DARK FLOOD

KARON ALDERMAN



Orion

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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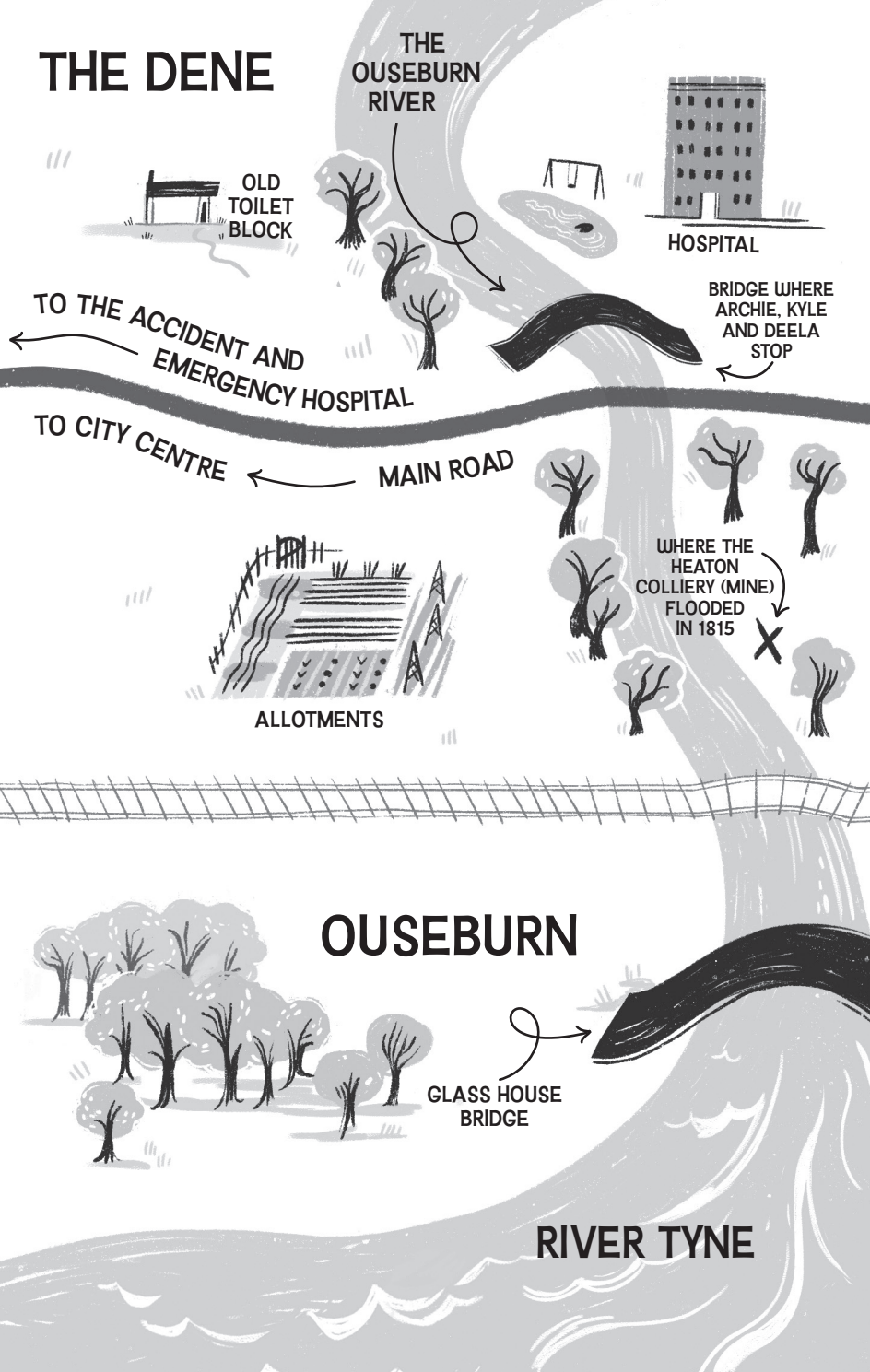


