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***SAMPLE – FIRST THREE CHAPTERS ONLY***

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## Chapter 1

Suddenly, Danny was wide awake. He lay staring at the ceiling. The sound of his breathing filled the darkness around him.

Why had he woken up? And where the heck was his duvet?

Not that he really needed anything over him. It was stupidly hot in his bedroom that night, and the air hung still and muggy around him. The window was open, but not even a slight breeze stirred the curtains. He was annoyed that he'd woken up, because it'd taken him ages to get to sleep in the first place. As he turned over on the bed the sticky sheet clung to him, wrapping him up like a giant sweaty burrito. He tossed, sighed and wriggled for a few minutes longer, trying to pummel his brain back to sleep.

It was no good. With a grunt Danny hauled himself out of bed, wondering if opening the window a bit wider might help. After just two steps, his feet caught on something and he landed in a heap on the duvet. He must have kicked it off while he was sleeping. Muttering, he stumbled up to the window and pushed it open. But all he felt from outside was a slow, hot puff of air that smelt of wet grass. The thunderstorm earlier in the evening had been fun but it hadn't cooled things down at all.

Danny gazed out across the back garden, towards the trees beyond, which looked as if they'd been cut out of black card. It was so *dark*, here in the countryside. Then he

raised his eyes and gasped. The clouds had cleared and the sky was bursting with stars – a few big and bright, some small and twinkling, others clustered together in little sparkling knots. It was as if some ginormous toddler had hurled tiny flecks of white paint with a brush across the black heavens.

Danny had to admit that living in the middle of nowhere did have its good points sometimes. He still missed the city, but there the glary yellow street lights blanked out the night sky and made the stars hard to see. Here in the small village of Brampton there were no street lights near his house and the night sky, when it was clear, was just brilliant.

It would have been cool to share the sight with someone though, and he found himself wondering whether Sam was looking up at the same stars from his new home in Scotland. Danny's best friend, Sam Jones, had moved away with his family in the summer, and since then life had seemed very quiet. Brampton was hardly the liveliest place in the world, and without Sam it was basically dead.

Danny sighed and leant a bit further forward, craning his neck to see more (he imagined what Mum would say, though, and kept his feet on the floor). There was the Milky Way, a band of those little stars. Down near the horizon, just above the dark trees, was the really bright Evening Star – the one he knew wasn't a star at all but the planet Venus. There was no moon that night but that just made the stars even more vivid.

Then he stiffened.

Was that a flicker of white-blue light coming from somewhere behind the trees? It looked a bit like a camera flash. More lightning? But the storm was long gone. He stared harder into the gloom, but all he could see were the trees swaying gently, as if in a breeze he couldn't feel.

But now he could hear something too – a faint, low humming sound. It was a bit like the noise the fridge made, except this was deeper and quieter, almost on the edge of hearing. As he strained his ears he could detect something else – beneath and *inside* the humming. It was the faintest, most delicate whistling sound; not harsh like the teacher's blaring whistle on the sports field at school, but soft and melodic, hanging in the air like the strangest music, all of one note but rich and deep. It was somehow delicious to Danny's ears, and for one dizzying second he had the insane urge to climb out of the window to get closer to it. It wasn't just the sound either. In fact, he *felt* it more than anything; it was under his skin, making his cheeks and fingertips tingle. The dark trees seemed to quiver in the magic air.

Then the sound was gone, and Danny gradually realised the night was perfectly quiet again. The trees were still once more, frozen in the dark silence. He stood at the window for a little while longer, half mesmerised, as if he'd woken from a dream. Perhaps he'd just imagined that light? Or maybe it *had* been lightning after all, far off in the distance where there might be clouds he couldn't see. And that humming, whistling noise ... an aeroplane or a helicopter maybe, somewhere out of sight? Except it hadn't sounded like any

aircraft he'd ever heard before. It sounded like *nothing* he'd ever heard before.

Danny yawned hugely and his eyelids grew suddenly heavy. Must be the fresh air, he decided. After one last lingering look at that sumptuous night sky, he shuffled back to bed. Yawning again, he flopped his head down on the pillow and closed his eyes. He dimly thought about having a look round in the trees in the morning, to see if there was anything there.

