

CARNEGIE MEDAL-WINNING AUTHOR

KATYA BALEN

GHOSTLINES



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is always privy to their darkest thoughts, always on
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Mother Earth’

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snort with laughter in the same sentence’

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‘Katya Balen’s writing fizzes with her trademark
originality and voice’

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GHOSTLINES

Books by Katya Balen

The Space We're In
October, October
The Light in Everything
Foxlight
Ghostlines

For younger readers

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

GHOSTLINES

KATYA BALEN

Illustrated by Jill Calder

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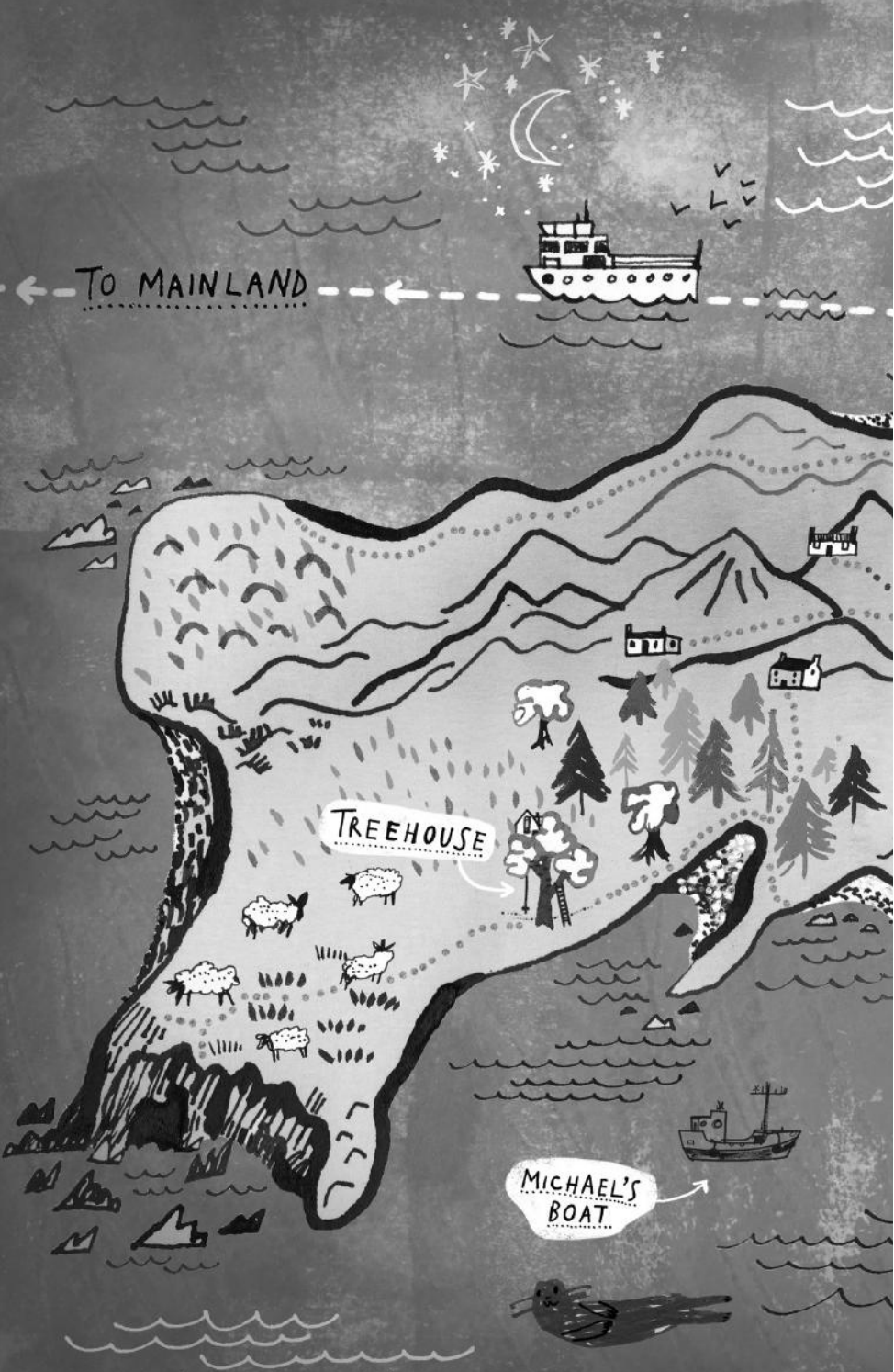
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For Ross Montgomery – surprise!

