

JACK'S SECRET SUMMER

JACK RYDER



HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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To my mum

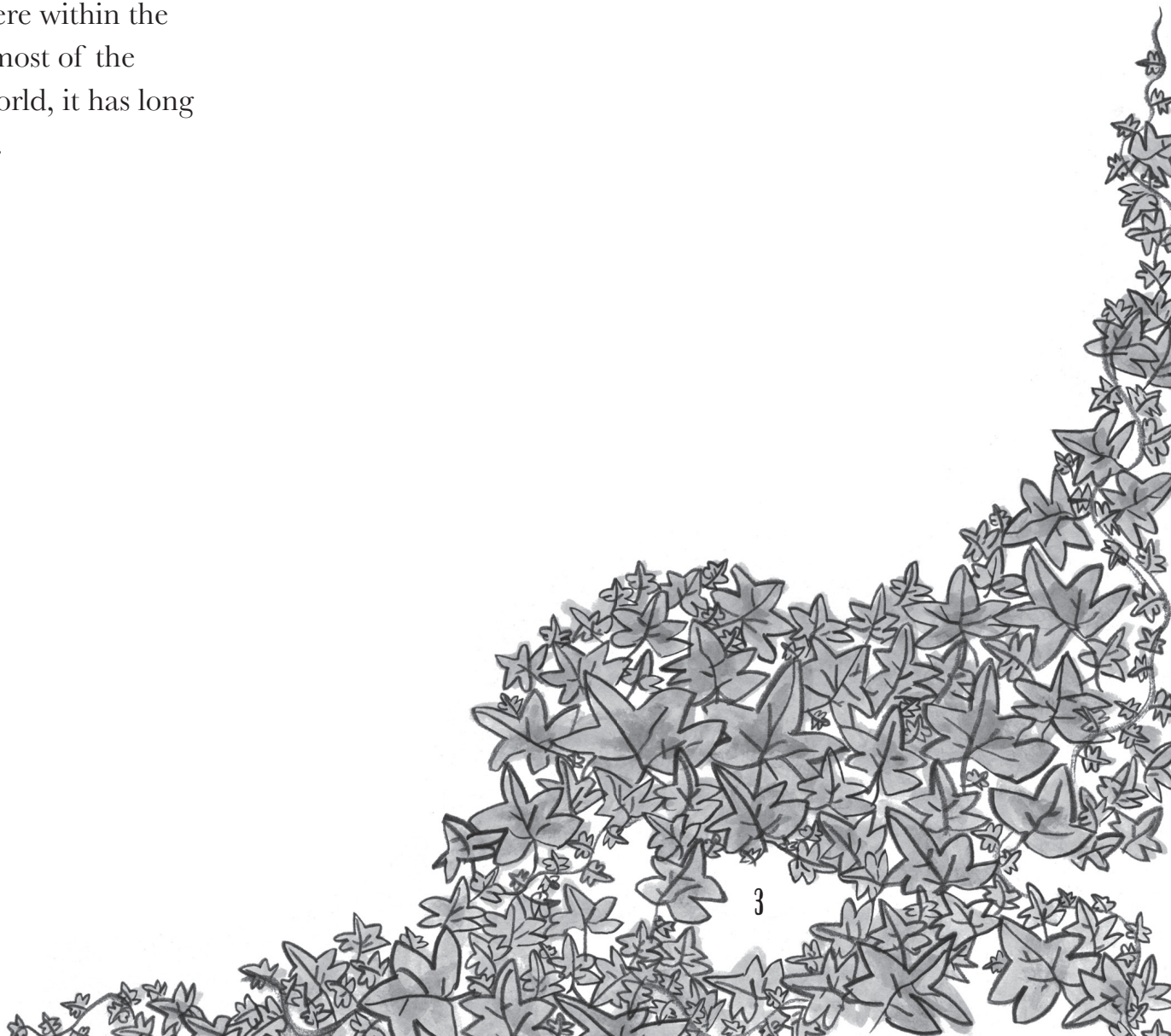


PROLOGUE

There is often a moment in a child's life when everything around them feels so marvellously wonderful and just absolutely ... perfect.

