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KATYA BALEN

Letters from
the Upside

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is always privy to their darkest thoughts, always on
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‘[Writes] with the pen of a poet and the soul of
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Liz Hyder



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Natasha Farrant

‘Katya Balen’s writing fizzes with her trademark
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Letters from the **Upside**

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For younger readers

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The Thames and Tide Club: Squid Invasion
The Thames and Tide Club: The Ghost Pirates

Letters from, the **Upside**

KATYA BALEN

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*To Kevin Crossley-Holland,
for the letters*



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On Monday morning I get to take the register back to the office. I walk along the cool, quiet corridors and I trail my fingers along the wall. I haven't been allowed to do this in months. It's like being let back into a secret club. Everyone else tucked away in classrooms. Just me and the empty halls. A whole world and I'm the only one in it. I hold the register tight in my hand like it's the most precious thing in the world.

At break I play football with Vas and Kyron. It's the first time I've picked up a ball since the day Dad left. It feels brilliant. I thought it would be all mixed up with missing him but as soon as my foot slides the ball across the ground I feel like I'm flying. Even when I miss a goal and Mickey boos and laughs. I remember what Mrs Kennedy said about taking deep breaths. I fill my lungs and I walk away. Light as air. Mrs Kennedy tells me she's





proud of me and I feel proud of me. The feeling sits in my chest, spreads sweet like honey through my blood.

After lunch I get on the good behaviour board for the first time in ages. Mr Townsend sticks my shiny plastic photo on to a cloud and moves it up into the blue sky. I've made it. A whole morning without an Incident. I'm floating.

On Monday after lunch I get to pick the music for classroom disco. It's the best job ever. Even better than taking the register back. Everyone wants to do it. You get to sit at the front in the teacher's chair and make a playlist for everyone. Anything you like as long as it's not rude. Mr Townsend lets us dance or sing or wriggle or toetap for five minutes every morning. You can make the whole classroom buzz with the right song. I've never been asked before. Mr Townsend says my name and faces turn to me and the class looks all surprised and jealous. I settle into the big wheely chair behind the desk and I scroll through YouTube. Everyone is throwing suggestions into the air, calling my name, begging for me to listen to them, choose them. For a moment my brain





freezes. There's too much choice. I could get it wrong. I click and switch and shuffle. My fingers tremble. I glance around the classroom and Kyron gives me a thumbs up.

The song I pick threads through the chatter. The beat winds its way up. Hovers high. Waiting. Then it swoops. Drops. Explodes. Everyone jumps up. Arms in the air. Whirling round and round. Skirts and jumpers all a painted blur. I let the music run through me. The beat matches my heart. I lean back on the chair. Tap my toe. Vas is doing the worm in the gaps between desks. Kyron is beatboxing in time. He waves at me to come and dance but I shake my head. Even though I made this happen, it still feels like there's a piece of glass between me and the others. So I just sit here and watch. I did this. I chose the perfect song. And just for a little bit I can forget that I am angry and that my dad is gone.

On Monday afternoon I punch Mickey Phillips in the face and break his nose.





Mum is very still. She's in her uniform because she should be at work. She looks like she might cry. Maybe she's already been crying but she's rubbed it all away before she got in here. She doesn't want me to see. It's all my fault.

I don't cry. I'm not going to cry. I'm pressing my nails into my palms. I'm staring very hard at the floor. The carpet is made up of hundreds and hundreds of grey loops. I try to count them but they start to blur and spin. I get to ten and have to start over again. I imagine shrinking down to the size of a pin. Making myself as small as possible. Hidden. Far away from all of this. Battling my way through the carpet forest. Making friends with spiders. Living in the cracks in the walls. I read a book about tiny people who lived under the floorboards once. Made their beds from

matchboxes and stuff. Things they took from the big people. Mrs Kennedy gave the book to me when I was in the Little Room trying to calm down. She said I could take it home and finish it. It took me ages to work my way through the chapters. But it was a good story. It was nice to think about a little world happening in secret all around me. For a while I left things out on the floor of the flat, for the tiny people to take. Scraps of string and bits of shiny sweet wrappers and I even cut up some of my socks for them to use as blankets. Mum got cross when she found out. Socks don't grow on trees. They cost money. Anyway I'm too old to believe in things like that now.

