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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natasha Farrant is the author of the Costa Award winning novel, *Voyage of the Sparrowhawk*, bestselling middle grade novel, *The Children of Castle Rock*, the acclaimed Bluebell Gadsby series and Carnegie-longlisted and Branford Boase-shortlisted YA historical novel *The Things We Did For Love*. She lives in London with her family.

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The Things We Did for Love

THE RESCUE OF RAVENWOOD

NATASHA FARRANT

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For my parents, who taught me to love books
and the natural world.

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*'Sometimes the beauty of the world can
take your breath away.'*

from *The Children of Castle Rock*

PROLOGUE

Bea and Raffy came to Ravenwood when they were babies, and they loved it straight away.

Surrounded by ancient woods in the north of England, perched between the Ashby valley and the sea, the house and its surrounding outhouses sit on the highest point for miles around. Ever since the Iron Age, people have lived here – early farmers, Roman soldiers. Viking settlers. Four hundred years ago, give or take, a rich merchant built his manor here, and named it after the great birds which circled its cliffs and woodlands. The manor was burned down in one war, rebuilt, bombed in another war, rebuilt again. The new house is square, white and a lot scruffier than it was, but that's not the point.

The point is, it's a place people come back to.

A place people fight for.

Bea came first, Ravenwood being her family home. On the day our story begins, it was owned by her father and her two uncles, who inherited it from their parents. Alex Pembury – Bea's father, the eldest of the three brothers – lived in London with Bea's mother Ingrid, and worked in finance. Jack Pembury, the middle brother, lived in Central America, doing nobody knew quite what. Leo Pembury, the youngest, lived at Ravenwood and was an artist. He made giant installations from wood and old junk in one of Ravenwood's three barns, which he had turned into a studio. To his brothers' astonishment, people sometimes actually paid for his work, though never very much.

The last few decades had been peaceful up on the hill, but today the house was once again under attack, not from planes or armies but from the weather. Last night, a late summer storm smashed an oak tree through the kitchen roof. On the morning we join them, Leo – like so many before him – is clearing up. Alex is driving from London

to inspect the damage. Bea is in her baby seat in the back.

Alex had loved going home when he first moved to London, but since his parents died Ravenwood mainly exhausted him. With its big, draughty rooms, its weather and its problematic trees, the old place was a drain – on his money, his time, his energy. He never came any more unless he had to. But now here he was, off to sort out the latest problem when he should have been at work, taking his small baby with him because the childminder was sick and Ingrid was having one of her bad days. He was tired – so tired. Worried, too, and prickly with resentment at having to make this journey.

And yet . . .

Shortly before lunch, he drove through the village of Ashby-under-Raven and turned on to the unpaved track which led up to Ravenwood. At the top of the hill, just where the track flattened, there was a gap in the trees. Out of habit, Alex stopped and opened the window, the way he used

to when he still loved the place, to catch that first lungful of sea air.

The wind rushed into the car.

Bea, who had slept all the way from London, woke up.

Alex drove through the old iron gate (rusted, in need of repair, guarded on either side by a moss-covered stone raven on a crumbling pillar), parked beneath the old ash tree and looked up.

‘Hello, Ygg,’ he said.

Even now and even for Alex, it was a magical tree. Four hundred years old, thirty metres tall and almost as wide across, it stood by the entrance of Ravenwood like a guardian spirit. As a boy, Leo had named it Yggdrasil, like the tree of life in Viking myths. ‘Because Vikings used to live here,’ Leo had said. ‘And it *is* full of life.’ As if to prove a point, a raven had taken off from one of the top branches in a great beating of wings, and from then on it had become Yggdrasil for everybody. Peering up, Alex saw that the platform their father had built for his brothers and him to play on when they were boys was still there, defying all safety

regulations, about five metres up. A frayed rope ladder hung along the trunk. Just for a moment, Alex considered climbing it . . .

He shook his head. He had long given up climbing trees. Instead, he got out of the car, opened the back door, took Bea out of her seat and went in search of his brother.

Years later, Leo would enjoy describing the first time he saw Bea at Ravenwood.

‘The mess!’ he would say. ‘The roof smashed, tiles everywhere, shattered glass, broken branches and in the middle of it all, like a miniature queen, Bea gobbling it all up with her eyes on stalks.’

‘I was *not* like a queen and I do *not* gobble,’ Bea would say, tossing her long red hair.

