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Chapters 1-3

Chapter 1

Suddenly Danny was wide awake. He lay staring into the darkness of his bedroom. Why had he woken up? And where the heck was his duvet?

Not that he really needed anything to keep him warm that night. It was stupidly hot and the air hung still and muggy around him. His bedroom window was open but not even the slightest breeze stirred the curtains. Waking up was annoying because he'd taken ages to get to sleep in the first place. As he turned over on the bed the sticky sheet clung to him, wrapping him into a giant sweaty burrito. He tossed, sighed and wriggled for another few minutes, 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. He got only two steps before his feet caught on something and he landed on a heap on the duvet. He must have kicked it off in his sleep. 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.

He gazed out across the back garden towards the trees beyond. They looked as if they were cut out of black card. It was so *dark* here in 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 just like 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 after all. 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 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 it 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 as it was; without Sam it was basically dead.

Danny sighed and leant a bit further forward (keeping his feet on the floor, remembering what Mum would say) and craned his neck to see more. 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 really 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 from somewhere behind the trees? 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.

Now he could hear something: a low humming, a bit like the noise the fridge made but deeper and quieter. As he strained his ears he detected something else too, almost on the edge of hearing. 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 pure. It was somehow delicious to Danny's ears, and for one dizzying second he was gripped by the insane impulse to climb out of the window to get closer to it. 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 it was gone, and Danny slowly realised the night was perfectly quiet again. The trees were still once more, frozen in the dark silence. He stood for a little while longer, half mesmerised as if he'd woken from a dream. Perhaps he'd just imagined it? Or maybe it had been lightning after all, far off in the distance where there might be clouds he couldn't see. That humming, whistling noise ... an aeroplane or 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.

He yawned hugely and his eyelids grew suddenly heavy. Must be the fresh air, he decided. After one last lingering look at the 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. That ghost of that 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'd over-slept, 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 faintly 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 so gently that Danny knew 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 right away.’ Mum sat down heavily and groped for her cup of coffee. Her face was white and creased; she looked really tired recently. Danny wanted to ask why it was such a problem for her brother to visit them. It wasn’t like they saw him very often. Although that, he realised, was probably part of the problem.

‘He sounded a bit flustered,’ continued Mum after a pause. ‘I’ll soon find out why I guess. You know he still works at the Ganymede Institute don’t you? You know, 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 Danny, 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 front doorbell rang and he heard Mum groan. ‘What? Don’t tell me he’s here *already*?’

He was. Mum opened the front door (after pausing to twist her face into a plastic smile) to Doctor Colin Box – to give him his full title. 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 made polite noises while herding Uncle Colin into the sitting room so rapidly that the visitor didn’t seem to notice his nephew. Danny sat on the bottom step slowly pulling on his school shoes while a muted conversation went 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 interested in 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 she’d worked there – which was until about a year earlier – Mum used to 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, still sweating in 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 absolutely no argument was even vaguely possible.

‘Oh yes – well it’s only a five-minute walk so ... Mum, do you want ...?’

Before Danny could finish, 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 the door began to swing shut, he heard Uncle Colin say something that made his tummy do a somersault.

‘... oh, sis, I meant to ask, did you – er – see or hear anything – um – *odd* last night?’

‘Odd? How do you mean?’ he heard Mum reply.

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

‘No, no, I don’t think so. No. 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 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 more interesting was going to be said, so Danny decided to set off for school while the two adults burbled on in a way that managed to sound both bored and jolly at the same time. As he walked down the front path he wondered what Uncle Colin had meant about a bright light and a humming noise. What he’d heard and seen the night before had begun to crumble and fade in his mind, like a dream, but maybe it had really happened after all. 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

School 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 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. Then he glanced at the empty chair beside him. It had been unoccupied ever since Sam had moved away, and the gap left behind seemed a lot bigger and quieter than one seat. Everyone else had a friend in that small class, in that tiny village school, but there weren't enough to go round. Sam would have been excited by the mystery of that 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 here for today, OK ...?'