Con, are you listening? says Ms Pritchett and I don't look up. I can't. She sighs. *I have no choice now, Jo. Not after what's happened. You understand, don't you? Con has had so many chances already. He's been doing really well lately, back to his old self. This has come as a bit of a surprise. What happened, Con? What set this off? Did this boy say something to you? You can tell me. I can help.*

I shake my head and I keep staring at the carpet loops. I don't want to say what Mickey said. Saying it





won't change what I did. And it won't change her mind about what has to happen next. Nothing is going to help. No one can. I am just the angry boy who doesn't stop to think. It's who I am now. It's a part of me. Wrapped around my bones. Always there.

Ms Pritchett sighs. I hear the click of her tapping her pen against the edge of her desk.

We've tried a lot of things, Jo, and we're going to keep trying. I know Con is a good boy. I know things have been hard for him. I know you've had a tough time as a family. But we can't ignore what he's just done. This isn't the first time he's lashed out at this particular boy. There have to be consequences.

Of course whispers Mum and she squeezes my hand but she doesn't look at me.

Four days says Ms Pritchett. Including today. And that takes us straight into May half-term. So it'll be a fresh start after that. I'm afraid you can't come to holiday club at half-term though, Con. It wouldn't be appropriate.

A four-day-long suspension.





A week and a half really. No holiday club. More time off work for Mum.

I feel heavy. Like the fire has burned away all the air inside me. Turned my bones to rock. My hand throbs. I can't tell them that though. I know what they'll say. *Consequence of your actions.*

Mum pushes her thumb into her temple like her head hurts. I know what she's thinking. A week and a half off work. Because of me. A week and a half where she won't get any money to feed the meter or to feed us or to pay the rent or to buy me new shoes because I'm growing like a weed and my toes are bunched up and rubbed raw.

Please I whisper. *I'll be good.* I stare back at the carpet. Back at my too-small shoes.

Con says Ms Pritchett and she sounds suddenly very sad and tired. *Your actions have sent another child to the hospital. Do you think I want to suspend you? It's not fun for me. I don't have a choice. I'm not expelling you. You have a chance to do better. We will help you. We will always help you.*

It doesn't feel like help. Being sent away. I scuff my





shoe along the loops of grey and then feel guilty just in case I've kicked a tiny pin person. Then I remember I'm too old to believe in them.

Mum has to sign some forms and so I go and wait on the chairs in the corridor outside Ms Pritchett's office. Everybody knows that if you're in those chairs then you've done something wrong.

Kyron walks past and he's holding the register tightly in his hands. Just like I did yesterday. It seems like a thousand years ago.

Kyron. My oldest friend. Maybe my only friend. We've been spinning apart a bit lately. Kyron hates my explosions. Says they scare him. Doesn't meet my eyes much any more. Doesn't want to hang around after school even though we live in the same building. Thought maybe we were on our way to fixing things. Football. Music. Me not exploding all week. I want things to go back to how they were before.

I miss him.

Hi I whisper.

He looks at me and he almost jumps back. Like



being in the same space and breathing the same air as me will infect him. Turn him into a monster.

I don't wanna be late says Kyron. Doesn't look at me when he speaks. Drops his words on the carpet between us for me to pick up. And then he walks towards reception and he doesn't look back.



Mum comes out of the office to get me and her cheeks are very pink and so are the rims of her eyes. She grabs my hand and pulls me up and away and out into the empty playground. The little swings in the infants' area are creaking backwards and forwards in the breeze. Football pitch is quiet. It's weird. Like we're walking through a dream.

What are we supposed to do now, Con? Mum asks as we go out through the gates. Her voice is wild and it reaches the sky. Some birds shift in the trees but they don't fly away. I look at them instead of Mum.

A week and a half she says and she puts her face in her hands. *Why did you hit him, Con? What a stupid, stupid thing to do. Never use your fists. Use your words. Haven't I said it a thousand times? A million times? You*



were doing so well. So well. Oh God, Con. I just don't want ...

She stops herself. Cuts off the rest of her words with a knife.

I bite the inside of my cheek. Too hard. My teeth meet. Salty iron on my tongue.

I wish I could understand you Mum says. She puts her arm around me and I lean into her and I whisper that I'm sorry and it tastes like blood.

You're always sorry Mum says. *You're always sorry and nothing changes. I know things have been tough for you. I know that. But you can't keep doing this. What can we do? How can we fix this? Please talk to me.*

I don't think she's really asking me. I don't think she wants an answer from me. She's just throwing words in the air and wondering aloud but I wish I could tell her anyway. I wish I could say what to do. I wish I could change. I wish I could do everything differently. I wish I wasn't like this. But every time I try to explain my mouth seals shut. My words dry up.