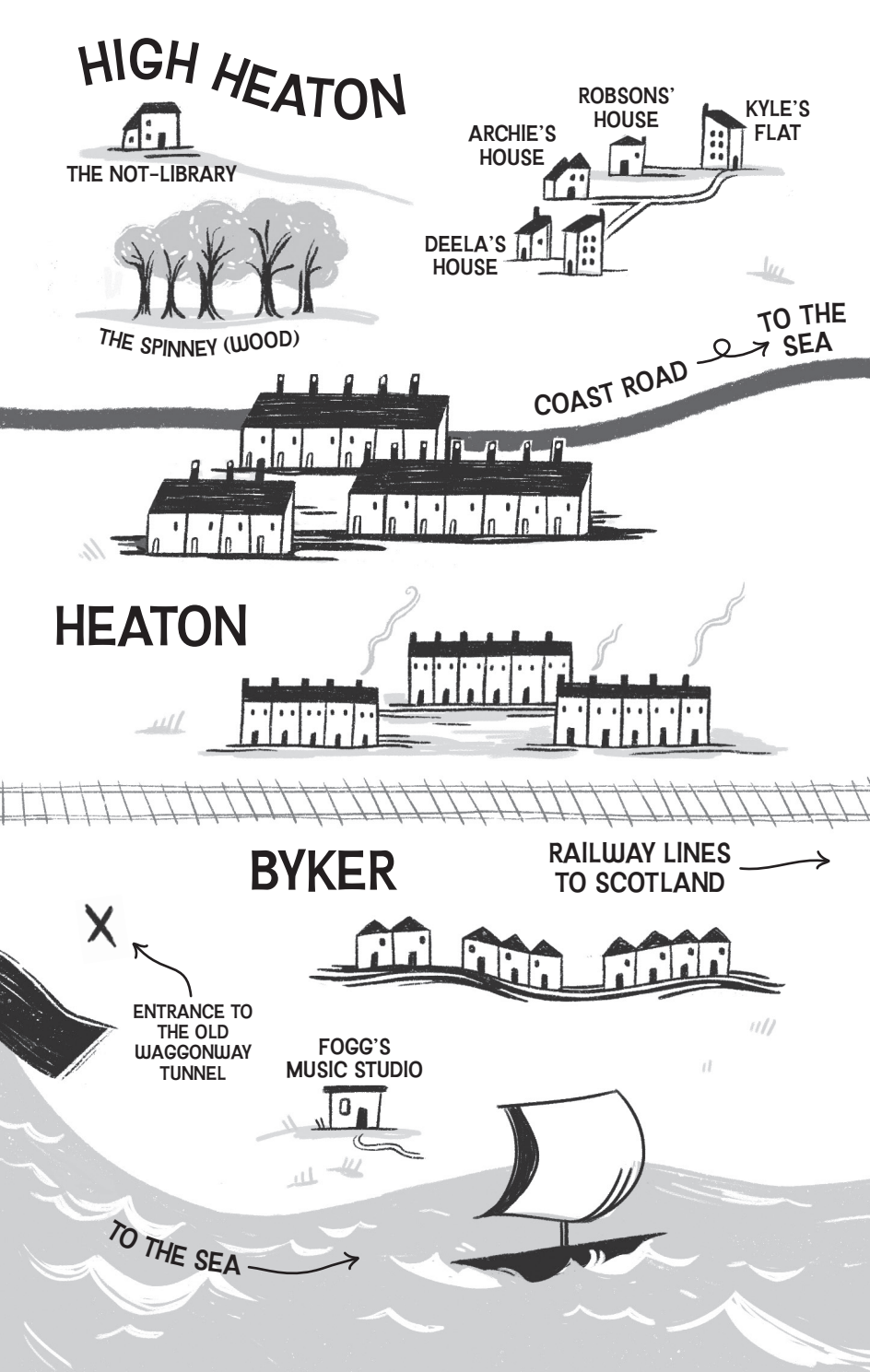
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For all those who keep trying.


