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“This book totally blew me away. I love it. It’s the best new voice I have read in ages.”

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Book Zone 4 Boys

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Toppsta reader review

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Armadillo Magazine

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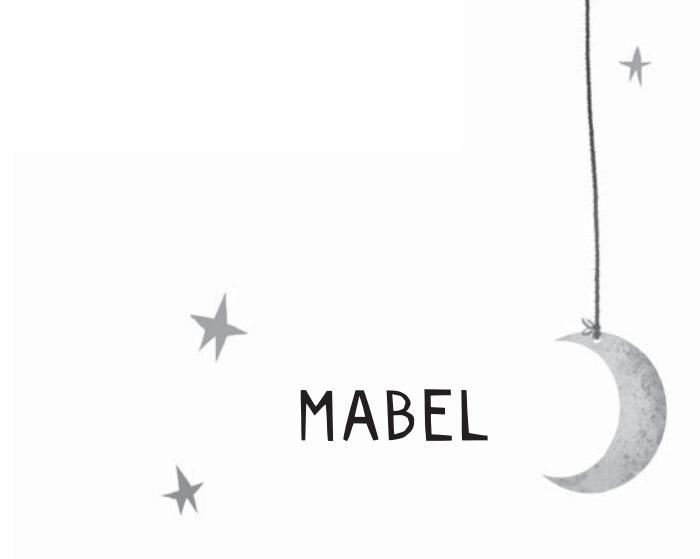
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THE GIRL
with
SPACE
IN HER
HEART

LARA WILLIAMSON



USBORNE



For Geraldine and Allison, with love.

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Do you ever carry a lot of things around with you? I do. For example, in my pocket I carry a little silver star necklace that Mum bought me. It's supposed to be part of the constellation Canis Major, which means "greater dog". I don't have a dog, but I do have a cat called Jupiter. I'm always carrying him around too, because he's lazy and sometimes he won't budge from under my bed. I love Jupiter and I know Jupiter loves me because he keeps bringing me "gifts". Unfortunately, some of them are dead.

I have a twelve-year-old big sister, Terrible Topaz, who I'd like to carry straight into a black hole. And

leave her there. Then there's Mum – I carry a little photo of her in my purse. Mum has a shop near the seafront called Fudge Fudge Wink Wink and she has a boyfriend: Galactic Gavin (by the way, it was Topaz's idea to call him Galactic and that's because she thought he was from another planet). He's actually an estate agent on planet earth though and I think he's one hundred per cent nice, even if Topaz doesn't. What's more, he loves the stars as much as me.

Finally, there's Dad, and I have a big space in my heart where he used to be. You see, after Dad went away he didn't contact me or Topaz again and Mum got sad and didn't like talking about him. When I asked her questions, she wouldn't answer and her eyes would go all misty and miserable. I don't like thinking Mum's heart was broken by Dad – even though she's got Gavin now to cheer her up. Hearts aren't ever supposed to break or have empty Dad-shaped spaces in them and that makes me worry. I worry about a lot of things. I worry about Dad not being here and how we don't fist-bump or tell each other “I love you” like we used to.

That's why the main thing I'm carrying around at the moment are worries, and they're the heaviest thing to hold. To be honest, I've been trying to keep the worries squashed down. I've tried to convince myself that I don't

need to worry this much and that maybe I should ignore them. But it's not easy, especially when I can't talk to Mum.

Today, there's a whole new worry to add to my collection and this time it's not about Dad.

It's 8.30 in the evening when it happens. I'm sitting cross-legged on my starry duvet cover and busy petting Jupiter (who is licking his paws like they taste of something yummy) when my sister comes into my bedroom and plonks herself beside me. She takes a bite out of her apple and tells me that something unexpected has happened. Straight away, I know I'm about to have another worry. Topaz slowly shakes her head and sighs and tells me it's a cat.

“A cat?” I interrupt, looking down at Jupiter. “Our cat?”

“You didn't let me finish.” Topaz takes another bite of her apple, then says, “It's not a cat – it's a *catastrophe* and it's so catastrophic that you need to pin back your ears.” I'm about to say that pinning back my ears would be painful when she adds, “It's Galactic Gavin. He's not who we think he is.” A tiny river of apple juice runs down her chin and Topaz wipes it away with her finger.

At first, I'm confused with a capital Z. Seriously, I'm so confused that I have lost all sense of the alphabet.

Not who we think he is?

Not Mum's boyfriend?

Not Galactic Gavin?

"Is he even *Gavin*?" I ask Topaz, without the "Galactic" bit that she added to his name. Already this is turning out to be a worrying situation and I can feel my stomach bubbling away as Topaz purses her lips together and then says that she doesn't know who he is. At this point, I ask Terrible Topaz if she's having a laugh.

Topaz is not. In fact, her face is as miserable as the Abominable Snowman's if he was in the desert.

"I don't understand what you mean. Gavin's nice," I mutter. In my head, the words I've just said sounded sharp. In reality, they've flopped out of my mouth like marshmallow in front of a bonfire. Gavin is nice though. At first, when Mum introduced him to us, I wasn't sure. He would try to smile at us and join in with conversations, even if Topaz wouldn't let him. Later on, Topaz would say to me that Galactic Gavin was trying too hard and it was a bad thing. I wasn't sure how it could be a bad thing, as Mum always said trying hard at school was a good thing. But bit by bit, Gavin kept trying. He made the day feel brighter if he was in it. It turned out, Gavin was growing on me like a fungus growing on a tree in autumn (Mr Spooner, my teacher, taught me about this).