We walk through the skinny city streets. Buildings crowding out the light. Our tower block copied and





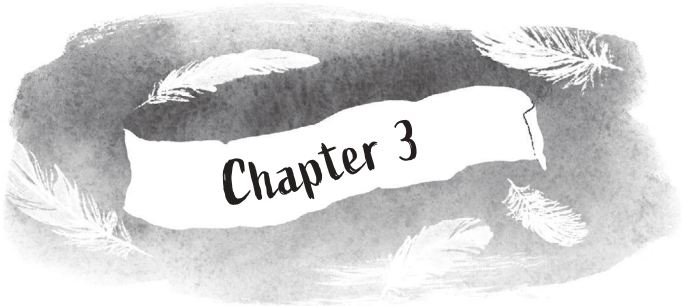
pasted over and over again. A printed skyline. Too many buildings. Not enough air. Rows and rows of shops with neon signs and windows piled high with plastic toys and bags of rice and pet food. Buckets and trays of vegetables spilling out on to the pavement. Weaving round. Men shouting and kids in buggies howling and buses' brakes screeching and no space to move or think or breathe. Nothing here is calm and neither am I.

Mum sighs and she kisses the top of my head roughly. Then she pulls out her phone and messages fly through the air *beep beep beep* and there's no one to cover her shifts and she makes some phone calls but no one can do it. Everyone knows why she needs the time. Me. She keeps sending messages and my heart is dipping into my shoes.

All my fault.

Everything is all my fault.





Chapter 3

Mum doesn't go to work today. When we get back to the flat she phones in sick but she can't keep doing that. She's worried. Fingers twisting. Eyes scanning the messages on her phone. I turn on the TV but there's nothing good and the hours tick by so slowly it's like time has turned to treacle. I hear the other kids get back from school. Noise in the corridor. Laughing. Shrieking. Scuffles and shoving and mums and dads using their cross voices and then more laughing. I sit quietly. On my own. Walls between us.

Finally Mum looks up from her phone and tells me to get changed and for a moment I think maybe I'm not allowed to wear school uniform when I'm suspended. But she's looking at my front and I look down and my polo shirt is speckled and streaked with rust. Not rust. Blood. Mickey's blood. The stain of



what I did. I feel a rush of something like sick and fear and guilt and it slips through me like ice. I go into my room and pull off the top and I scrunch it into a ball and I throw it in the laundry basket.

Most of the day has slipped away so I put on pyjamas and sit on my little bed. Spider-Man duvet cover. Blue with webs and Spidey crouching low. Kyron's got the same. His mum and dad gave them to us so we could be matching. Like brothers. I wonder if Kyron still uses his. Maybe he's given it to Logan or Jesse or Sammy. His actual brothers.

Even though it's early and I'm not ill I get under the Spider-Man duvet. Webs wrapping me up tight. Watch the sun sink down below the buildings.

I wish I wasn't like this.

Choosing the music. Carrying the register. Playing football again. Up on a good behaviour cloud. Everyone smiling at me. Mrs Kennedy saying she knew I could do it. Saying she was proud. Saying I had it in me all along.

Course it all went wrong.

That's what I'm like now.



Angry.

Let everyone down.

Drive them all away.

Like I drove Dad away.

He was angry too.

I want him back.

Two things can be different and true all at once.

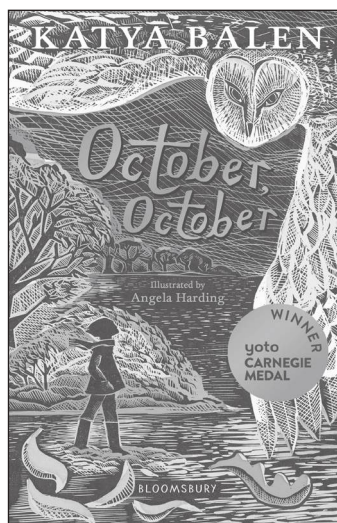
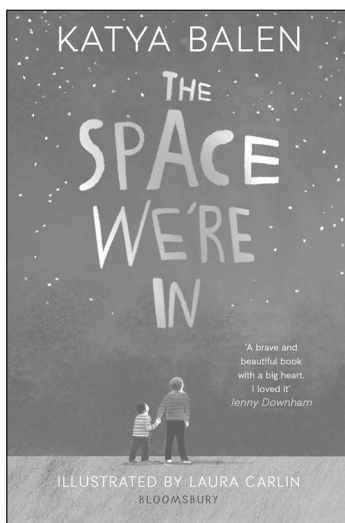
He would shout and he would take me for ice cream and he would slam doors and he would bring me comics and he would go to the pub and not come back for a week and he would watch me play football matches and tell everyone I was his boy.