Danny looked up. 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 his answer, Miss Perry bustled away to grapple with some explosive whispering and giggling just 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 glimpsed red puffy eyes and understood why she'd been moved. Sandy had already announced the previous week that she didn't like the scraggy new girl with her scruffy clothes; and Sandy Wright could make anyone's life miserable if she wanted to. Natalie was being moved out of harm's way – but, Danny knew, not nearly far enough. You couldn't escape from Sandy and her mates; and he had no intention of being anyone's protector. Far too much hassle.

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 unmistakable whine rang out across the tarmac behind him. Danny felt the familiar lump in the bottom of this stomach, and for the thousandth time he cursed his red hair. (A past attempt to convince Sandy he 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. Oh great. He quickened his pace.

'They're black and white!' honked Sandy.

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, 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 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 hit anyone maybe once or twice. These bullies were too clever to go too far, to do too much that might get them noticed and stopped. Instead they made their victims' lives miserable by degrees, bit by bit, the cruel shove here, the 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 – better not to get caught near trees with a storm brewing. He jumped as a fat raindrop plopped onto the top of his head. Nearly home now, just through one more line of trees and he'd reach his road.

Then with a shock he heard the thump of running feet from behind. Chad and Sandy immediately muscled 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 pursuit. 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 even lived in this direction.

At least she didn't seem to want to hang around – within a few second 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, standing oddly still a few metres ahead, facing away from him. Now what? As he unwillingly approached, she glanced back and held a finger to her lips. She wanted him to be quiet – but why?

He edged up next to Natalie and peered over her shoulder and past the tree-trunk behind which she'd stopped. About ten metres away in a clearing stood another figure, clearly an adult, tall and thin. Danny squinted and watched, for some reason holding his breath. The village was a small place and Danny, who had seen everyone there was to see within a week or two, was pretty sure he'd never come across this person before.

The figure was facing half away from them. 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 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, and Danny leant forward to listen – then felt his foot catch on a tree root. He stumbled forward into the open, hands flailing like a demented helicopter; and his other foot came down on a small branch which snapped in two with a crack like a gun-shot.

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

'You there. Who's that?' Then in four long, rapid strides the figure 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 was a woman. Amazingly tall, and dressed like a soldier

with a khaki green jersey and trousers and impossibly shiny black shoes, but definitely a woman. Wide, ice-blue eyes gazed back down at him.

The 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 soldier-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 said *Missable Blob* to that tree? She'd think he was a total loony. She didn't seem to have seen Natalie, who was still out of sight behind him, 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 now longer towering over Danny – but her imposing frame still blocked his way, and her eyes never left him. 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, like 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, making 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. He felt his stomach relax with relief when he saw no sign of the creepy solider. 'Thanks, Natalie,' he muttered, without looking at her. 'She was well weird, that woman.'

'Too right. If she *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 the trees?’

‘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. Seeya.’ Danny turned and stalked through the gate. 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, big smirk on her face. Pausing for dramatic effect, no doubt. 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?’

‘Well 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. ‘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 one of those green land rovers 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. What with last night, and now this. Maybe something *was* going on? Maybe he and Nat could …?

But he shoved down the thought 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. Black and White.* No way!

‘OK. Doesn’t matter. Whatever.’ He 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 an upstairs 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 woods 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. When he looked through the kitchen window he groaned as he saw a grey curtain of rain so thick it obscured the trees. That was that then.

‘Danny? Is that you?’ he heard Mum call from the sitting room.

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

‘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 soldier-woman. Mum had enough to worry about as it was.

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,’ Mum called after him. ‘Don’t get too wet 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. 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, gasping as a drip of cold water coursed down his neck and back. Then, carefully pushing back the last bramble, he reached the clearing.

In the centre of the small wood that belonged to his family’s rented house was a circular clearing, about twenty metres across, where an old shed or outbuilding used to stand. Now all that remained were some low stony foundations, interspersed 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 over 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 had been where he'd seen that bright light the night before, and maybe also where the humming, whistling sound had come from ... if he hadn't just dreamt it, that is. But Uncle Colin had asked about something like that 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 very long way off?

Then he noticed something else. Some of the tallest nettles looked like they'd been half-flattened, their very 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 light and dark 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 calm pond. It was a bit like 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, 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, but it was there ...

To be continued ...