



## JAY GIEBUS

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Jay grew up in Pennsylvania surrounded by forests and shopping malls. Like all good American boys, he played baseball, pledged allegiance to the flag and wanted to be Batman when he grew up.

When he was twenty-one, Jay moved abroad. After receiving a MA in Irish literature from University College, Cork; he moved to London where he became a teacher of young children. He now lives in Bristol with his wife, three children and two dogs. When Jay isn't writing, he teaches English and Religious Studies at Clifton College.

A first draft of *Fire Boy* was awarded an honorary mention at the 2017 United Agents/Bath Spa Prize.

### *About Fire Boy*

Life isn't easy for London's youngest superhero, Aidan Sweeney. He's in trouble at school, his grandmother wants him arrested for setting fires and his evil uncle is out for revenge. Will Aidan ever learn how to control his fiery powers? Can his friends, Sadie and Hussein, help him keep their powers a secret? Will he ever learn to fly? The answers to these questions and more await in *Fire Boy*, an adventure story about friendship, love, rare Amazonian plants and a cat named Lemon.

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## FIRE BOY

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Q1. You are handed a box marked TOP SECRET with your name on it.

Do you:

- a) Wait for your parents to come home before unwrapping it;
- or
- b) Rip it open?

If you have answered b, proceed to the next question.

Q2. Inside the box you find a jar of sweets and an information booklet.

The sweets are labelled NATURE'S OWN and smell of peppermint. The information booklet is forty-eight pages long. Do you:

- a) Read page after boring page from the booklet;
- or
- b) Open the jar?

If you have answered b, proceed to the final question.

Q3. You discover the sweets unleash a chain reaction. It results in you developing EXTRAORDINARY POWERS. Do you:

- a) Overcome your fears, dedicate yourself to a life of public service and become the warrior hero the world so desperately needs?
- or
- b) Run amok, struggle to control your powers, cause havoc at school and upset your family and friends?

If you have answered b once again, read on.

My name is Aidan Sweeney and this is the story of how I became FIRE BOY.

## *Chapter One*

### *Special delivery*

**I**t began with a doorbell. I was not long in from school. Lemon was curled beside me on the sofa, a white paw tucked under her chin, her tail flung lazily over the cushion. The two of us had the flat to ourselves. Mum wouldn't be home for ages and Granny, my ever-watchful minder, was asleep in my bedroom, snoring like a bear.

That's when the doorbell buzzed.

Lemon yawned and rolled over.

I sat up.

It buzzed again. This time, a voice from the intercom followed it: 'There's a special delivery parcel here for an A Sweeney.'

A Sweeney? I was the only A Sweeney in the building.

The voice spoke again: 'I need you to sign for it.'

I bolted off the sofa, hurdled a stool, sprinted past the kitchen and skidded to a halt. 'I'll be right down!' I yelled into the speaker.

As I waited for the elevator, I fizzed with excitement. A parcel – for me – and it wasn't even my birthday!

And yet ... it was hard not to be suspicious. No one had told me to expect a parcel and I hadn't sent away for anything. So, who could have sent it?

The doors pinged open and I entered. I tried hopping up and down on its floor to make it move faster, but nothing happened. It creaked steadily along, so I made a list instead of who might have sent me a package and why.

#### **Mum.**

Unlikely. Mum believed in rewards, not surprises. None of my most recent accomplishments – coming third in a Longest Spit contest or thumping Hussein not once, but twice at FIFA on his own Xbox – fell into her 'Achievement' category.

#### **Dad.**

Doubtful. Not only was my father never around, he was not a man for keeping secrets. If he had planned a surprise, he would have dropped so

many hints that I could have told you what was in the delivery box and when it was arriving.

**Granny.**

Could it be a peace offering for kicking me out of my room, insisting I came straight home from school every afternoon to wait on her hand and foot, and being a miserable brute with no sense of humour?

Not a chance.

**It was a trick.**

The favourite. Could Mitchell Mulch be hiding in the bushes with his Super Soaker Double-Pump AK-47 Attack Gun? Or might he be waiting with a new weapon from his arsenal of assault toys? Very possibly. This 'delivery person' and the surrounding area must be approached with great caution.

**It was my lucky day.**

Fingers crossed.

I burst into the lobby and spotted a tall, thin man in cycling shorts outside the glass partition. He had a parcel in one hand and a Deliver-O box strapped to his back. A bicycle leaned against the wall behind him.