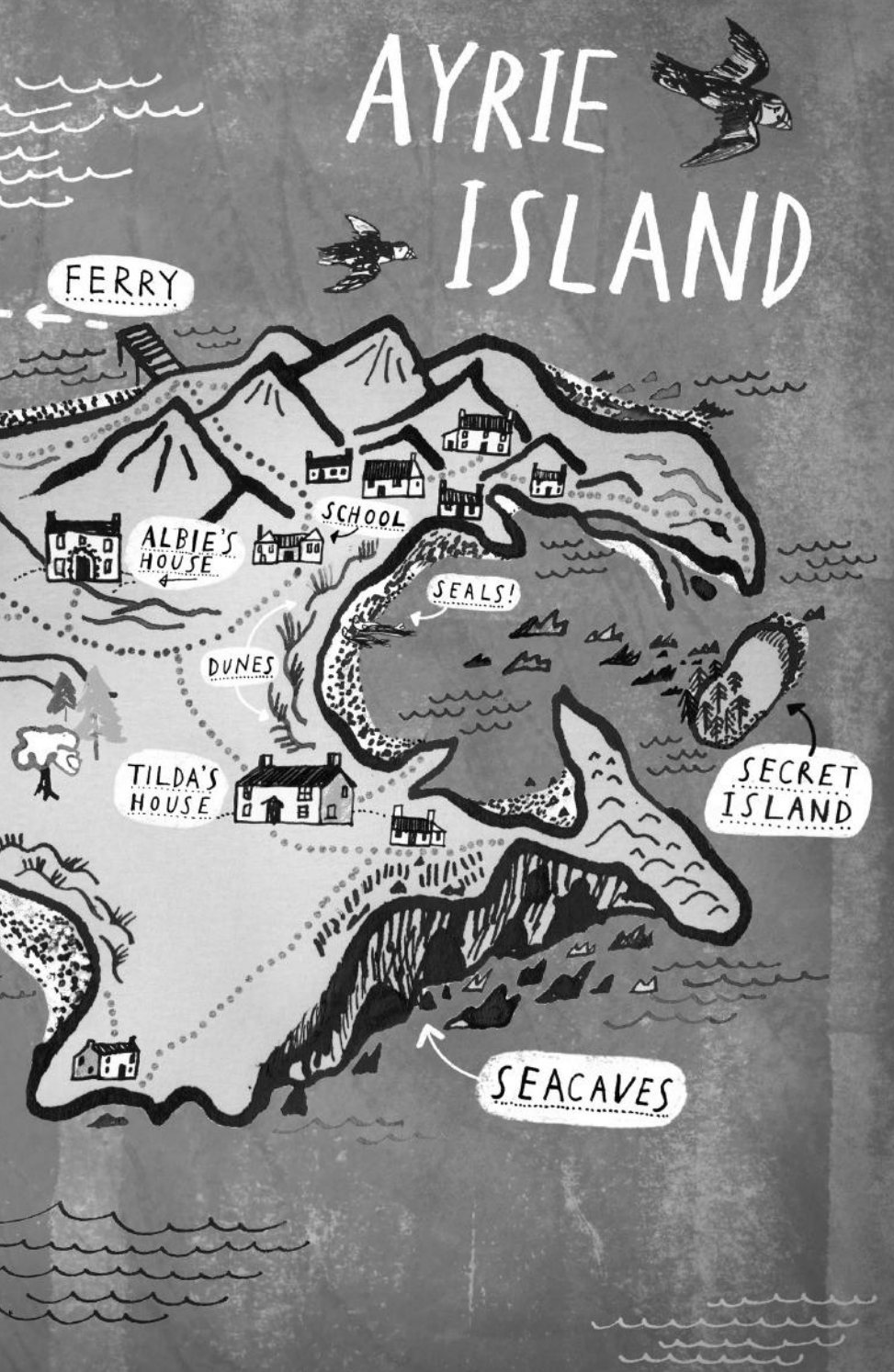


TO MAINLAND

TREEHOUSE

MICHAEL'S BOAT

AYRIE ISLAND





I see him on the day that everyone else is leaving and the island is starting to breathe again.

I'm down on the seafront waiting for the shore delivery with Michael. The wind is full of salt and seaweed and the boat's rope is burning fire as it frays in my hands. Michael grabs it from me and twists it into impossible loops around his knotted fingers and on to the post. I watch so I can copy next time but he's too quick and I lose track of the slips and circles and turns. Michael has been doing this job since he was my age and he could be at least a hundred now. He once told me he remembers when the world was black and white.

The boat rocks and bucks. It doesn't like being held down and it fights against the sea and the wind and the sky. The visitors stand nervously on the damp



harbour. Some of them look green already. One woman is clutching her huge rucksack so hard that her hands are all bone and tendons. Eagle talons. A man starts fiddling with his binoculars and he flips the caps off the lenses over and over and over again and tightens his jaw until I worry that his teeth will crack. It was calm when they arrived. Seaglass, still and gentle. But the island has had enough and it's spitting them back to the mainland with a roar and a howl. The sea grumbles and I know how it feels. I don't like the visitors much. Especially after last year.

All clear.

The shout is caught by the wind and splinters on to the stone ground. It could have come from anywhere but it comes from the boat and I know because I've heard it a thousand times before and I'd know that voice even if it was pulled apart by a hurricane. Once he's taken these last visitors to the mainland, Dad will be back and he'll stay back for the whole autumn and the whole winter and into the spring. Hours and days and weeks and months. No more disappearing towards the horizon every single day and sinking into