His mind full of stars, Danny felt himself float up into the heavens. The ghost of the strange sound lingered in his ears, a strange and distant melody. Wouldn't it be totally awesome, he thought, if he really could fly up there into the sky, into space, to the stars?

If only ...

## Chapter 2

Mum's voice sliced though his jumbled dreams: 'Danny! It's quarter to eight! Get up, sleepy-head!'

Danny sat up, blinking in the yellow morning sunlight that streamed through his half-open curtains. He looked at his bedside clock and sighed. He'd overslept, and it was clear that his plan to search the wood at the bottom of the garden would have to wait until later. Right now it was breakfast, bathroom and school.

Downstairs in the kitchen, as Danny was munching through a bowl of his favourite apricot wheats, the silence

was broken by the phone's tinny ring. Mum picked it up and frowned as she listened to a voice yammering at the other end. 'Oh, really ...? Look, Colin ... OK, it's just I've got a lot on today and ... OK, OK then. Yeah ... nine's fine ... OK, bye.'

Mum put the phone down on the table very gently: which, Danny knew, meant she was especially irritated.

'Um ... was that Uncle Colin, Mum?' he asked.

'Yes.' She got up and started banging some plates around in the sink.

'What did he want?'

'Well, he wants to come round here. Right away, don't you know? After, what, how long's it been? Three months or so? Now suddenly it's urgent he sees me.' She sat down heavily and groped for her cup of coffee, her face white and creased – she'd been looking really tired recently. Danny wanted to ask why the prospect of a visit from Uncle Colin was annoying her so much. It wasn't as if they saw him very often. Although that, he realised, was probably part of the problem.

'He sounded a bit flustered,' Mum continued after a pause. 'I'll soon find out why, I guess. You know he still works at the Ganymede Institute, don't you? The place where I used to work. He's a senior manager, though, quite high up, rather above a mere researcher like me.' She gulped down some coffee. 'Right, come on, get your teeth cleaned and get going. It's nearly half past eight.'

Ten minutes later, just as Danny was coming down the stairs again, the doorbell rang and he heard Mum groan loudly. ‘What? Don’t tell me he’s here *already*?’

He was. She opened the front door (after pausing to twist her face into a plastic smile) to Doctor Colin Box – to give him his full title. Danny was always amazed that, although Colin was Mum’s brother, you wouldn’t think it to look at them. While his sister was tall and slender with long fair hair, Colin was short, plump and bald as an onion. Only their brown eyes looked sort of similar. (Mind you, Danny knew he himself looked nothing like either of them – with his red hair and green eyes, he definitely took after his dad.)

‘Hi sis,’ said Colin, wiping his glistening forehead with a crumpled hankie. ‘Flipping *hot*, isn’t it? Wouldn’t believe it’s September.’

Mum herded Uncle Colin into the sitting room so rapidly, the visitor didn’t seem to notice his nephew. Danny sat on the bottom step of the stairs, slowly pulling on his school shoes while a muted conversation took place on the other side of the sitting room door. He knew it was wrong to eavesdrop, but he wanted to know why Uncle Colin had turned up so abruptly and at such an odd time. What was so urgent? Also, he was curious about what happened at the Institute. He didn’t know much about it, except that it was something to do with space and satellites and things like that. When Mum had worked there – which was until about a year earlier – she would talk about it sometimes, though

often she'd suddenly stop and change the subject, as if she was afraid of saying too much. It sounded mysterious and exciting.

Then he had an idea. He knocked on the sitting room door and pushed it open. 'Erm – hello, Uncle Colin. Would you like a cup of tea?'

Colin was perched on the edge of an armchair, sweating inside his too-tight brown suit. 'Oh – hi Danny. Yes, I think...'

'I think you should be getting on to school now, don't you?' interrupted Mum in the light, sing-song voice she used when she wanted to make it completely clear that any argument was totally futile.

'Oh *Mum*,' Danny protested. 'It's only a five-minute walk.'

But Mum strode over and pecked him on the forehead. 'A five-minute walk if you *run*, yes. Off you go, Danny, love. Have a good day. Don't forget your bag.'

