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The
SECRET
of
GOLDEN
ISLAND

NATASHA FARRANT

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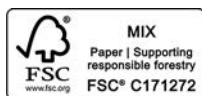
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For Dad.

*A ship is safe in harbour,
but that's not what ships are for.*

*Oh, give me a storm, and the waves, and the wind
And I'll count myself rich enough, true
For I am a sailor, I'm meant for the sea
But it just ain't enough, love, for you
And so . . .*

*Twice to the right and up I rises
To the beat of the tide's steady drum
Twice to the right and up I rises
To the hush of the tide's deadly hum*

*Oh, give me a storm, and the waves, and the wind
And I'll count myself rich enough, true
For I am a sailor, I'm meant for the sea
But it just ain't enough, love, for you
And so . . .*

*Down to the left to the heart of darkness
To the beat of the tide's steady drum
Down to the left to the heart of darkness
And the start of a day's new dawn*

SMUGGLERS' SONG,

Broadmouth and Golden Island

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Far away from here, a mile out from Dead Man's Beach and just west of the market town of Broademouth, tiny Golden Island sits like a fortress in a swirling sea. There is a landing stage on its eastern side, but it is rarely used. All around the island, sheer cliffs and jagged rocks discourage visitors. The one tree visible from the mainland is a lonely sight, stunted and twisted, all its branches stretched inland, as if trying to escape. There is a house here but, apart from the curious lookout tower which juts from its roof, it is entirely hidden behind a garden wall.

In the depths of winter, when the wind howls and storms batter the cliffs, this can seem a desolate

place. And yet, in the spring, pink roses tumble over the wall facing the mainland. Behind those walls, people say, anything can grow. They say that it is full of trees planted long ago – chestnut, oak, an ancient yew. That the scent of a particular honeysuckle could make you drunk.

All of this they say, but no one knows for sure, because this is a private island. It's been a long time since anyone but its owner sat beneath those garden trees, or lay in bed listening to the whisper of the waves. And even he hardly ever comes, though he does love the place. He lives so far away now! Aside from his rare visits, the island is home to birds – warblers, wrens, finches, pipits, gannets and gulls and cormorants and terns.

There are stories about Golden Island. Long ago, it was said that on nights when the moon was full, the tide would pull back far enough for a silver path to shine along the seabed, all the way from the island to the mainland. On darker nights – it was said – the ghosts of smugglers who once used the island as a hiding place rose from the ground all along the coast, bent on murder and revenge.

But these are old stories. Ours is new, and it begins on an ordinary Friday morning in the middle of May, on a school playing field, with a boy and a girl called Yakov and Skylar.

CHAPTER TWO

Picture the scene.

It's the last period before lunch, which for Albatross Class of Broademouth Middle School means PE, and football. The ground is wet from weeks of rain, but the players don't care. The game is patchy, fast and loud, the mud-spattered teams yelling as they race up and down the pitch.

In the middle of all this is Yakov.

Small for his age but quick on his feet, pink from running, black hair falling over his eyes, absolutely concentrating. He's meant to be playing left wing, but Mr Roberts (the PE teacher) has pretty much given up enforcing positions. This is more about enthusiasm than game plan.

Here comes one of Yakov's team now, racing down the right wing. An opposing midfielder intercepts, shouts for a teammate. The girl marking him flies in. She boots the ball up the field to a boy lost in a daydream. In races one of the opponents' defence and she is OFF! The field ahead is wide open and she is going to SCORE!

But who is this hurtling towards her? Why, it's Yakov, and he has *skills*! He tackles, takes possession and then away he flies back down the field, feinting right, weaving left, until there is nothing between him and the goal but a boy whose reputation as a keeper is so awesome his nickname, literally, is Keeps. There's a minute of play left, and the score is five all. Everything rides on this kick, but does Yakov falter?

He does not!

There's a scuffle at the other end of the pitch, a scream, then shouting – some fight has broken out. Other players are distracted, but not Yakov! Another feint, left this time. Yakov kicks. Keeps dives. The ball curves right and into the back of the net, just before the final whistle.

GOOOOOALL!

Yakov's team goes wild. They race towards him, they jump on him, they hug him. Someone even kisses him. For a few seconds, his world is a warm and happy blur. Overcome by the sheer perfection of that goal, he gives in to the praise. This is where he belongs – on a football pitch with his friends.

Oh.

The world returns to focus as Yakov remembers.

These are not his friends.

His friends are far away, scattered across continents by war.

CHAPTER THREE

Yakov measured his life in days now.

Eighty-five days since the war started, leading to nine days with Mama and his sister Anoushka and a lot of friends and neighbours in the cellar turned air-raid shelter of their apartment building back home. Seventy-six days since the sirens stopped long enough for them to pack all they could fit into their very small car, and leave their city home for safety in a friend's borrowed country house.

'To wait it out,' Mama said, though no one knew how long that wait would be, or even what exactly they were waiting *for*.

Seventy-six days since they left the city, and fifty-four since the morning when, with the war showing

no sign of ending, Mama announced a new plan. No more waiting in the country. Thanks to her English father, they all held British passports. Now they would go to England, to live with Mama's sister Nina and her carpenter husband John. Highcliff, their tumbledown home near the sea, was a few miles away from Broademouth.

