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Opening extract from

Saving Sophia

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Life with the stick insects

"Lottie," says Ned, thundering uninvited into my bedroom. "Will they let me take Oddjob to Bream?"

I stare at the thing in his hand. It used to be a stick insect, it might still be a stick insect, but mostly, it just looks like a stick.

"Not now, Ned, I'm busy," I say. "Actually, could you get out of my room?"

He's still standing there. I can feel it, but I go back to the tricky business of hiding my makeup deep inside my bag and try to ignore him. It's Dad's old rucksack and I'm packing it to take with me to

Bream Lodge Active Pursuit Centre.

I don't want to go.

I really don't want to go. But Ned wants to go so I have to go – because we always do everything together, whether or not I want to, and anyway Mum and Dad want to go moth-hunting in Cornwall – WITHOUT US.

Not that I want to go moth-hunting.

I stuff two old paperbacks down the side of the bag. *The Mystery of the Severed Foot,* and *One Against Many.*

"Ned, go away – I didn't ask you in."

"Why are you stealing Mum's books?"

"Ned, GO AWAY!"

He charges out, slamming my bedroom door behind him and the lump of plaster shaped like the Isle of Wight that's been clinging to the ceiling finally gives up the struggle against gravity, and crashes to the floor.

"Soreeeeeee," he says, sticking his head back around the door. "Actually, she – Mum – wants you." And he slams the door again.

"Why?" I say, picking my way through a cloud of plaster dust.

Ned's already halfway up the stepladder to the

loft. It replaces the stairs that fell down last August when Dad tried to fix them. "Dunno," he says. "She's not cross with you or anything." He vanishes into the darkness.

Letting the rucksack slide to the ground, I creep out on to the landing. I don't want to pack because I don't want to go to stupid Bream Lodge, which is as utterly dull as this place; absolutely nothing happens here, absolutely nothing happens there. Perhaps if I haven't packed, I won't have to go and I can be bored in my own bed, or not bored, because in my bed I can read, and when I read, I can escape.

For a wonderful moment I let myself into the world of stories. It's a place where things happen and interesting people live. I go there every night. I read and I dream, and I'm happy because it's full of colour and excitement.

Behind me, a final small piece of plaster slips from the ceiling and plummets to the floor.

My life is not just dull, it's skanky, too.

Mum, Dad and another woman's voice float up from the kitchen below. It *sounds* like Miss Sackbutt from school but it can't possibly be. I've kept this house a closely guarded secret for the whole year that I've been in her class and I've let

no one, absolutely no one, in or anywhere near the place. There is no way that I want anyone to know anything about our house; if they knew how grim it was, I'd never live it down.

I stand and listen at the top of the stairs.

It's all because of my parents. They're not normal; they're scientists. For fun, they read pamphlets about soil composition. Visit the compost heap. Or, for a treat, they take us to the National Humus Society headquarters in Okehampton where we eat alfalfa sprout sandwiches.

Sunday lunch is road kill.

I bet no one else has parents like mine.

I think of the last parents' evening – Dad smelled of silage, Mum wore a boiler suit – and I shudder.

I wish they could be like other people – wear suits, work in offices, eat ready meals. Watch telly. Then I could have friends home.

I could have friends. Full stop.

I approach the staircase. I'm going as quietly as I can, but the steps are tricky; the third tread's missing and the rest creak like coffins. When I reach the bottom, I lurk in the dark shadow under the stairs so that I can see into the kitchen.

There's a man. A stranger. He's tall and wearing

a very expensive suit. I know it's an expensive suit because Sarah-Jane Parkins' dad wears one like it so it must be. His face is turned away from me but I can see there's a twitch in his smoothly shaven jaw. Everything about him is perfectly turned out. Like a really smart bouncer.

I stare hard through the gap, collecting every clue I can from his appearance.

He's spotless, and despite looking like he's auditioning for the next James Bond movie, there's something altogether piggily pink about him, something that reminds me of a sausage, or a pork chop. It's probably the short blonde bristles sticking out over his collar.

Behind him bobs a minty green dress, stretched tight over a round shape. It *is* Miss Sackbutt and she's talking. "So when Mr Pinehead asked if he could meet someone else who was going on the school trip to Bream Lodge, I thought of Lottie, she's such a sensible girl, just the sort of influence Sophia needs, and I'm so sorry, I should have rung, but there's so little time, and he very sweetly offered to give me a lift in his rather wonderful car, and I still need to pack, seeing as we're off tomorrow…" Her voice tails off. I wonder if she's caught sight

of the South American fungi that Dad's been cultivating on top of the fridge.

Wonderful car? *Definitely* a spy.

"Of course, of course." That's Dad's voice. "Bream, excellent spot – home of the first Earl of Bream of course, he of the breadplants, eighteenth century castle, built in the baronial style—"

"Bob, shhhh," says Mum. "They want to know about the outward-bound place." She addresses the man. "It's not very smart, you know."

"We don't need smart – just safe," he says. He's got a soft voice that doesn't go with the twitchy jaw. "Somewhere to keep Sophia tucked up and cosy while we get on with one or two things. Good idea of yours, Miss Sackbutt, keeping the children busy over the holidays."

"Oh – thank you, yes," says Miss Sackbutt. She lets out a silly high-pitched laugh. The same one she does when the vicar comes to school. She fancies him, too. "It does prove helpful to some parents."

"It's supposed to be educational as well," says Mum, grinding eggshells in a pestle and mortar with such force that she has to shout over the noise.

"Naturally, educational too," says the man, "but

it's very handy, and – like here – a long way from London. Almost remote."

Mum looks at him over her pestle and mortar. "So," she says. "What brings you here, Mr Pinehead? To our 'remote' patch of England?"

"Business," he replies. He pulls at his cufflinks. They're gold, they catch the light.

"Oh, how interesting – what kind of business?" asks Miss Sackbutt.

"Yes, what exactly?" says Mum, pausing in the demolition of the eggshells.

There's a long silence. I wait for him to say MI5. Instead he says, "A bit of property development."

"Gosh – how thrilling!" giggles Miss Sackbutt. "Do tell, where?"

"Place called the Grange?" he says. "It's up a tiny lane…" His voice tails off and I hear Mum's sharp intake of breath.

"Goodness – anyway," she says, too loudly. "I wouldn't really call Bream *cosy*. More like *shabby*. Your daughter might find it a bit basic."

Miss Sackbutt raises her eyebrows. "Shabby? Oh, I wouldn't say that. It's just back to nature; there are no frills, if that's what you mean. Anyway, I thought it would be good if the girls met

before we left."

"LOTTIE!" yells Mum. I can tell that the pink man mentioning the Grange has irritated her.

Miss Sackbutt sidesteps suddenly, as if she's avoiding something on the floor. Mum's got a broom out and she's making the noises of someone who wants to drive people away: fierce sweeping and cupboard doors slamming. Then she says, "Do excuse me, Miss Sackbutt, Mr Pinehead. I just need to see to the chickens."

A cold draught on my face, a clunk, and Mum goes out of the back door. She slams it so hard that it bounces back open and swings wide, letting all the cold damp of the outside join the warm damp of the inside.

"Of course they should meet – LOTTIE!" bellows Dad.

I'll have to go in now.