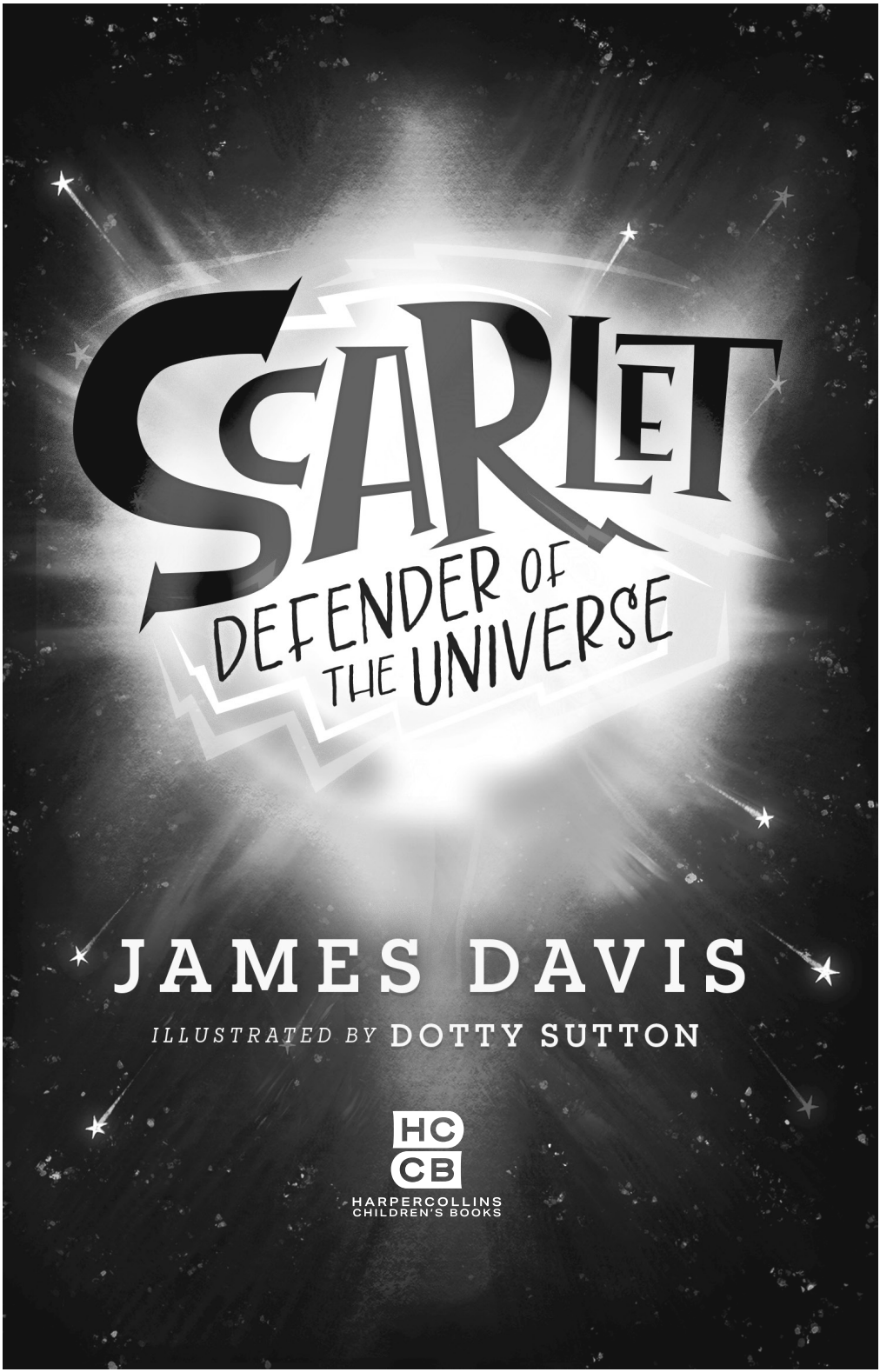

SCARLET
DEFENDER OF THE UNIVERSE
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HC
CB
HARPERCOLLINS
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

First published in the United Kingdom by
HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2025
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