'We will build a brand-new life,' Mama had said, tossing her long red hair like a brand-new life was what she had always wanted.

Fifty-three days since Anoushka declared that rather than go to England to study, she would stay home and train to fight, and fifty-two and a half days since another plan was hatched.

The family, already separated from their old life, would be separated from each other.

Anoushka would join the army, Mama would stay where she was to be near Anoushka 'in case anything happens to her', and Yakov would go to England without them. An English friend returning home would take him.

Yakov had been to his aunt and uncle's before and he remembered it quite well. There had been an

ivy-covered old house with John's workshop across the yard, a town with twisty old streets and boats in a harbour, a beach with a terrible name. There had been an island . . . All of these he had loved, especially the beach and the island, but he did not want to go there now.

Not without Mama and Anoushka.

'You'll be safe with Nina,' Mama said.

'But what about you?' Yakov asked. 'Will you be safe? Will Noushka?'

Between them hung that awful phrase – *in case anything happens*.

Mama had showered his face in kisses, like she used to when he was little. But she had not changed her mind.

Forty-five days since Mama and Anoushka had waved Yakov off on a train, with no idea when they would see each other again. Forty-three since Nina and John met Yakov at the airport in London. John, a great friendly bear of a man with a bald head and an enormous beard, had tried to talk to him about football. Nina, tiny and fierce with red hair exactly like Mama's, had hugged him hard and

cried a lot. Yakov had felt so overcome with rage and bewilderment that he had hardly said a word but pretended to sleep all the way back to Highcliff.

He knew he was lucky, compared to others. He was safe and living with family. The room they had given him was lovely, much bigger than his room back home. Nina had bought him books and comics, John had given him his old guitar, someone had lent them a bicycle so he could go to and from school on his own, like he did at home. But the lovely room was not *his* room, the books were not his books, and after what had happened back home he never wanted to play the guitar again.

Every night in that nice room, nightmares filled his head with shadows.

And then, for the last thirty-three days, there had been school.

Back home, Yakov had loved school. Here, he hated it. Back home, he had been quick to learn and to make friends. Here, he struggled with both.

The language didn't help. Mama had always spoken English to Yakov and Anoushka. He had thought he was fluent, but it was different here, with

the strong local accent and people all speaking at once, laughing and interrupting each other. Often Yakov had no idea what his classmates were talking about. At first, when he was new, they had tried to be nice. Frustrated by his lack of words, still shocked at finding himself suddenly so far from home, Yakov had responded stiffly. Eventually, mistaking his attitude for unfriendliness, they had lost interest, until he was left feeling completely alone, missing his old friends so much it hurt.

Yakov could have howled with homesickness every day, but he told himself he owed it to Mama and Anoushka to be strong. For their sakes, he never complained but did his best to fit in, and if he did cry, he did so in secret. But that football game had nearly broken him. After his winning goal, when they all piled on top of him to celebrate, just like they did at home ... It had reminded him too much of all he had lost.

It was lunchtime after PE, but Yakov couldn't face being with other people. As soon as he had changed out of his muddy kit, rather than go to the canteen with the rest of his class, he slipped back alone to

their empty form room, where he took a comic from his bag and settled down in the book corner to read.

His stomach rumbled, but he ignored it.

He was *never* going to fit in here. He might as well accept it.

The comic was a favourite, but Yakov was too unsettled to enjoy it as he usually did. When Skylar burst in just as he was getting into the story, he huffed, not even trying to hide his irritation. It was bad enough to be the outsider – the least people could do was let him be the outsider in peace!

Skylar, however, did not even appear to notice him.

She and Yakov had never spoken, but he knew something about her. Her grandparents were Nina and John's only close neighbours, and Nina said that until her grandpa's stroke, about a month before Yakov arrived, Skylar was always staying with her grandparents but that she hardly ever went there now. A cheerful, friendly girl, Nina had called her, though Yakov had never seen any evidence of this at school, where she was almost as gloomy as he was. Right now, however, she looked wild – still in her PE kit, her face flushed and streaked with mud and

tears. Half her dark blonde hair was escaping a plait, the other half stuck up around her head.

Yakov's annoyance turned to puzzlement as she stomped over to her desk and emptied its contents into her school bag. His puzzlement changed to alarm as she stomped back towards him, then with a loud sob kicked Grace Griffiths's chair to the ground. Yakov instinctively shrank back, but it was too late: she had seen him. Her eyes widened with surprise, then narrowed as she set her jaw – part accusing, like she thought he was spying, part defensive of what she had done.

'I slapped Grace,' she said with a tilt of the chin – daring him to judge her. 'During football.'

Yakov's alarm gave way to confusion. Why was she telling him this?

'Right,' he said.

'She deserved it,' Skylar said. 'Also, I'm not crying.'

This was clearly untrue, but Yakov understood all about secret crying.

'I know,' he said.

Skylar's eyes narrowed even further.

'Just as long as you do,' she said, then wheeled back

out of the room.

Yakov watched her go. Relieved. But also – for the first time since arriving in England – curious.