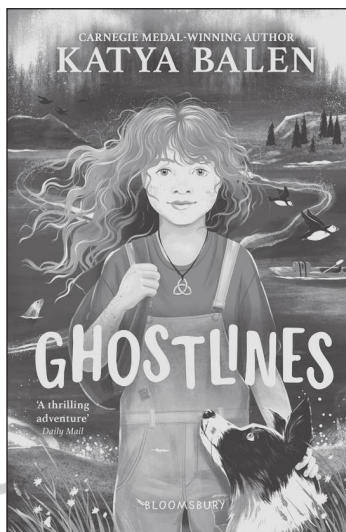
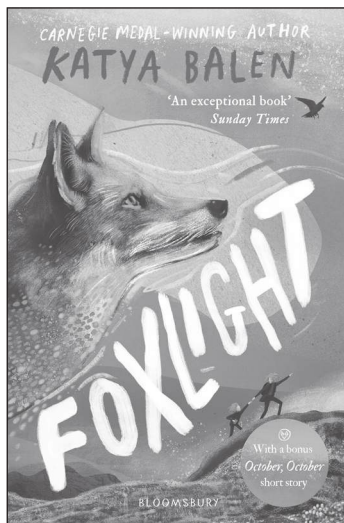
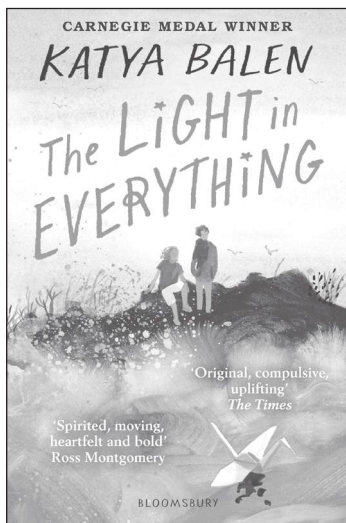
I miss him.

And I pull Spidey up over my head and the world is dark and quiet and my thoughts scatter into the silence.



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KATYA BALEN



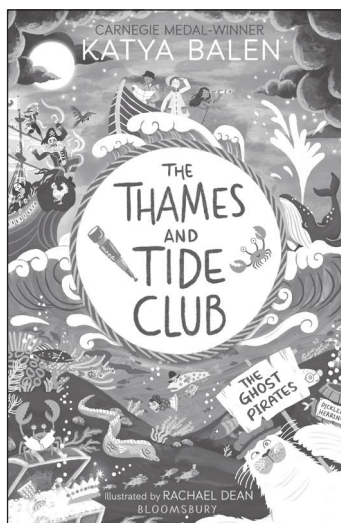
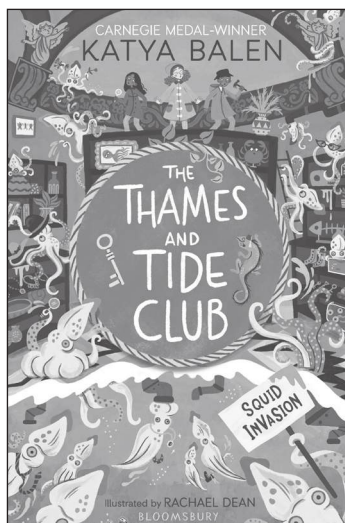
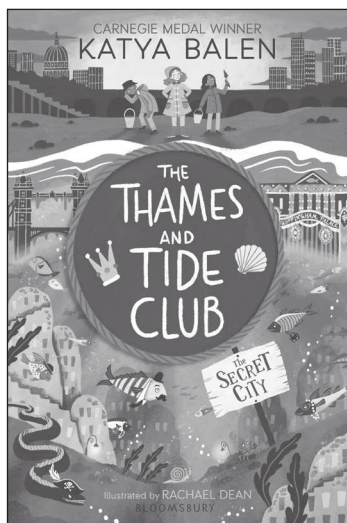




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And don't miss this exciting underwater
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About the Author

Katya Balen is an award-winning author of books for children. Her debut novel, *The Space We're In*, was highly commended for the Branford Boase Award, *October, October* won the Yoto Carnegie Medal and the UKLA Book Award, and *The Light in Everything* was shortlisted for the Yoto Carnegie Medal. When she's not writing books, Katya likes to scroll through dog-rescue websites, bake, and attempt to keep her house plants alive. She lives in London with her partner and their dog.