THE DENE
THE OUSEBURN RIVER
OLD TOILET BLOCK
HOSPITAL
BRIDGE WHERE ARCHIE, KYLE AND DEELA STOP
TO THE ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY HOSPITAL
TO CITY CENTRE
MAIN ROAD
WHERE THE HEATON COLLIERY (MINE) FLOODED IN 1815
ALLOTMENTS
OUSEBURN
GLASS HOUSE BRIDGE
RIVER TYNE


HIGH HEATON
THE NOT-LIBRARY
THE SPINNEY (WOOD)
ROBSONS' HOUSE
KYLE'S FLAT
ARCHIE'S HOUSE
DEELA'S HOUSE
COAST ROAD
TO THE SEA
HEATON
BYKER
RAILWAY LINES TO SCOTLAND
ENTRANCE TO THE OLD WAGGONWAY TUNNEL
FOGG'S MUSIC STUDIO
TO THE SEA

Dark watter's rising . . . a black flood, air so thick, like breathing blood. Shadows, monstrous in the gloom, dancin' on me grave . . . me hands, heavy now. 'Play for me lad,' I say. 'It eases the pain.'

A silver thread of tune, singin' me home.



1



The tall lad with the strange gadget is out in the Spinney again. He moves slowly through the trees, prodding the ground with his weird metal contraption. He doesn't look up as we pass.

'I bet he's one of them, you know, archaeologists.' Deela knows everything. I think of Granda sat in his chair, wheezing, watching people dig up old bones and swords and stuff and him, glued to the telly as they uncover the past.

'You gan on out, Archie,' he'd said. 'I'll have me nap. You gan out in the fresh air.'

So now, here's me and Kyle and Deela, just mooching around the estate, drifting through the scrubby little wood we call the

Spinney between our houses and the main road.

'What a waste of money,' Kyle says, fierce like, with a few swears sprinkled in like salt on chips. 'What we need round here is jobs, man, not diggin' up old history.'

I don't swear much, me, cos Mam goes radge and Granda says a real man doesn't need to use bad language. Kyle tries not to when he's with Granda, but he's got a short attention span, Kyle, and he forgets.

'Well, it's give him a job,' Deela says. 'And I don't see any digging going on.' She looks back over her shoulder. The lad's scanning the ground between the trees with his machine, which looks like a cross between a Zimmer frame and a metal detector. A bright red rucksack is propped up against one of the trees.

'It uses sound waves so they can see what's under there without digging it up,' I say, stepping round some dog poo and carrying on through the trees. 'I saw it on one of Granda's history shows.'

'Bet it costs a bomb,' Kyle grumbles.

We walk towards the main road, past the library. Really, it's the Not-Library cos it got closed down in the cuts. As we pass, Kyle says what he always says:

'It's a brand-new building! Why would they close a brand-new building?!'

Me and Deela snort with laughter.

'You sound like your mam,' she says. How to calm Kyle down . . . not.

'No way!' he says, but he still goes off on one of his rants about the government and how he could do a better job himself blah blah blah.

We cross the pavement pitted with small grey gum blobs. I imagine some archaeologist guy in a hundred years scraping away the layers, like they do on telly, and finding this grey-white layer. A grey-white deposit, they'd call it, analysing it. Gum and spit. They'd think it's, like, some strange sacrificial offering, '*They came here and mingled their own saliva with the Holy*

Gum and offered it to the gods so that . . .' I could almost hear the voiceover, dead posh like.

'Well?' Kyle is standing, hands on hips, waiting. 'How much you got?'

We scrat about in our pockets and manage two quid between us. We go into the Co-op and roam the four short aisles. A bottle of pop and some doughnuts, or a slab of chocolate? We go for the doughnuts and head out of the shop and down the hill.