the faraway sky like ink on paper. Just once a week for the supply run. I can't wait. For nearly an entire second I think that it'll be perfect and that we'll all be back together again and then I remember Rowan and my heart skips like a skimming stone. The first Silent Season without him. Truly quiet.

The boat starts unloading all the supplies people have ordered from the mainland. I see Struan and John carrying bright boxes with cartoon pictures of toys and teddies and bags and bags of Mrs McCready's favourite prawn cocktail crisps and sleek bottles of shampoo that Eilidh gets for her pony but Flora reckons she definitely uses on herself too. She says Eilidh's hair is too shiny to be using the stuff you can get in the Co-op here. The boxes and bags pile up on the damp harbour cobbles and the gulls start getting excited. Their eyes slide sideways and their ash-brushed wings stretch wide. Everyone rushes forward to grab their stuff before the gulls can perform their daylight robbery. No one is taking any chances since the Great Teacake Heist of 2018. Rumour has it there's a family of gulls still living off the proceeds.



Struan is trying to keep order and is waving a list about but no one is listening. Everyone knows who everyone else is and exactly what everyone else ordered.

One of the men on the harbour shouts into the wind and the crowd of visitors push forward like giant beetles with their great shiny backpacks and scuttling legs. Then there's another shout and everyone stops and the air buzzes. The air tangles in my hair and I sweep it away from my eyes.

Two to get off still shouts Michael and he's right next to me and my ears ring and I must have misheard.

