capital. As soon as you get there, you can see why. It's this huge, frenetic place, with traffic and noise everywhere. Men pushing wagons through the streets selling fresh loaves of bread and honking their bicycle horns. There are goats and camels everywhere. In the distance you can hear the *athan*, the call to prayer sung by the muezzin: 'Allah Akbar! God is great!'

Our grandparents lived in a stone house on the outskirts. Each part of the city is named using a number scale: Quarante-Deux-Trois (40–2–3), Quarante-Deux-Quatre (40–2–4), and so on – a legacy of French colonialism, which continued until 1977. When I was a kid, our house seemed huge. I remember arriving at the house and thinking that Grandma and Grandad lived in a mansion. When I returned to Djibouti many years later, I revisited my old home. I couldn't believe it when I found the right address. I was like, 'Seriously, we lived here?!?' The house seemed so much smaller than I'd remembered it.

In Djibouti we had access to all kinds of things that we didn't have in Gebilay. There was a local cinema, basically a dark room with a TV at one end wired up to an old-school VHS recorder. Whenever Hassan and me had a few coins, we'd be straight off to the 'cinema' with our friends to watch a movie. Sometimes the cinema owner would show one of those old black-and-white Westerns with cowboys and Indians. Other times it was a Disney cartoon or a Hollywood action movie – whatever they happened to have on tape at the time. We didn't care. Most of the time we didn't understand what was being said by the actors anyway (there was no dubbing, and we couldn't read or write in English). We just liked watching the films, seeing all these exotic locations, people doing crazy things. Sometimes I'd get bored and make animal noises over the film. We were just kids having fun.

Dad occasionally visited, flying back to Djibouti from London for a week here or a few days there. I was probably too young to appreciate the difficulties of travelling back to Djibouti from London at the same time as working and

studying, not to mention the cost. Looking back, I can understand the reasons why my dad wasn't able to visit more often. But that didn't make it any easier to accept as a young boy. We never had that normal father-son relationship. For me, there was my grandma and my mum, and my brothers, and that was it.

A few people in our neighbourhood had TVs, and we watched programmes whenever we could. My favourite was *Esteban, le Fils du Soleil*, which translates as 'Esteban, Son of the Sun'. It was a French cartoon series from the early 1980s about a Spanish kid called Esteban who goes on this great adventure to the Americas to find a lost city of gold. (In English it's known as *The Mysterious Cities of Gold*.) His friends accompany him on his epic quest, including an Incan girl called Zia, and Tao, the last survivor of an ancient civilization. But although Esteban is on the hunt for the cities of gold, that isn't his real mission. Actually, he's searching for his dad. Esteban also wears this cool medallion around his neck that allows him to control the sun. As a kid, I thought this show was the best thing ever on TV. Every day at 6.30 p.m. on the dot, I'd find a TV to watch it. I never missed an episode. I was totally addicted.

But following the adventures of Esteban and his crew was a bit of a challenge for a kid living in Djibouti. The city suffered almost daily power cuts, and more than once I'd sit down to watch the latest episode and then – phhtt! – the power would cut out. The TV screen went blank. No way was that going to stop me. I simply had to know what happened next, so I'd sprint out of the house, racing across

the streets and running towards the lights of a friend's house several streets away, where I knew the power would still be working. In a matter of minutes I'd get to my friend's house, catch my breath and tune in to *Esteban*. A few minutes later, same thing. Power cut. I'd dart off again in search of the next house where I could watch the programme. Sometimes I'd have to rush between three or four houses across the city just to catch a single episode of *Esteban*. But it was worth it. I was totally mad about that cartoon show.

Looking back on it, I guess it was pretty good training for a career in distance running.