Me and Kyle and Adila. But we call her Deela. She got put with us for a Year Five history project and we've been hanging out ever since. Deela says she likes us cos we're not judgemental. And that's true. I don't mind she's always got to be right and they don't care I still hang round with me Granda, playing his old fiddle. He's taught me since I was a little kid. I know it's not cool so I keep quiet about it. I don't do school concerts, just play at home. Deela says it's keeping up a tradition. Kyle says it's me human right to be a saddo if I want.

We pass the bus stop and school. Kyle's mouth is full of doughnut, but he's not done with the previous conversation. 'That lad's just wastin' his time,' he says, taking another from the pack. 'Cos there's nowt more to know about this boring place.'

I squish a bit of the white fleshy dough between me fingers and an ooze of red jam slips out. We're still mooching along, off the main road now. It's not like there's anywhere we've got to be; it's summer holidays and nowt to do but hang out. Deela rolls the doughnut packet up and squishes it into her pocket.

'Seventy-five trees in the Spinney, planted for seventy-five men and boys.' She likes history. 'Don't you think it's sad, Kyle? All them men and boys dying? Trapped in the mine right under our feet?'

Kyle shrugs, scuffing up some crisp packets on the path. 'I s'pose, but it's all in the past. Two hundred years gone and buried. And let's face it, there's a disaster a day if you need one.' He's licking the sugar off his fingers and wiping his hands on his

jeans. I try to be on both sides so they won't get into another stupid row, even though I cannet see that any of it matters.

'Aye, it's sad,' I say. 'But we already know what happened; how the miners accidentally broke through the wall into the abandoned workings and got flooded. What can Gadget Guy add to that?'

'Gadget Guy,' Deela says. 'Good name.'

'You couldn't pay me to prod around the ground all day,' Kyle goes on. 'What's the point? Like, when Granda tells us stories that's interesting, but at school . . .' He shrugs and pulls at a bit of twig sticking out of someone's garden. He starts to strip the leaves off. 'I mean, history's all kings . . .' he drops a leaf, 'and wars . . .' he drops another leaf, 'and dates and . . . ugh.' Kyle's not daft, but school isn't really his happy place. He breaks the twig and drops it.

Deela frowns at him. 'It's important to know about the past,' she says. 'It totally shapes the future, right, Archie?'

We're crossing the big iron pedestrian bridge that arches out over the park in the Dene below. We stop halfway and rest our arms on the metal railings and stare down at the tops of the trees beneath us. From up here you can see where the Ouseburn River cuts through. It's hot today. I can hear kids playing and shouting as they go into the cold water. Me and Kyle used to go down there all the time when we were little, with Granda minding us while Mam worked and Kyle's mam did whatever she did when she wasn't around.

'D'you remember when Granda used to let us play in the river, Kyle?' I say.

He nods. 'Aye, and he used to lift us both up and swing us round dead fast? Epic.'

'How is Granda?' Deela asks.

'Same,' I shrug. 'Bit low. He hates not being able to get out down the park and the allotments.' I think of him stuck in the house, wheezing away, his lungs and heart shutting down slowly. 'He's got this thing – *em-fa-seem-a,*' I say. 'It's where his lungs got

damaged when he was working in the mines. It slowly gets worse and worse. Now he can't barely get out of his chair.' I stare out over the park so they cannet see me face.

'Why doesn't he get one of them scooters that old gadgies drive about in?' Kyle asks. 'Then he could get out a bit.'

'Dunno,' I say. 'I think they're, like, massively expensive.' I don't mention my dad, cos there'll be no help from him. We all kind of pretend he doesn't exist cos that's easier than admitting the guy is a scumball who took off and left us – me, Granda and Mam. He never sends us anything, never mind money. I've not even heard from him in ages. Two years, mebbes? I dunno. Don't want to either. Mam thinks he rings me now and then. So the truth is I lie to her sometimes.

