THE CHILDREN OF CASTLE ROCK

NATASHA FARRANT

FABER & FABER

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natasha Farrant lives in London with her family and a large tortoiseshell cat. She has written numerous books for children including the Bluebell Gadsby series. She has been shortlisted for the Queen of Teen Award, and the second Bluebell Gadbsy book, *Flora in Love*, was longlisted for the Guardian Children's Prize, while the third, *All About Pumpkin*, was WHSmith Book of the Month. Natasha is also the author of the Carnegie-longlisted and Branford Boase-shortlisted YA historical novel *The Things We Did For Love* and Carnegie-nominated *Lydia*. She enjoys long rambling walks in the country but is a hopeless map-reader. This is her first standalone novel for middle-grade readers.

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

The Bluebell Gadsby Series

After Iris

Flora in Love

All About Pumpkin

Time for Jas

For Phoebe, most excellent of god-daughters, with thanks for her invaluable help.

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'Perhaps I'm mad . . . and the professor too –
but I think children must lead big lives . . .
if it is in them to do so.'

From *Journey to the River Sea* by Eva Ibbotson

PART ONE

STORMY LOCH

CHAPTER ONE

Goodbye, Cherry Grange!

Imagine a house, in a garden.

The paint is flaking and the chimney is cracked and the uncut grass is wild. But ignore all that. Look here instead, at the giant wisteria with a trunk as thick as your arm, its purple flowers dripping against the old stone wall. Look at the swing hanging from that ancient oak, those cherry trees planted in a circle around the house. One of the trees is so close to a window that in summer, when it fruits, the girl who lives here can reach out to pick the cherries.

Imagine *that* – picking cherries from your bedroom window!

The house, Cherry Grange, was named for the

trees. A man called Albert Mistlethwaite built it over a hundred years ago when he came home from a war, and his family have lived here ever since.

That's a *lot* of cherries, and pies, and cakes, and pots of jam . . .

We'll go inside now. Do you see those pale rectangles on the hall floor, those other pale rectangles on the walls? They were made by rugs and pictures, but those have gone now, along with all the furniture. There's nothing left but dust and sunlight.

Let's move on! Here is the kitchen – and here is the family, finishing breakfast. Small, pale eleven-year-old Alice sits cross-legged on the counter with her nose in a book, chewing the end of one of her stiff dark braids. Her father Barney (you may have seen him once on television) stands drinking coffee by the window with his back to the room, while his older sister Patience, in paint-spattered dungarees, dries crockery at the sink.

The last of the Mistlethwaites, in their natural habitat. Take a good look – you'll not see this again. For today the house is sold and they are moving out.

Shh! Listen!

Something is about to happen.

A blood-curdling screech broke the silence in the kitchen, followed by a series of thumps. Barney turned away from the window.

'The house,' he observed, 'is crying.'

'It's just the wind in the chimney.' Patience finished drying and began to stack crockery into a plastic crate. 'It doesn't help being all dramatic about it. And hurry up with that mug.'

A juddering moan – the water pipes – succeeded the thumps.

'*Revenge of Cherry Grange*,' rasped Barney in a loud stage whisper. 'That's what it would be called if it were a film. *The Curse of the Mistlethwaites. The Haunting of the Brown-Watsons*.'

The Brown-Watsons were the happy, bouncy family of six people and two Labradors who had bought Cherry Grange. All the Mistlethwaites loathed them, even Patience, who actually *wanted* to sell the house.

'Barney, your *mug*!' she snapped now.

'All right, all right!' Barney drank the coffee and handed her the mug. 'But just so you know, Alice has already written a story about the Brown-Watsons, and they all die except the dogs. It'd make a cracking film, wouldn't it, Alicat?'

Alice looked up from her book and blinked. 'What?'

'We're talking about your story,' said Barney. 'And ghosts.'

Patience shoved the crate at him. 'Go and put this in the car,' she said, then, 'Alice, *where are you going*?'

Alice, at the mention of ghosts, had turned even paler and slid off the kitchen counter. Now, like scores of Mistlethwaites before her, she was opening the garden door with a practised kick.

'Mum,' she said.

'Your *mum*? What? Alice! *Breakfast!*'

But Alice was already gone.

It had rained in the night, and the grass was still wet. Uncut since last summer, in some places it reached almost to Alice's knees, soaking through her jeans. She didn't notice, and if she had noticed, she wouldn't

have cared. She thumped through the grass and past the ring of cherry trees dropping the last of their blossom, round the weed-choked pond where the heron came every spring to eat the tadpoles when they turned into frogs, past the butterfly bush and the lavender, until she arrived panting at the bench at the end of the garden.

She couldn't believe she had forgotten.