My heart did a little thump-thump-thump. This was no trick. This was real.

I rushed to the door and opened it.

'Hi! I'm Aidan Sweeney! We just spoke on the intercom.' I pointed to the box in his hands and reached for it. 'That must be for me.'

But instead of handing the package over, the delivery man pulled it back. 'You're A Sweeney? I was expecting someone older.' He looked over my head at the elevator. 'What about your mum or dad? Are they upstairs? I need someone to sign for it.'

'I can sign for it.'

He scratched his chin and frowned. 'I don't know ... Do you have any ID?'

'Just this,' I said. Removing one of my trainers, I showed him its heel

where the name *Aidan* was written in large black letters. He held it gingerly, his nose wrinkling slightly, and inspected the writing.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘That will do.’ He handed me a pad.

I signed my name and he gave me the package.

Wrapped in brown paper, it was an odd, egg-shaped lump. Postmarks blotted one corner and rows of blue airmail stickers crowded another. I had never seen its stamps before: one of a scarlet macaw perched in a tree and another of a toucan with a great orange beak. I didn’t recognise the handwriting either – a messy scrawl in a purple biro – but the address was mine: A Sweeney, Alexandria Apartments, London, N1.

When I looked up again, the delivery man was gone. In his place was a girl in a maroon blazer and straw boater.

Sadie was home.

## *Chapter 2*

### *Ultra Secreto*

‘**Y**ou never told me you had family in South America, Aidan.’  
‘I don’t.’

‘Then who sent you this?’

Sadie and I were sitting on the sofa. Lemon, the traitor, was stretched across Sadie’s lap, one eye on the brown-paper parcel wedged between us.

#### **Four phrases (in no particular order) that best describe Sadie Laurel-Hewitt, aged twelve:**

Tall and willowy with long black hair;

Daughter of television actress Alice Laurel;

Speaks four languages, reads books with titles difficult to pronounce and is unrivalled in games involving planning, word skills or precision;

Fellow resident of Alexandria Apartments, top floor, and day student at Lady Pandora’s School for Girls.

Sadie pointed to the macaw stamp. ‘This was posted in Brazil, yet its identification tags are Spanish, not Portuguese. How curious. Are you going to open it now, or wait until your mum is here?’

Waiting had never crossed my mind. My only worry was Granny. She was still sleeping, but for how much longer? I feared the great She-Bear might stumble out of her bed-cave any minute. If Granny caught sight of this parcel, that would be the last I’d see of it too. Like all the other treasures I was no longer allowed under her watch, it would be padlocked away in her trunk never to be seen again. All I would be left with was a stiff wallop over the head from her walking stick. For now, I was safe. Her snores still thundered from the back bedroom.

I picked up the parcel. ‘Mum would want me to open it now, I’m certain of it.’ Carefully, I tore around the stamps and postmarks – those I wanted to keep. The rest I ripped apart.

Underneath the brown paper was a small box. Wrapped around it like a small cocoon were layers of tape. I picked at the ends, but the Sellotape was wound so tight that I couldn’t unravel it.

‘Do you have any scissors?’

‘Yes,’ Sadie said, ‘though this might be more useful.’ She dipped into her school bag and pulled out a small hunting knife. ‘It’s sharper.’

It certainly was. Sadie removed the blade from its sheath and held it up for me. The tip was curved and sharp like an eagle’s talons.

‘What do you think?’

I paused to admire her hunting knife. ‘I think you Lady Pandora girls know how to pack a school bag.’ I stared down into her open kitbag. ‘What else do you keep in here? A Taser? Grenades?’

‘No. I meant, do you think we should we use the knife to open it? I don’t want to damage your parcel.’

‘Use it! Use it!’ I said.

Sadie offered the handle of her knife to me. ‘Here,’ she said.

‘No,’ I said. ‘You do it.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’ There was only one person in the room who could be trusted to handle a hunting knife, and it wasn’t me.

Sadie shifted over to give herself some cutting room. ‘You had better take Lemon,’ she said.

I didn't need to. Sadie's wiggle woke Lemon. When my sleepy cat saw that knife over her head, she wasted no time somersaulting off the sofa and out the door.

Sadie gripped the parcel. 'Ready?'

'Ready.'