'Yeah. You too, Mum,' he muttered and backed out of the room. But just as the door began to swing shut, he heard Uncle Colin say, very casually, something that made his tummy do a somersault.

'Oh, sis, I meant to ask: did you – err – see or hear anything – um – *odd* last night?'

'Odd? How do you mean?' Mum replied.

'Oh, I don't know ...' Colin gave a nervous little laugh, even though his sister hadn't said anything funny. 'Like a ... bright light or a – a – sort of humming sound?'

‘No, no, I don’t think so. Why? Has something happened at the Institute?’

‘Well, something’s sort of gone missing – but I can’t talk about it, you know how it is. But an old lady in Brampton reported seeing something last night, so that’s why I thought … anyway – Helen, um, how’s the new job going? You’re working from home, aren’t you …?’

It was soon obvious nothing else of interest was going to be said, so Danny decided to set off for school. As he walked down the front path he wondered what Uncle Colin had meant about a bright light and a humming noise. What he thought he’d heard and seen at his bedroom window the night before had begun to crumble and fade in his mind, like a dream, but maybe it really had happened. And what, exactly, had gone missing from the Institute? Danny couldn’t wait for school to finish so he could get home and do some exploring in the garden – but what on earth might he find?

## Chapter 3

The school day rushed past in a hot blur. Usually Danny quite liked maths, but today the numbers kept squirming around in his head, like they were sweaty with the heat, and his brain couldn’t keep hold of them. The air inside the classroom felt like treacle that thickened as the afternoon wore on. So he gazed out of the window, towards the distant

trees in the wood behind his house. Was there really something there, he wondered?

In the end Miss Perry told him off: ‘Daniel Chaucer, wake up! Your head’s in the clouds today.’ He shook his head, threw out a ‘Sorry, Miss!’ and managed to focus on his decimals and percentages for about thirty seconds before his brain started to float away again, followed closely by his eyes. He glanced at the empty chair beside him, which had been unoccupied since Sam had moved away. The gap he’d left behind seemed a lot bigger than one seat, though. Everyone else had a friend in that small class, in the tiny village school, but there weren’t enough to go round. Sam would have been excited by the mystery of this missing *thing*, thought Danny. It would have been fun to look for it with him.

Then Miss Perry barged into his thoughts again. ‘Danny? Natalie’s going to sit next to you for today, OK?’

Danny looked up and groaned inwardly. There was Natalie Ford, the new girl, a dark and sullen little thing who looked at least a year younger than everyone else in their Year Six class. ‘Um … I thought she was sitting with Sandy and Chloe?’

‘Well, she, er … I thought we’d try her here. That OK?’ Without waiting for an answer, Miss Perry hustled away to grapple with some explosive whispering and giggling that was breaking out on the other side of the room. Danny grunted as Natalie sat down in the spare chair. *Sam’s* chair.

‘Hi,’ said Danny gloomily, while thinking *go away*.

‘Hi, I’m Nat,’ mumbled the girl. Danny caught a glimpse of red, puffy eyes and understood why she’d been moved. Sandy Wright had announced the previous week that she didn’t like the scraggy new girl, with her scruffy clothes, and Sandy could make anyone’s life miserable if she wanted to. Natalie was being moved out of harm’s way – although, as Danny knew, it wasn’t nearly far enough. You couldn’t escape from Sandy and her mates; and he had no intention of being anyone’s protector. That was more than his life was worth.

Finally the bell rang for the end of the school day and the whole class let out a hot ragged sigh. A faint rumble of thunder rolled across the ashen sky as Danny trudged across the playground. He hadn’t forgotten about exploring the wood, but he was in no mood to hurry. He could already feel the sweat prickling on his skin.

‘Hey look, it’s Carrot and the Dwarf!’ Sandy’s cold voice rang out across the tarmac behind him. Danny felt the familiar lump in the bottom of his stomach, and for the thousandth time he cursed his red hair. (A past attempt to convince Sandy it was strawberry blond had not gone well.) Just keep walking, he told himself. They’ll soon pick on someone else. But – wait a minute – *the Dwarf*? He glanced round to see Natalie Ford just behind him. Oh, great. He quickened his pace.

