"Fierce, brave and compassionate"
NATASHA FARRANT

Little House



KATYA BALEN

Illustrated by Richard Johnson

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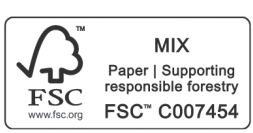
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For my German Girls – Laura, Insa, and now little Lotta. You make the world beautiful.



Chapter 1

The night feels soft and warm when we arrive. The nightbirds are singing and the sound is gentle and low and all around us. Mum loops her arm round my waist but I wriggle away and let the shadows swallow me. The darkness is everywhere and it creeps and twists like the vines that snake up the side of the house.

The house looms ahead. Its shape shifts in the darkness and I shudder. It looks like one of those haunted mansions from the fairground. It's all edges and turrets and windows that flash with the whisper of ghosts and scattered stars.

I'd rather spend the summer hiding in the Yardley Fair Haunted House than have to spend it here. At least there'd be candyfloss at the fair. I could sneak out at night and play Hook-a-Duck and eat toffee apples until my teeth fizzed.

Mum rings the bell at the front door and it echoes in the still night air. An owl hoots and I twist to find it. You don't get owls in the city and it might be cool to see one just once.

But you do get funfairs in the city. And a summer filled with noise and music and cinema and friends and sleepovers and football in the parched dry park. I think of ice lollies that drip down your wrist and make your hot skin sticky with neon sugar. The summer everyone else is getting. Back home. But everyone else has nice normal parents who work in banks and schools and hospitals and shops.

The owl hoots again but I can't find it in the gloom. The stars are brighter here than

at home but their glow only offers speckles of light on the gravelled drive. It's like the whole driveway is all the way at the bottom of the sea and the light is filtered and wobbling. The moon is a silvery O but it can't push back the night. There are no streetlamps or car headlights or glowing billboards and the dark has taken over.

Mum rings the bell again and keeps her long finger pressed down until a light flicks on somewhere inside. There's the crackle of a voice and the soft shuffle of feet.

I keep myself pressed into the shadows and I close my eyes. Just for a moment everything disappears and I imagine I'm back at home in my cosy bed with Fudge the rabbit. He's snuffling sleepily in his hay nest and a new summer's day is waiting for me when I open my eyes in the morning light.

"Juno, what on earth are you doing?" Mum hisses. Her cool hand is circled around my

wrist and my eyes snap open. I want to tell her not to leave me and I want to tell her that I don't want her to go. I want to tell her that I am so worried and scared every single time Dad goes away that it feels like my whole chest will burst. Now Mum and Dad are both going and it feels like my heart will splinter into a thousand pieces.

"Mum," I whisper into the soft dark. "Please don't go. Please stay back. Just stay with me for the summer and we'll have the best time ever, I promise. We can go to the funfair and I'll make surprise pasta but not with mustard this time. Please?"

"The mustard was definitely surprising," says Mum. There's a small smile on her face but it slips away into sadness. "But you know I can't stay, my love. You know I have to go. It's not for long, Junebug. But I have to go. I've not helped in so long. But I need to now. Those tiny children. They've lost their homes. And



their mothers. Their fathers. They've lost everything and I want to give them something back. Something more than just words or a place to stay that's not their own. It's not enough to give people just enough. You have to give them hope. You have to give them a home. You have to make them feel like there is still beauty in the world. To make them feel that life can still be beautiful. They need that. I need to help give them that again."

I need you, I want to say. I want to shout it amongst the stars and let my voice bounce off the moon and startle the owls from the trees. I want my words to echo in the night air over and over until Mum listens. But me needing her isn't the same as the way the world far away needs her and so I can't say anything. It's not the same at all. But it still feels like my heart is trembling and I wish she would stay right here with me.

Then there's a rattle and the front door is open. My grandfather is standing in a doorway of amber light and Mum has already turned away.