



VOYAGE *of the* SPARROWHAWK

NATASHA FARRANT

Praise for Natasha Farrant:

‘Outstanding. Although it has echoes of . . . not only JK Rowling but also Eva Ibbotson and Enid Blyton, this wise and touching novel has originality and a fresh voice.’

The Sunday Times

‘Glorious.’

Metro

‘Unputdownable, funny and wise, it’s an unconventional treat for nine-plus readers.’

New Statesman

‘Gripping . . . I stayed up all night reading it!’

Emma Carroll, author of *Letters from the Lighthouse*

‘Wonderful contemporary storytelling with a classic feel.’

Bookseller

‘Thrilling.’

The Times

‘Like the Secret Seven on steroids, in a good way.’

The Observer

‘This **delightful story** already feels like a classic.’

WRD Magazine

‘A Blyton-esque . . . **fast-paced, witty adventure.**’

Daily Mail

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 longlisted for the Guardian Children's Prize. Natasha is also the author of the Carnegie-longlisted and Branford Boase-shortlisted YA historical novel *The Things We Did For Love*, Carnegie-nominated *Lydia* and runaway bestseller *The Children of Castle Rock*. She would love to live on a boat.

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

The Children of Castle Rock

The Bluebell Gadsby Series

After Iris

Flora in Love

All About Pumpkin

Time for Jas

The Things We Did for Love

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For Jane, Eleanor, Matilda and Julia.

In memory of Dobby, a most excellent chihuahua.

*'I ought to say,' explained Pooh as they
walked down to the shore of the island,
'that it isn't just an ordinary sort of boat.
Sometimes it's a Boat, and sometimes it's
more of an Accident. It all depends.'*

'Depends on what?'

*'On whether I'm on the top of it or
underneath it.'*

A. A. MILNE

*As wonderful as dogs can be, they are
famous for missing the point.*

JEAN FERRIS

CHAPTER ONE

It was the first April since the war. The sky was blue, the sun was shining, the scent of blossom wafted on the breeze. Birds sang, and the people of Great Barton smiled at each other in the street.

A cheerful day, then, with the world waking up to the possibility that all was not cold and dark and fighting. As Ben ran across the meadows towards the canal with his dog Elsie at his heels and a rucksack on his back, he felt almost happy.

It was just over eight months since Nathan had gone to France, to visit Sam in the army hospital where he was being treated for a head wound. Eight months almost to the day since the letter came from the farmer with whom Nathan had been staying,

to say that the hospital had been bombed and that Nathan had been killed. Just under eight months since the telegram came from the War Office saying Sam was missing. The longest, hardest eight months of Ben's life, but today things were changing.

Today, Ben was back in charge.

When Nathan went to France, rather than leave Ben and Elsie alone on the *Sparrowhawk* as Ben had wanted, he had trusted them to the care of a local woman, Mercy Jenkins. Mercy had been kind. After Nathan died, rather than put Ben in the care of the local authorities, who would have taken Elsie away and sent Ben back to an orphanage, she let him stay on with her.

'Just until we hear what's happened to his brother,' she wrote to her husband away at the front. But then Mercy's husband had also been killed, and a few months later she decided to leave Great Barton to go and live with her sister on a farm in Wales.

'You can come with me, if you like,' she had said to Ben. 'We'll need a hard-working lad.'

But Ben had no intention of going with Mercy.

What Ben wanted was to live on the *Sparrowhawk* and wait for Sam to come home.

'Thanks, but I think I'll stay.'

'You can't stay on your boat alone, Ben, you're too young.'

'I won't be alone!' Ben smiled, as widely as he could. 'I was about to tell you! I got a letter from the War Office.'

Mercy frowned. 'I didn't see no letter.'

'Well, I got one,' said Ben. 'And it said that Sam's coming home!'

Mercy still looked unconvinced, but he could see that she wanted to believe him.

'When?' she asked.

'Soon. A few days maybe.' Ben's smile was so wide now it hurt.

'All right,' said Mercy. 'I'll speak to Albert. Ask him to keep an eye out for you until Sam gets back.'

Albert was Albert Skinner, a local police constable and an acquaintance of Mercy's. And while Ben would rather not have anyone keep an eye out for him, least of all a policeman, he could see it was the only way Mercy would allow him to stay on the *Sparrowhawk* alone.

‘Thanks,’ he had said. ‘I’ll be sure to tell him if I need anything.’

And with that Mercy had been satisfied. She had left Great Barton that morning on the train, and now Ben was on his way to the *Sparrowhawk*.

Ben reached the edge of the meadow, ducked through a gap in the hedge on to the towpath, ran past the allotments and the bench near the railway bridge where ex-soldiers liked to drink and play cards, round a bend in the canal past a lonely cottage – and there she was, the *Sparrowhawk*. Not as bright as when Nathan had left, in need of a scrub and a lick of paint, but to Ben as welcoming as the most solid of houses.