But no one went to the mainland on this trip I say and Michael ignores me because he is a hundred years old and thinks children should be seen and not heard. He's probably got mixed up. He's always saying stuff that doesn't make sense. He once told me that seals were actually women in fur coats waiting to drag you into the sea. Michael is what Ma calls an eccentric and what Dad calls mad as a box of frogs. And Michael must have it wrong. Everyone is leaving. The island is closing to tourists. The puffin season is over, mostly.



There might be the odd one still hanging about but last night was Fledging Night. The whole island gathered along the edges of the island and turned out all the harbour lights so the babies wouldn't get confused and fly into the pub instead of towards the moon. The whole island except me. I've never missed a Fledging Night before. But this time I said I had a headache and Ma gave me Calpol and a hug and I stayed in bed because the word puffin tastes different now. It used to make me feel small and safe and special. Now it just reminds me of Rowan. So I didn't want to stand with the islanders and the visitors watching puffling babies hurl themselves into the wide open starlit sky and think about the empty space beside me.

Anyway, the puffins have left. Now it's Silent Season. No one will come again for months and months and months and that's when the island is at its most fierce and beautiful and quiet and that's when everyone who lives on the mainland thinks we're all crackers and wonders how we cope with power cuts and running out of crisps and layers of snow and winds that cut right down to the bone.



No one has ever come to see for themselves.

But then I see him.

A shape against the sky.

A boy.





Chapter 1

The boy doesn't have a big hiking backpack with walking poles tied to the side ready to poke enthusiastic dogs or toddlers in the eye. He isn't wearing stiff new walking boots or carrying a guidebook about Ayrie or puffins or wild camping or survival. He isn't like the people who usually come here. He is, however, being sick off the harbourside. He drags in his breath and heaves again and again and the crowd of beetle-bright visitors shrinks back as one as they pass him and board the boat which is all ready to take them back to the mainland. The boy doesn't notice because he's busy providing the fish and gulls with an unexpected supper. Waste not want not.

There is a woman there with him and she's rubbing his back and I can't hear what she's saying but I can see the shape of her mouth and it's soft and kind and



gentle. The boy shudders and heaves and she keeps rubbing slowly slowly until his body stops juddering for just a moment and I can see his shoulders rising up and down as he tries to pull the sea air into his lungs.

I start to walk over because I don't mind sick because you can't be squeamish when you live a boat ride away from a hospital and last year I helped some of the farmers with the calving and there was sludge and blood lining the creases of my skin every single evening and Ma said I smelt like something turned inside out and left in the sun. I want to see who this boy is and ask him a thousand questions because this has never happened before and everything is back to front. No one arrives in September. Never. Ever.

The boy straightens up and turns around and for one beautiful second I think he is Rowan and my whole heart glows. But then the late summer light shifts across his face and the shadows change and so does he. He is too young and too skinny and too pale and too strange and the lines of his face are all wrong. My chest tugs and every question I had in my head



has dissolved like salt in water and I feel like my skin has been rubbed raw by the wind.

The woman turns too and I can see the boy's face echoed in hers. Sharp and pale and unfamiliar. She looks back at the boy and the whole world between them is frozen and even the gulls are quiet and the purr and chug of the boat is swallowed by the sea. She pulls the boy into a hug so tight that his bones must crackle and I wouldn't be squeezing someone who is so seasick and green.

The boy gulps a mouthful of seasalt air and boat fumes. He is the greenest thing I've ever seen. Greener than frogs and pond scum and meadow grass and lime gummy worms and the apples Dad grows for pies and scrumpy. The boy's face is green and his eyes are green and his hoody is green and he looks like he might fade into the churning sea and for a moment I wonder if I've imagined the whole thing and whether his edges will flicker and blur and I'll blink and he'll be gone and then he'll just be a story I'll tell at break to scare the little ones. But then he pulls away from his mum and stares around the harbour and the sea



and the heather and the faraway mountains and the speckle of houses that rise and fall with the lines of the land. And in one quick flash he bends double again and the very last of his lunch spatters the cobbles and the gulls shriek the supper alarm into the sky.