HarperCollins*Publishers*
Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper
Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland

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ISBN 978–0–00–865362–0

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Typeset in Avenir Book 11/16pt
Printed and bound in the UK using 100% renewable electricity at CPI Group (UK) Ltd

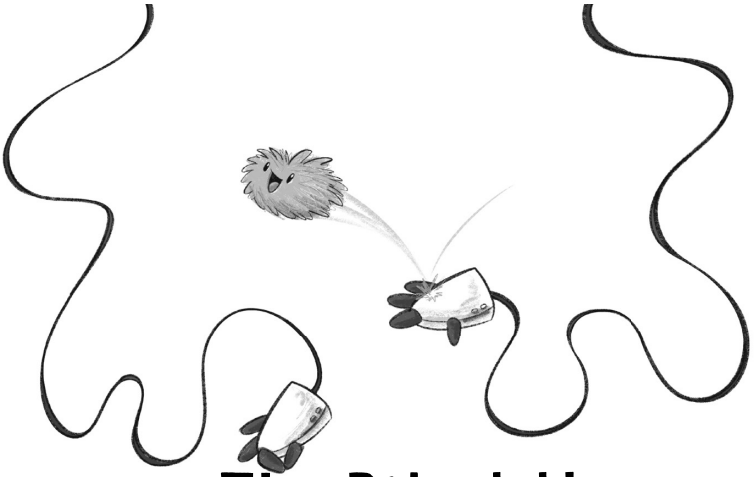
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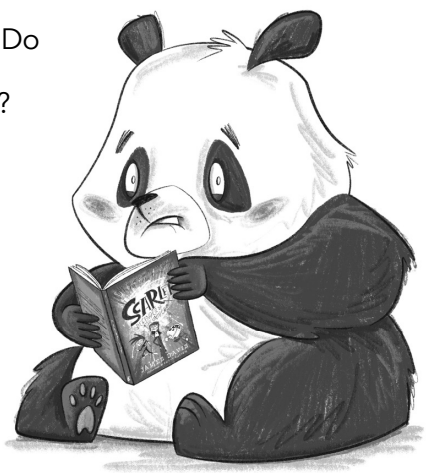
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To Edgar. Love you kiddo.



The Bit at the Startilogue

Are you sitting comfortably? Are you fantasising about bamboo? Do you have black and white fur? Are you huge and cute and cuddly-looking? Well, put this book down, because you are a panda, and this is not a book for pandas.



This is a story about a girl called Scarlet. She's nine years

old, just like you, if you're nine. If you're not nine, then she's more like someone else who is nine. She has red hair, just like you, unless your hair is brown. She is 127 centimetres tall, just like you, unless you're taller or shorter. Her favourite colour is green, just like you, unless your favourite colour is grey, although that seems highly unlikely. And she is as smart as a shiny button, just like you.

Now, if you're a boy and you're thinking, *Aw, man, I want a story about a boy*, then you shouldn't think like that. Girls are like boys. Boys are like girls. Also, there is a boy in this story too, called Jasper, so hang in there.

If you are a girl and you're thinking, *Yay, I don't like stories about boys*, then you shouldn't think like that. Even if some stories about boys are goofy.

If you are an alien from the planet Spludgeronia and you're thinking, *Aw, spludge, I like stories about*

aliens from Spludgeronia, don't panic, because there are some aliens from Spludgeronia too.

