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Opening extract from

Dear Scarlett

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A Box

Bing bong. The doorbell.

I listen, but nothing happens.

Bing bong. The doorbell again.

My baby brother, Syd, pauses. He's feeding dinosaurs to the laundry bin. He smiles and hands me a slimy stegosaurus.

Bing bong, bing bong, bing bong.

Rats. Mum must be deaf or something.

I lower myself from the top bunk, headfirst. I've got the sheet wrapped round my waist. It's how I'd like to escape from a burning house, but this time all the bedding comes with me and I end up

crashing to the floor.

Bing bong!

"Coming!" I yell. I pull on some jeans and peer out of the window. I can only just see through the glass because all the rain there ever was seems to be trying to fall on our house, and most of it's racing down my window. There's a battered half-timbered car wedged between the large concrete rectangles that make up the watercress beds at the back of our house. Mr Hammond, the watercress-bed man, is talking to whoever it is, pointing at our front door, but I can't actually see anybody.

I don't recognise the car and, for one second, I wonder if something exciting might be about to happen. Perhaps someone's come to tell me I've won something.

I drag on yesterday's dirty T-shirt, and try to remember if I ever did enter the Sugar Puffs "Honey Monster challenge" or whether the cardboard packet's still stuck behind the toaster. I'm pretty sure it's stuck behind the toaster.

Putting my hands on the banisters, and without using my feet, I slide over Syd's stair gate and arrive silently at the bottom of the stairs.

I look round for Mum. She's doing her morning

yoga with earplugs. She hasn't even heard the door.

I stop in the hallway, looking out.

Somebody's standing on the other side of the glass, pressing against it; but because our front door's made of this ancient cloudy glass with little ships on, I can only see a shadow. I'm guessing they don't have an umbrella and they're trying to get out of the rain.

Bing bong.

For a moment I wonder if it's a mad axe murderer, but then decide that mad axe murderers probably never call at nine o'clock on a Saturday morning.

I look again at the shadow. I don't think it's a scary shadow, it's really no taller than I am.

I'll take a chance.

I yank open the front door.

"Scarlett? Scarlett McNally?" It's a round shiny man in a sheepskin jacket, with a Father Christmas beard. He is definitely not a mad axe murderer but he doesn't look like he's come to tell me I've won anything. He looks more like someone buying watercress. I'm sure people who tell you you've won something drive cars that were built this century. He's holding a box.

"Yes?" I say, looking round at Mum, who's

stretching now. She still hasn't noticed anything but I expect I can handle this.

"Morning, Scarlett. I was your father's solicitor." He's standing right in the doorway now; half of his jacket's dark with the rain.

Solicitor?

I don't know what to say, so I stare at the man. I go on staring at him. I can stare at people for ages, and they can never do it back anything like as well. It gives me the upper hand. I can see he's getting uncomfortable, so I give him a chance and blink.

He's looking really confused now. "I'm acting on your father's instructions."

"Dad's – but he's…"

"Yes, Scarlett, but he left these items in my care, to be given to you on, or around, your eleventh birthday. You were eleven last week, weren't you?" He grips the box as if he's about to whisk it away.

"Yes – Tuesday."

"Well, happy birthday last Tuesday. It's yours now." He plonks the box on the carpet, fumbles for the door handle, touches his hat and trips out through the door.

"Why did I have to be eleven?" I ask, calling into the rain.



"Haven't a clue – perhaps he thought you'd be old enough to avoid some of his less lovely friends?" He scuttles back to his car, his shoulders hunched against the rain. "Don't get too excited." The door squeaks as he clambers in and when he closes it, a small piece of wood pings off the side.

Reversing, he narrowly misses one of the watercress beds and lurches off through some puddles. The battered car swings out on to the main road and disappears.

I stare at the box, then I pick it up and shake it. It rattles, but only a little.

Dad.

It's from my dad.

My dad the burglar. My dad the thief. The person that no one mentions.

He's been dead for five years.