Her father and her aunt had yet to explain properly why they were leaving, but Alice was almost certain that if her mother hadn't died none of this would be happening. Mum had loved Cherry Grange as if she had been born Clara Mistlethwaite instead of Clara Kaminska, and when she was alive everything – *everything!* – had been better. The house had been full of noise, because Mum was always laughing and singing and dancing, and it had smelled delicious because she was an amazing cook, and they hadn't been always broke, because Mum had had a full-time job people actually paid her for, unlike Aunt Patience with her painting or poor Barney with his acting. But she was gone, killed by a fast and horrible illness four years ago when Alice was seven, her ashes scattered

in the garden, and a white rosebush planted in her memory right where Alice was standing now, which was the exact spot that they had loved to sit together on summer evenings to read bedtime stories. Alice came here often to talk to her mother. The bush was set against a wall, and it was strong and graceful, just like Mum had been, and covered in a riot of little pink buds which, when they opened, turned into big blowsy white roses. It was unthinkable never to see it flower again.

She picked up a stick and began to dig.

Patience, arriving on the scene a few minutes later, wondered, yet again, if she had been wrong to sell the house.

Once a cheerful, outgoing child, since her mother's death all Alice ever wanted was to stay at home to read and write. She wrote all the time, but most of all when Barney was away, filling the exercise books Patience bought her with stories she would present to him on his return. He was the only person who was allowed to read them. Alice worshipped her father, never questioning his long absences but clinging firmly to the belief that one day he would

be a great actor. And they could have carried on like this forever – Alice scribbling away and not going out, and Barney travelling but not saying why, and Patience in the attic painting pictures nobody wanted to buy – except that Patience had snooped, and read some of Alice's stories.

The stories were wild and sad and funny and beautiful. Until she read them, all Patience had wanted was to keep Alice safe and fed and well. After reading the stories, it became her secret wish to help Alice live as passionately as she wrote. And the more she thought about it, the clearer it became to her that what was needed was a clean break with the past. And she was sure she was right – most of the time – almost sure – probably right. For weeks now, she had lain awake at night convincing herself . . . but when she saw her niece do things like try to dig up a rosebush with a stick, she did question if it was – well – *kind*, to take a child away from the only home she had ever known.

Alice never talked about her emotions – never talked much at all, in fact, her one-word exit from the kitchen being a typical example – but she was

hopeless at hiding them. Her eyes blazed with anger as Patience approached, even as she scrunched her nose to stop herself crying.

'I'm not leaving without her,' she said.

Patience sighed, knowing there would be no room in her small car for a rosebush. She looked around for Barney. Barney – as usual when there was something difficult to do – had disappeared. She would just have to tell Alice it wasn't possible.

A clean break, Patience thought.

Then, seeing the determined set of Alice's chin, *sometimes, you just have to* make *room*.

'There are still tools in the shed,' she said. 'I didn't see any point getting rid of them. I'll get a spade, and we can dig it up properly. We'll have to cut it back, mind. Then we can put it in a pot.'

'*Her*,' Alice corrected, scrabbling away with her stick again. '*Mum*. We can put *Mum* in a pot.'

It sounded funny, but neither of them laughed.

Goodbye! whispered the cherry trees. *Goodbye, goodbye*, murmured Patience's art studio in the sprawling attics, and the den where Alice liked to

write, from the banisters Mistlethwaite children always slid down and the green-tiled fireplace where they roasted chestnuts in winter. Alice walked silently through every room, and heard the house's farewell in everything she touched.

It had *nothing* to do with pipes and chimneys.

They finished packing their car. It didn't take long, because they didn't have much – a few suitcases of clothes, a crate of crockery, some books, a silver teapot. Pictures, rugs, a vase.

A rosebush in a pot.

It wasn't a lot to show for over a hundred years.

They took one last look at the dear old house, and squeezed into the car. For a wild, hopeful moment Alice thought it wouldn't start, but then there was the familiar crunch of gravel beneath the tyres, and they were driving through the wooden gates they would never drive through again, and they were in the lane, and there was the little bridge over the stream in which they had all paddled, and now they were turning on to the main road, and the house was gone, and there was a prick of blood on her arm where the rosebush had scratched her. She sucked

the scratch to make the bleeding stop, and thought that if this were one of her stories, she would make the rose or the car or even the blood into a portal to another world, one in which cures were found to keep mothers alive and aunts did not inexplicably sell houses. But this wasn't a story, just people in a car, driving towards an unknown and terrifying future.

'To new adventures!' Barney cried, brandishing the silver teapot. 'This is going to be fun!'

There would be no room for Barney in her story. There never was. Barney, for Alice, was above stories.

The Mistlethwaites didn't see the Brown-Watsons' removal van when it passed, or the Brown-Watsons' people carrier that followed, and just as well. They don't need to know about Brown-Watson children tearing upstairs to fight over bedrooms, or Brown-Watson adults talking about which trees to fell, or Brown-Watson Labradors digging holes in the garden. And neither do we, frankly. Our story is with the Mistlethwaites, and we are going with them to London to put Alice on a train.