Now I'm used to Gavin visiting and I enjoy talking about the stars with him. Sometimes he brings Topaz and me chocolate (our favourite kind because he found out what we like most in the world) and when he smiles at us it reaches his amber-coloured eyes and they twinkle like Sirius, which is the brightest star in the night sky.

Terrible Topaz gingerly nibbles the edge of her apple like a little mouse and then continues, "You're being silly, Mabel Mynt. Think about it. Not everyone is who they say they are. Some people are liars, including Galactic Gavin."

Whoah! Someone tell my sister she is more mixed up than peanut butter and jam on toast.

There's a kind of stunned silence before I insist, "You're getting this confused. Gavin's not telling us lies. I like Gavin."

Topaz wrinkles her nose then says, "Oh, Mabel. I'm not the one who's confused. And you might like Gavin, but it's clear you don't understand the games that men play."

"Like Monopoly? Or Cluedo?"

Turns out, it's not the sort of games I'm thinking about. According to Topaz, "It's the game of hurting someone and not letting them know you're hurting them, but if they did know they'd be hurt. And I know

all about this stuff because my romance books tell me. They're about love and falling-out-of-love and hurting people. They're about triangles."

I blink. "I hate triangles. Mr Spooner always talks about them in maths and they confuse me. I don't get triangles at all."

Topaz's jaw tightens. "I'm talking about *love* triangles, not maths triangles. Galactic Gavin is in a love triangle and he's a liar. Let me explain..." I'm still confused, but I'm not sure I actually want an explanation. Topaz carries on regardless. "So, listen to this. Remember yesterday, when we were walking home from school and I went off because I fancied an iced bun from Bread Pitt." I nod. "Well, Bread Pitt happens to be beside Galactic Gavin's estate agency and I saw him leaving his office."

"That's hardly big news," I say, staring at some freckles on my arm like they're a dot-to-dot of the stars. "And if it *was* big news that you saw him leaving his office, then why didn't you tell me this last night?"

"Well, there's more to it than Galactic Gavin just leaving work. And I needed time to think it over and consider how serious the situation was before passing on such sensitive information," says Topaz. She looks at me solemnly. "It was a lot to take in."

"You forgot," I reply.

"*Au contraire*, Mabel Mynt," replies Topaz, speaking as though she's swallowed a French dictionary. "I did not forget. It would be impossible to forget that a woman with a blonde ponytail appeared – let's call her Blonde Ponytail Woman – and she met up with Galactic Gavin outside his estate agency and he hugged her." Topaz pauses, takes the breath of an Olympic diver and continues, "The hug was big." She swings the apple core by its stem between her fingers. "Blonde Ponytail Woman was wearing a giant coat that looked like she was wrapped in a duvet. And she and Galactic Gavin walked off down the road together."

Back up! Hold your horses! Shut the front door! "So what?" I exclaim, blowing out a long breath. "He must meet people every day in his job. He was probably showing her a house he's selling."

Topaz looks around my bedroom, saying she needs to make sure no one is listening – which is completely and utterly stupid because a) I'm listening and b) Jupiter is listening (but mainly yawning, to be fair). A string of saliva stretches inside Topaz's mouth. "Anyway, it is a big deal. He can't have been showing this woman around a house, because he hugged her. He hugged another woman who isn't Mum. And think about this –"

Topaz leans in and I can smell a puff of cupcake scented body spray. “Doesn’t Galactic Gavin visit his mother on a Tuesday afternoon? Yesterday was Tuesday. This wasn’t his mother. And they stopped at Throwing Rocks.” I shake my head because I don’t know what Topaz is on about now. “The jeweller’s,” she snaps.

“Oh,” I swallow. “Kay.”

Topaz rises from the bed and begins pacing up and down like she’s going to wear a hole in my carpet. Occasionally, she stops and seems to think about something and then marches on. “You don’t understand,” she blurts out eventually, her eyes locking onto me. “I never believed Galactic Gavin was right for this family in the first place and this has proved it. He is going to break Mum’s heart. I’m not having Mum hurt again.” Topaz fixes me with a fierce stare and I think back to when Dad left and Mum had miserable eyes and didn’t brush her hair. It’s hard to forget the days she sat staring into space wearing her dressing gown. I don’t want Mum to sit around in her dressing gown again. I don’t want her hair to look like she’s rubbed a balloon on it and it’s sticking straight up. I think about the Dad-shaped space in my heart and I’m aware of worry fizzing in my stomach, like someone has a straw in there and is blowing bubbles through it.

“But how will he break her heart?” My nails leave crescents in my palms.

“With lies, Mabel. Because he’s not telling Mum everything. He’s keeping secrets. Galactic Gavin went inside the jeweller’s and Blonde Ponytail Woman waited outside and then he reappeared with a small box and I think it was a ring box.” She throws herself back on my bed.

I blurt out, “Hey! How did you know there was a ring inside? Did you have a pair of binoculars?” My head begins to thump like a tiny musician is playing the drums. And I know I’ve lost the battle with what Topaz says next.

“Pfftt... I didn’t need them. I saw Blonde Ponytail Woman take something out of the box and slap it on her finger, so I didn’t need a crystal ball to tell me the future.” Topaz thinks for a second, then grimaces. “Trust me. It was a ring and Galactic Gavin is getting married.” She pauses, waiting to see my reaction. To be fair, my reaction is mostly me picking my jaw up from the floor. “And not to our mum. So that is why he’s going to break her heart with his lies and that is why we need to look out for her.”