Then came a sound that made Danny’s stomach lump ten times heavier: the snarling Rottweiler laugh of Chad Wilson. Brilliant! There was only one thing worse than

Sandy Wright and Chad Wilson, and that was Sandy Wright and Chad Wilson *together*. They were the double act from hell. Worse still, they seemed to think Nat was with *him*. Nightmare!

‘Maybe she’s his *girlfriend*!’ barked Chad, and Sandy’s whiny giggle slithered through the air. Danny’s dad had always told him to stand up to bullies, to never run away – but he didn’t understand. And he was responsible for the red hair, so it was partly his fault anyway. Danny knew that Chad and Sandy and their assorted hangers-on were mostly just bags of noise. They rarely bothered to follow if you ran away, and Danny had only ever seen Chad actually hit someone once. These bullies were too cunning to go too far – to do anything that might get them noticed and stopped. Instead they made their victims’ lives miserable by degrees, bit by bit: a cruel shove here, a spiteful jibe there, usually under the radar but always *there*.

No, it was better to just get away as quickly as possible; so Danny broke into a jog, his tormentors’ jeers snapping at his heels.

Luckily, two corners and one zebra crossing later, he seemed to have left everyone behind. He slowed to a walking place, wiping the salty sweat from his eyes and glancing over his shoulder to check he wasn’t being followed. Then he turned off the street and began to cut across the village common towards home.

Another peal of thunder, so loud it seemed to make the treetops quiver, prompted him to quicken his pace again.

Often he'd pause by the bramble bushes and help himself to a blackberry or three, but not today – with a storm brewing, it was best not to get caught near trees. He jumped as a fat raindrop plopped onto the top of his head. Nearly home now, just one more line of trees and he'd reach his road.

Then with a shock he heard the thump of running feet behind him. Chad and Sandy immediately muscled their way back into his thoughts, but he'd hardly turned around before Natalie Ford came jogging past, throwing him a quick glance and a half-smile. Danny surveyed the way she'd come but there was no sign of the bullies: she'd obviously shaken them off, which was good. Natalie could certainly move. But why did she have to come this way? He didn't think she lived in this direction.

At least she didn't seem to want to hang around – within a few seconds she disappeared under the trees ahead. Danny trudged on, unwilling to risk catching her up. But no sooner had he ducked under the first branch into the green dusk than he saw Natalie again, just a few metres ahead. She was standing oddly still behind a tree trunk, facing away from him. Oh great – now what? As he unwillingly approached her, she glanced back and held a finger to her lips. She wanted him to be quiet – but why?

He edged up behind Natalie and peered over her shoulder. About ten metres away, in a clearing, stood a figure – clearly an adult, tall and thin. Danny squinted and watched, for some reason holding his breath. Although the

person was facing half away from them, Danny was pretty certain it was a stranger – the village was small, and he'd probably seen everyone there was to see within a week or two of moving here.

Danny was about to ask Natalie why she'd stopped, and why they were hiding from whoever was in front of them, when she held up her hand again for silence, leaned in close and whispered in his ear, 'Listen!'

Then, Danny heard the figure mumble – in a voice that could have been male or female – something that sounded like 'Missable Blob.' Surely not ... but then he heard the same words again, this time slightly more clearly.

*Missable Blob?* What the heck did that mean? Why was this strange person standing in front of a tree, saying *Missable Blob*? He looked at Natalie and she grinned at him. She seemed about to say something else, so Danny leant forward to listen – but as he did, he felt his foot catch on a tree root. He stumbled forward into the open, arms whirling like a demented helicopter, and his other foot came down on a small branch, which snapped in two with a crack like a gunshot.

The figure in the clearing swung around. For a few breathless moments it seemed to be looking at Danny, its face indistinct in the half-darkness.

'You there. Who are you?' the figure demanded. Then in four long, rapid strides it was right in front of him. Danny peered up into a sharp white face topped with short, slicked-back yellow hair. It took him a few moments to realise it

belonged to a woman. An amazingly tall one, dressed like a soldier with a khaki green jersey and trousers and impossibly shiny black shoes. Wide, ice-blue eyes gazed down at him.

The soldier-woman spoke in a deep, quick voice: ‘What were you doing, skulking around in the undergrowth? Were you *watching* me?’