‘I picked her up,’ Leo would say, ‘and I carried her across the garden to look at the sea. It was one of those grey days, you know, when there seems to be no light, but then the sun came out and the sea was turned to gold. And little miss madam here, hardly bigger than a kitten . . .’

‘A kitten!’

‘. . . stretched out her arms like she was saying *all*

of this is mine! Even then, she knew exactly what she wanted.'

Back then, the brothers argued. Tedious, grown-up arguments about insurance papers and new kitchens. Alex said, if only you'd cut down that tree. Leo said, how was I to know it would fall. And so on and so forth. It isn't really interesting.

What *is* interesting is that while Leo and Alex argued, out on the tree-smashed terrace, Bea gazed at the clouds scooting across the washed-out sky and tilted her head to the song of a blackbird.

That when they moved indoors and Leo laid her on the living-room rug, she watched entranced as a spider spun its web between two ceiling beams.

And that when at last the arguing was done and Alex tried to put her back in the car, she refused to be put in her seat, arching her back and screaming until her face went purple.

'What am I supposed to do?' asked Alex, close to tears himself.

'Here, give her to me,' said Leo.

Bea stopped crying as soon as she was in Leo's arms. Leo laughed and said, 'I think she wants to stay.'

It was the perfect solution, Leo liked to say. Alex so tired, Ingrid not well, the childminder also sick. Him all alone in the big house.

'Just for a few days,' Alex said to Ingrid on the phone. 'Until everything is better.'

'But what does Leo know about babies?' Ingrid worried.

'About as much as I do,' said Alex, which was almost true.

'And you're sure she really likes it there?'

'I think she really does.'

'Just until everything is better, then,' said Ingrid after a pause.

And Bea stayed.

Bea cooed as Alex took the bag of baby things out of the car. She gurgled as he drove away. Leo laid her on a blanket on the terrace near where the tree had fallen and she pumped her arms and legs like a miniature gymnast. He walked away to continue his clearing.

She began to cry again.

Leo tried to prepare a bottle of milk in the microwave, but the bottle exploded. He tried to feed

Bea apple sauce, but she spat it out. He gave her a rusk, but she hurled it away.

Clearly, babies were more complicated than he had thought.

In the end, he drove to the village for help, with Bea wedged between his legs because he couldn't work out how to fit the car seat.

And this was the best bit.

The elderly volunteers who worked in the shop were fond of Leo, whom they had known all his life. They did their best for him. 'Have you tried changing her nappy?' one asked, and 'maybe she's hungry' said another, and 'why don't we all try singing to her?' suggested a third.

And then (Leo would say), an angel appeared.

'Try this.'

A new voice, quiet but assured. A young woman nobody knew stood by the noticeboard at the shop's entrance – about his age, dark-skinned, with a halo of soft curls, dressed in a city raincoat, with a rucksack on her back and a sleeping baby in a pushchair.

She held out what looked like a tube of toothpaste.

'It's teething gel,' she said. 'Put a bit on your finger and rub it on her gums.'

Leo did as he was told. Bea instantly stopped crying.

Resisting the urge to kiss the miraculous stranger's feet, Leo said, 'How can I ever thank you?'

The stranger nodded towards the noticeboard. 'I don't suppose you have a room?'

Leo didn't think twice.

'I do have a room!' he cried. 'I have many, many rooms!'

'It's true,' said one of the volunteers. 'He does.'

'Please stay!' said Leo, wildly. 'I so badly need help.'

'That's also true,' said another volunteer.

The stranger didn't answer at once but gazed at him with her head on one side, calm dark eyes appraising him like they were looking right into his soul.

Leo prayed his soul was good enough.

At last, the stranger smiled. 'Thank you,' she said. 'We would like that very much. Just for a few days.'

That was how it started.

Her name was Martha and her baby was Raffy and none of them could know then that a few days

would turn into a week then a month until, eleven years later, they were all still living at Ravenwood. That Martha would become a teacher at the Ashby primary school, that she and Leo would fall in love, that together they would turn Ravenwood into a place where everyone was welcome, that over time they would let nature take over the garden until it became a wilderness where birds and animals also came in droves. That out of the fallen oak which had smashed the kitchen, Leo would build a life-size model of a Viking longboat complete with mast and oars, to commemorate this day.

Over the years, Leo would tell how, as he drove his van back up the hill with Martha beside him holding the babies, Raffy woke and took Bea's hand.

Martha would smile when Leo got to that bit and say they have never really let go.

PART ONE

ELEVEN YEARS LATER