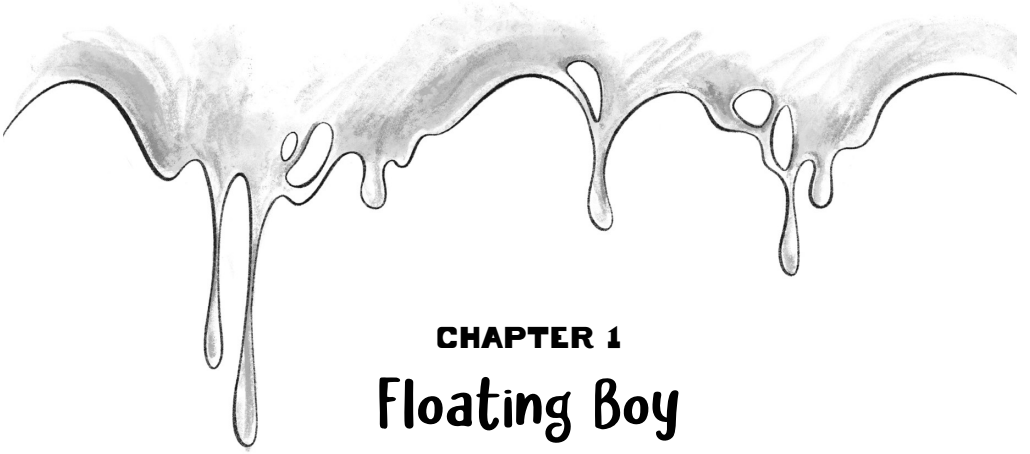
There's something for everyone.

Even parents might learn a thing or two.

Well, I know what you're thinking. *Why don't you get on with it for goodness' sake?*

Yes. Okay then. I will.





CHAPTER 1
Floating Boy

Scarlet was drifting off to sleep when she heard a ***tap-tap-tap*** at the window.

The sound snapped Scarlet's senses back into the room. She flicked the light on, but couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, so she switched it back off again.

There was another ***tap-tap-tap*** at the window.

This time she deduced, somewhat brilliantly, that the sound she'd heard, the one that sounded like somebody tapping at the window, could in fact be somebody tapping at the window.

GENIUS!

Except Scarlet's bedroom was in the loft, so if someone *was* tapping on the window, they had extendable legs, had learned how to fly or had an incredibly long finger. Or perhaps they had something more normal like a ladder.

Scarlet turned the light on again, sprang out of bed and zipped over to the window. Of course, it could just be a bird, she thought with a hint of disappointment. Then she drew back the curtains and locked eyes with a smiling boy.



Seeing a smiling boy might have been quite nice, ordinarily, except she wasn't expecting to see a boy of any description, so she let out a scream, shut the curtains and did some falling of the backwards and over variety.

'Scarlet! Are you okay?' came a muffled shout from below.

Fortunately, Scarlet's father was notoriously unwilling to climb the two flights of stairs to the loft room to attend to any problem that Scarlet might have, and this was doubly so when the football was on, which it was. Yet despite all her evidence pointing towards the fact that she may well have a problem that required immediate attention – for example, an *unexplained floating-boy issue* – her instinct was to keep it a secret for now.

'Yes, Dad. Sorry. I stepped on some Lego!' she shouted.

'You should be in bed!' her dad yelled.

'Yes, sorry, Dad!'

'Stop shouting!' he shouted. 'You'll wake your brother up!'

Her little brother never woke up. He slept like a stone in a coma. You could drive a tractor into his room and he wouldn't so much as turn round. You could land an aeroplane on his nose without him so much as opening one eye. You could explode a bomb on his head and . . . well, he'd be dead for sure, so definitely wouldn't wake up. Yet, despite all this, Scarlet was always being told to tiptoe around the house once he'd gone to bed. It had started when he was born and had never stopped. Nonetheless, given how annoying her brother could be, she really didn't want to wake him.

Scarlet stood up, turned to the window again and tried to be brave. She didn't feel brave at all; her insides

were like a washing machine on a fast spin setting. But *being* brave was not about *feeling* brave – it was about feeling scared and doing it anyway. She crept towards the curtains, grabbed one in each hand, took a deep breath and swiftly drew them back, squeezing her lips together so that a squeal didn't pop out. But this time all she could see was the night sky. The moon looked innocently back at her.

Perhaps she had imagined it? In fact, now she came to think of it, it was a bit silly to assume that it could be anything other than her overactive imagination. Boys did not appear at windows and they certainly didn't float! Not in this lifetime.

She was ready to believe that she'd dreamed it, when right in front of her very eyes the boy floated back into view. He tapped gently on the window and waved enthusiastically.

Scarlet started talking quietly to herself. *It's just a*

boy, just a regular floating boy, nothing unusual. Some boys stand, others float – this one's a floater.

She opened the window just a fraction.

'Excuse me,' she said. 'Who are you?'