‘Um … n-no …’ Danny felt his face burn. He’d never been a good liar.

The woman’s eyebrows shot up halfway to her custard-coloured hair, and a frown creased her milk-white forehead. ‘Did you – um – hear what I was saying, just now?’

Oh no! What could Danny say? That he thought she’d said *Missable Blob*, to a tree? She’d think he was a total loony. The woman didn’t seem to have spotted Natalie, who was still out of sight behind the tree trunk, and he felt suddenly very alone. Desperate to escape, he stammered out the only thing he could think of: ‘Um – s-sorry but – you’re a stranger and …’

‘Oh. Of course.’ The woman’s mouth creased into a tight little smile. ‘Don’t talk to strangers. Quite right. Very sensible. Never mind.’ She spoke as rapidly as she walked, spitting out the syllables like a machine gun. Then she took a small step back, so she was no longer towering over Danny – but her imposing frame still blocked his way, and her eyes never left his. He’d have to walk past her, but his feet seemed glued to the ground.

Then Natalie strolled casually out from behind the tree trunk, as if she'd just that second arrived. 'Alright, Danny? What's up?'

'Um ... yeah, alright Natalie. Just going home ...'

'Cool. Come on then.' Nat glanced up at the soldier-woman with casual disinterest, as if she was a lump of wood that was getting in the way. 'Excuse me, please, miss? We're late getting home and our parents will be worried.'

The woman stepped to one side. 'Well. Of course. Please accept my apologies, young *lady*.'

'Thanks,' said Nat. 'Come on, Danny.' The two of them hurried past soldier-woman. As they reached the road, Danny was certain those cold blue eyes were following them; the thought made his back prickle, but he dared not look around. His feet urged him to break into a run but he forced himself to walk normally.

They stopped only when they reached the front gate of Danny's house, and then at last he allowed himself to look back. Relief washed through him when he saw no sign of the strange solider. 'Thanks, Natalie,' he muttered, without looking at her. 'She was well creepy, that woman.'

'Too right. If it *was* a woman,' she replied. 'And call me Nat, OK?'

'But – wait a minute, why were you watching her anyway?' Danny's relief was fast being eclipsed by annoyance. That had been a seriously, *weirdly* embarrassing moment.

'Well – did you hear what she was saying to that tree?'

Danny hesitated. ‘I’m not sure ... it sounded like *Missable Blob*.’

Nat laughed. ‘*Missable Blob*? What the heck does that mean? Why would anyone go around saying *that* to a tree?’

‘Well I don’t know, do I? Why would anyone say *anything* to a tree? Maybe she was just some kind of nutter.’ Danny turned and stalked through the gate. ‘Seeya.’ Time to get away.

But just as he reached the front door, Nat called after him: ‘Hang on. So you don’t want to know what she *really* said?’

He stopped, key poised in mid-air, and reluctantly looked back. ‘What?’

Nat paused, one hand on the gate, a big smirk on her face. She seemed to be enjoying this. But he realised that, annoyingly, he did actually want to know.

‘*What?*’ he repeated.

‘She didn’t say *Missable Blob*. She said *Visible Bob*! ’

‘*Visible Bob*?’ Danny shrugged. ‘But that doesn’t make any sense either.’

‘Well it’s what she said.’

‘How do you know, anyway?’

‘I heard her. And I heard her earlier too, when I went home for lunch. She was in a field near my house, behind a hedge. She said *Visible Bob*. That was why I was watching her just now. I wanted to hear if she’d say it again. And she did.’

Danny felt like he was in some bizarre kind of dream. Apparently there was a woman walking around the village saying *Visible Bob* to various trees and shrubs.

He shrugged again. ‘Oh well. She’s definitely some kind of loony then, isn’t she?’

‘But what if she isn’t?’ Nat replied. ‘She’s with the army or something. I saw her get out of a green Land Rover this morning. I think it means something, this *Visible Bob*.’ Her eyes were wide with excitement, and for a fleeting moment Danny felt the same thing. Last night, and now this. Maybe something *was* going on? Maybe he and Nat could ...?

