



RICHA'S SECRET

by Camilla Chester

& illustrator Irina Avgustinovich



Leo is making his dominos fall across his living room carpet and I'm brushing his dog Patch. I'm thinking about the girls from *Just Jive* today, and how nasty they were to Leo.

'Is it because you won't talk?' I ask him.

It's the wrong thing to say and he throws me a sharp look.

It's then that I decide: I'm going to tell Leo my secret.

I move away from Patch, and get closer to my friend, talking softly all the time, 'anyone who meets you, knows almost straight away that you can't talk. but I have a different kind of secret.'

I'm frightened because my secret is a monster with loads of scary eyes. Huge fangs and poisonous breath. I've carried my secret like a sharp-edged rock that gets heavier every day. I've told so many lies to keep it hidden that I'm wrapped in sticky spider webs. Still, I creep, closer and closer, until our knees are almost touching. Leo looks right into my eyes. He's never done that before. He usually stares at the floor. I can see that he's properly listening with all his ears and more. There's something about the quiet of him that makes me feel safe.

'It's a secret I can't tell anyone, I say, 'except you. I'm going to tell you, Leo.'

This moment feels like a bomb that could blow up at any moment. One wrong move and KABOOM! Game over.

'I know I can trust you and I have to say it. It feels too heavy.' And then I do say it – out loud – to Leo.

And when the words start to escape my mouth, I can't stop them even if I want to. They tumble out, words pushing against words, knocking one another out of the way like the dominos.

Leo keeps listening. He gives me time to explain. He takes each word of truth from me and catches it gently. It feels like the secret is a new bird trying to fly.

I cry; fat hot tears that wrack my body, making me heave and splutter. Leo holds me in his thin arms. I can feel his skin like a healing blanket against mine. The sobbing is the last of my secret. All of it is out of me and shared with my friend.

When my crying slows, Patch pushes his way between us. We stop hugging, I smile and wipe my eyes with the back of my hand.

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'I feel loads better now. Lighter,' I say.

And I do - so light I could float up and bounce gently against the living room ceiling like a balloon at a birthday party.

'Thanks, Leo. You're the best listener in the world.'



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