She cut through it in a single go. 'There,' she said. 'That's better.'

Peeling the clumps of tape away, she presented me with a small box. On its lid, two words were stamped in bright red letters: *Ultra Secreto*.

Sadie gasped.

'*Ultra secreto*: that means top secret!' she said. 'Who sent you this?'

That was a very good question. I didn't know anyone who lived overseas or had a job anywhere important. I turned the box over. On its back there was a smaller stamp: *Propiedad del Laboratorio Cambio*.

My heart sank. 'This isn't meant for me.' I flung the parcel on the coffee table. 'It must be a mistake. No one would ever send me anything important.' I threw myself face-first on to the sofa, groaned and punched the cushion. By my standards, I was masking my disappointment well.

Sadie said, 'Don't be like that, Aidan. I have a good feeling about this box. There's something important in here, and you're meant to have it.'

I rolled over. Our eyes met.

'Do you really think so?'

'Yes, I do. Besides, if it isn't for you, we can always turn it in.' Her lips curled wickedly. 'Once we've had a peek.'

I sat up. 'We could, couldn't we?'

Sadie handed me the box. 'This parcel has *your* name on it. Stop worrying about who sent it and see what's inside.'

This was exactly what I wanted to hear. I tore off the least piece of Sellotape holding down its lid. 'Ready?' I asked.

'Ready,' she said. '*Abre la caja!*'

Unsure of what she meant, but eager to join in, I said in my best Spanish, 'Tacos! Nachos! Tapas Bar!'

But before I could remove the lid, the doorbell rang again.

## Chapter 3

### *The Death Star*

**I**t was Hussein.

‘I want a re-match,’ he said. He rattled his FIFA, Gold edition disc at me as he entered. ‘You got lucky. It won’t happen again.’

‘Twice. I got lucky twice,’ I said, following him into the sitting room.

**Four phrases (in no particular order) that best describe Hussein Aziz, aged twelve:**

Fond of crisps, computers, Star Wars action figures, the television game show Mastermind and information pertaining to the moons of Jupiter;

Small, dark-eyed, prone to geekish ways (see above);

Fellow classmate at Caversham School, Year 7, and resident of Alexandria Apartments, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor;

Poor loser on FIFA, Xbox, Gold edition.

‘Hussein!’ Sadie said. ‘You’re just in time for the unveiling.’ She told him about the parcel. Hussein, however, did not share her enthusiasm.

‘But ... you can’t open that,’ Hussein said. ‘It’s against the law. If you open confidential information, they can send you to prison.’

‘It’s addressed to me, Hussein.’

‘You *think* it’s addressed to you. *And* it’s top secret. Why would anyone in South America send you top secret information? I bet you don’t even know anyone in South America, do you?’

I began to regret opening the door for him.

‘Who knows what could be inside that box?’ he said, backing away from it. ‘There might even be a ... weapon of mass destruction in there.’

Sadie sighed and stared up at the ceiling.

‘Or worse,’ Hussein said.

‘What’s worse than mass destruction?’ I asked.

‘There might be a vial inside with a deadly virus that, once opened, could spread until the human race is destroyed.’ He grabbed me by the arm. ‘I’m serious, Aidan. Call the police. You don’t know what might be in that box. It might be booby-trapped. You can’t risk it!’

I turned to Sadie, who sat with the hunting knife balanced across her knee, a picture of composure in her straw boater and maroon Lady Pandora's uniform. 'What do you think?'

Sadie pursed her lips. 'Hussein worries too much.'

This was true.

'Deadly virus? A weapon?' Sadie tapped the box twice with the blunt edge of her blade. 'This isn't the Clone Wars, Hussein. We are not going to find the plans to the Death Star in here.'

Hussein wagged his finger at her. 'If you had read the Star Wars Legend series, you would know that the Rebellion Alliance stole and then lost the disc containing the blueprints to the Death Star many times.' Hussein rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'So, yes, the disc could be in the box, but the question is whether our technology would be capable of reading it. My feeling is that –'

Sadie stood. Her other hand held the knife. 'Aidan, open the box or I'm leaving.'

I hopped over the back of the sofa and landed on the cushion next to her. Sadie sat down.

'It has my name on it, Hussein. I'm opening it. Whatever is in here was meant for me. I'd like you to stay, but I won't be offended if you want to leave.'

I picked up the box and removed its lid.