But he shoved down the feeling with brute force. No. Natalie Ford was the uncool new kid who nobody liked. If Chad or Sandy or any of the others saw them together, he was doomed. He could hear their taunts already. *Carrot and the Dwarf*. No way!

‘OK. Whatever.’ Danny pushed open the front door and slipped inside. In the cool gloom of the hallway he stopped and had the odd feeling he’d left something important outside. Then he shrugged and ran upstairs. He peered through a window and caught sight of Nat disappearing back up the road. She looked dark and small. Danny felt a stab of guilt, but what was he supposed to do?

He’d meant to explore the wood behind the garden as soon as he could, but no sooner had he headed back downstairs than an enormous rumble of thunder rattled the window panes. He looked through the kitchen window and

groaned as he saw a grey curtain of rain so thick it obscured the trees. That was that then.

‘Danny? Is that you?’ came a voice from the sitting room.

‘Yeah, Mum.’ She was on the sofa, bent over the laptop, yawning and rubbing her eyes. How long had she been there, working? ‘Want a cup of tea?’ he asked.

‘Thanks, love, that would be wonderful.’ She smiled and stretched. ‘Good day at school?’

‘Yeah, fine,’ replied Danny, even though it hadn’t been fine at all. He decided not to mention the tree-talking Captain Frost to Mum – she had enough to worry about.

Danny did his maths homework while waiting for the rain to stop (that would stop Mum nagging as well). But it wasn’t until after tea that the grey clouds finally broke and let through a sliver of watery sunlight. He bolted down the last of his apple pie and pulled on his trainers. ‘Just going in the garden, Mum,’ he said as he dashed through the kitchen door.

‘I can see that,’ she called after him. ‘Don’t get too muddy, will you? Be back in twenty minutes, OK? Dad’ll be home soon.’

The soaking-wet lawn sparkled in the late sunshine as Danny crossed it towards the small wood that belonged to his family’s rented house. Dad had been too busy to cut the grass for a couple of weeks, and it was long enough to wet Danny’s ankles. He squeezed under the branches on the

other side of the lawn, gasping as a drip of cold water trickled down his neck and back.

He wriggled through the undergrowth, carefully pushed back the last bramble and arrived at his destination. It was a circular clearing in the middle of the wood, about twenty metres across, where an old shed or outbuilding had once stood. Now all that remained were some low stony foundations, scattered with fragments of rotten wood and a few treacherous-looking rusty spikes, all choked in a tangled sea of bright green stinging nettles. Danny came here quite a lot but usually stayed at the edges, working his way around to reach the line of trees at the far side, beyond which a field of swaying corn stretched to the horizon. Only once had he gone to the centre of the clearing, and then he'd stumbled and ended up with hands covered in angry red welts thanks to the nettles, so he didn't feel inclined to try that again.

He was sure this was where the bright light had been coming from the night before, and maybe also the humming, whistling sound ... if he hadn't just dreamt it all, of course. But, he reminded himself, Uncle Colin had asked about those things too.

Danny stood perfectly still, watched and listened. Only after a while did he realise how eerily quiet it was. He couldn't hear anything at all, not even the sound of a bird or the buzzing of a fly. There was just ... wait a minute, was there a humming, very faint? Like the sound of machinery, carried on the breeze from a long way off?

Then he noticed something else. Some of the tallest nettles looked like they'd been half-flattened, their tops bent over as if pushed down by a giant invisible hand. That was really odd, because there was nothing there that could possibly be doing that. Just empty air. Danny stared harder. Yes, there was just clear space, shades of green and brown, shimmering in the evening gloom.

Wait a minute – *shimmering*? He blinked. Yes ... the air was sort of vibrating in a most curious way, ever so slightly, like the tiniest ripples on the surface of a pond. Or the heat haze just above a road on a hot sunny day. But it wasn't hot or sunny in that clearing; in fact it was getting quite chilly, so it couldn't be that. Were his eyes just playing tricks on him? It was getting dark and there wasn't really enough light to see properly. There was also that humming sound though, almost beyond hearing – a soft throbbing deep in his ears.

As he stood there, Danny had the clearest, most unmistakable impression. There was *something*, right there in the clearing ... he just couldn't quite see it.

### **« End of free sample »**

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