He whistled for Elsie, who bounced towards him then stopped in her tracks, baring her teeth.

‘What’s got into you, you daft dog? We’re home!’

Elsie growled, black fur hackling.

‘Suit yourself.’ Ben shrugged. ‘I’m going on board.’

He jumped on to the aft deck, put down his rucksack, pulled the key to the cabin hatch from its front pouch – and paused.

If the hatch stayed closed, he could pretend that behind it everything was as it should be. Nathan

painting in the workshop, Sam reading on his berth. ‘Here’s trouble,’ Nathan would say as Ben jumped down into the cabin, and then he would push a pile of neglected schoolbooks across the fold-down table. ‘Lessons aren’t going to learn themselves, lad.’

Ben leaned his head against the hatch and blinked hard. With a quiet thud and a click of claws, Elsie landed beside him on the deck. Ben gave himself a shake.

‘You’re right,’ he said, and put the key in the lock. ‘Let’s go in.’

He knew as soon as he pushed back the hatch that something was wrong. There was too much light in the cabin. It was only ever that bright if the door to Nathan’s workshop was open – and since Nathan had been gone, though Ben had visited the *Sparrowhawk* many times, he had only set foot in the workshop once, when the pain of missing Nathan had been so overwhelming that he had closed the door and never opened it again.

Ben’s mind raced.

Who had opened the door? And how had they got in?

The cabin hatch was locked by a padlock from the outside, so they must have gone in from the foredeck. But only one person other than Ben had the key to that, which meant that . . .

Sam was home!

Ben hurled himself through the hatch, tripped over Elsie on the top step, tumbled down the rest and landed in a painful heap on the cabin floor.

A voice spoke, but it was a girl's voice, not his brother's.

'Please,' the girl said. 'Hide me. It's a matter of life or death.'

The girl, of course, was Lotti though Ben didn't know this yet.

She stood before him in the cabin, flushed from running, the skirt of her old-fashioned sailor suit dirty and torn, her long hair unravelling from its braids. Slung across her body, she carried a canvas satchel.

The satchel was wriggling.

Ben, doubly winded by his fall and the disappointment that Lotti was not Sam, could

only stare. Elsie growled, her golden eyes fixed on the satchel.

The satchel jumped.

'It's no good,' announced Lotti. 'I'm going to have to let him out. You'd better hold on to your dog.'

Quite composed, she sat down on Ben's bunk, pulled the satchel's shoulder strap over her head and laid the bag down beside her. Ben finally recovered the power of speech.

'Let who out? What are you talking about?' His voice was high with indignation. Who was this girl, and how dare she intrude like this on his boat? 'I don't even know what you're doing here!'

'Shh,' Lotti begged. 'You *must* be quiet.'

Ben *wanted* to say that this was his boat and he would make as much noise as he liked, but now curiosity was getting the better of indignation. Lotti was undoing the satchel's buckles, making tender cooing sounds as she did so. Elsie quivered and stepped closer. Ben slipped his fingers through her collar and craned forward to look.

'It's all right,' Lotti whispered into the bag. 'No one's going to hurt you.'

Ben and Elsie watched in astonishment as a small, black nose emerged from the satchel, then a slim, toffee-coloured snout. The nose twitched. A thin paw appeared, then another, followed by surprisingly robust shoulders and the rest of the head, with eyes like black marbles and ears like enormous bat wings, which would have made Ben laugh if the creature hadn't been so very pitiful.

'It's a dog,' he said unnecessarily, before adding, 'He's very thin.'

'That,' said Lotti darkly, 'is because he's been very badly treated.'

Elsie began to whine, soft little cries Ben recognised as words of comfort, and he relaxed his hold on her. Still whining, Elsie advanced on the little dog, who shrank back, flattening his enormous ears. Elsie pressed closer, sniffed him all over, then rather bossily began to lick him clean.

'They've made friends!' Lotti beamed, then turned to Ben. 'Isn't that wonderful? I'm Lotti, by the way. I live up at Barton Lacey.'

'I'm Ben,' said Ben. 'I live here. And you still haven't told me what you're doing on my boat.'

Lotti, he noted, didn't look the least bit repentant.

'Do you know a man called Malachy Campbell?' she asked. 'Short and red, with a nose like a potato?'

'Everyone knows Malachy Campbell,' said Ben impatiently. 'He's Great Barton's most famous crook. Look, I don't know where this is going, but ...'

'Would you mind just stepping up on deck and looking to see if he's out there? If he's not, I promise we'll be on our way. I have to get home soon anyway. It's very important that I'm not late, especially today. But Malachy Campbell is chasing me.'

This was not how Ben had imagined his homecoming. He had been looking forward to reclaiming the *Sparrowhawk*, unpacking, making her cosy again for him and Elsie.

This was ... annoying.

But also interesting.

He leaned forward. 'Why is Malachy Campbell chasing you?'

Lotti grinned. 'Because I stole his dog.'