Kyle kicks at an empty can, sending it right across the wide pathway. 'Money, cash, dosh, loot, dough – that's lots of names for summat you never get to see.' His voice changes. 'Hey! Why don't we, like, raise the money?'

Deela doesn't shoot him down like she usually does. Instead, she twirls the end of her plait round her finger. She does that when she's thinking. 'We'd need to do some research,' she says. 'Find out how much . . . but we could start. Oh, we could do cake sales! My cousin did that so she could go to Peru when she was in Year Eleven with school. She says homemade samosas go like hot-cakes.'

'She must've sold a ship load of samosas,' Kyle adds, grinning.

'Well, you got any better ideas?' Deela sounds huffy.

'I'm thinking,' Kyle says. He's always got big money-making ideas but somehow they never turn into actual money.

'What about a litter pick?' Deela says, searching 'mobility scooters' on her phone as she's talking. 'There's enough of it round here. We could get sponsored.'

'Nobody's got any money,' I say. 'Not the kind of money we'd need.'

'Wow,' she says. 'Yeah, we are talking four figures here. But you can get them cheaper on eBay. Second-hand.'

'I still don't think we could make anywhere near enough. Plus, no one wants to take on kids our age for jobs anyway.' I take a few steps back and start moving off the bridge. I don't want to talk about it any more. I hate thinking about how poorly Granda is now.

Kyle and Deela follow me down towards the park gates. It's halfway through the summer holidays and our feet just walk the same old route without us thinking or talking about it. We head into Pets Corner like we're kids again. A gran with a little lad in a red hoodie gives us a funny look, as if we're gonna bring trouble. Old people always think teenagers are trouble – except Granda – it's like he remembers what it's like being young. Kyle reads the labels on the cages out

loud, putting on different voices for each animal.

'Hi, I'm a Nubian goat,' Kyle says in a strong Scottish accent. 'I guess I come from Nubia.' He thinks for a moment. 'Archie,' he says, turning to me. 'Where the bl—' Deela coughs loudly and nudges him, '—the hell is Nubia?' He finishes.

The gran frowns and moves the kid on to the next animal pen.

'You shouldn't swear in front of little kids,' Deela tells him.

'"Hell" isn't swearing,' he says, surprised.

She giggles. The Nubian goat shakes its long ears, turns its back on us and shows us its bum.

'I know!' Kyle says. 'We could make some money busking!'

I look at him blankly.

'Where did *that* come from? You see a goat's bum and you think "busking"? I dunno how your brain works, man.'

He stares at the goats, not looking at me. His ears are starting to go red.

'For Granda, for the scooter. I was just thinking about Nubia – how can there be a country I've never even heard of? I bet it's a dead poor place.'

Deela sits on a bench and leans back in the sun. Kyle carries on, still staring at the goat which is dropping a pile of poo. He must be thinking dead hard cos he doesn't even mention it.

'So then I was thinking it's rubbish being poor. Lads can make money busking. I've seen them performers in town and they aren't anywhere near as good as you, Archie. But people just give them money!'

'Yeah, to go away!' Deela adds, but Kyle isn't joking around. It's the first time he's said I'm a good player, ever.

'And it was Granda who taught you, so it all works out,' he adds. 'It's like . . . payback for all them lessons and stuff. I'd do it only I cannet sing or play or anything.' Deela grins. We both remember Kyle trying out the

trumpet in Year Five. It was horrible. 'I've thought it all out,' he's talking fast now, words falling over each other. 'I could be, like, your minder and mind the money and stop people beating you up.'

'Thanks for that,' I say. Kyle is tiny – a small blond skinny kid with a shaven head. He looks like a naked mole-rat in glasses. *Not* an obvious bodyguard.

'What about me?' Deela says, miffed that she's not been included.

'What could you do?' Kyle says, tactless as ever. 'Anyway, your dad wouldn't let you go and stand with two lads busking in town, would he?'

She's silent again, but it's a thinking silence.

'He might not find out,' she says finally.


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