If only there were an invention that could bottle up the memory of this moment. It could be kept on a shelf for years and years, like some exquisite perfume, and then one day be uncorked with a magnificent pop! You could simply wave the bottle beneath your nose and relive the moment all over again. Wouldn't that be splendid?

Now, I shouldn't really be telling you this ... but such an invention does actually exist. In fact, it exists right here within the pages of this book. But like most of the wondrous treasures in this world, it has long been forgotten. Until now ...





THE BOY ON THE HILL

It was the end of July and today was no ordinary day.

It was, in fact, a very special day indeed. A day that thousands of children all over the country had been dreaming about for many, many weeks and weeks. It was the last day of term and the summer holidays had finally arrived.

In a school in a small town at the bottom of a very big hill, a loud bell rang out. A moment later, hundreds of children came charging out through double doors, all screaming and laughing and hurling their

bags up into the air. What a sight it was! With their arms stretched wide, every little girl and boy went soaring out of the school gates and into the open world, not once looking back.

However, there was one child among them who wasn't screaming or laughing or throwing his bag up into the air.

His name was Jack.

Jack lived at the top of the very big hill, and as he trudged his way up the slope towards his home it was clear he wasn't as excited about the summer holidays as the other children.

Up and up he climbed, dragging his feet as he went. The hill was so tall that whenever a heavy cloud floated by, all the little lanes would suddenly be blanketed in a magical fog and the houses would begin to disappear before your very eyes.

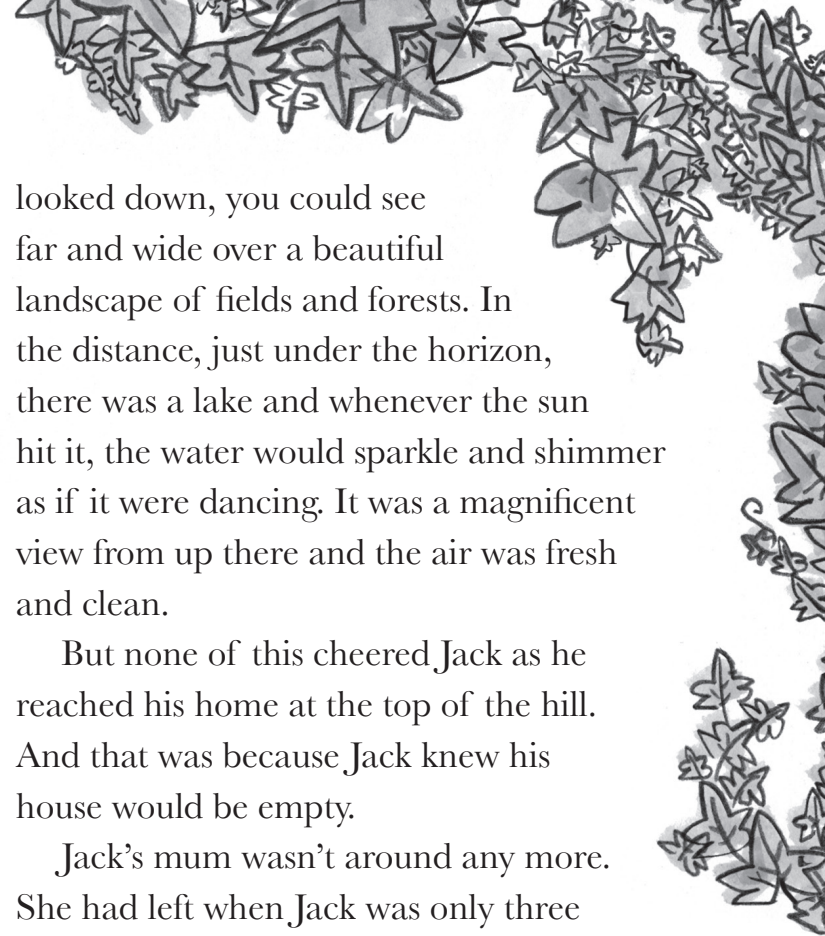
If you stood at the top of the hill and

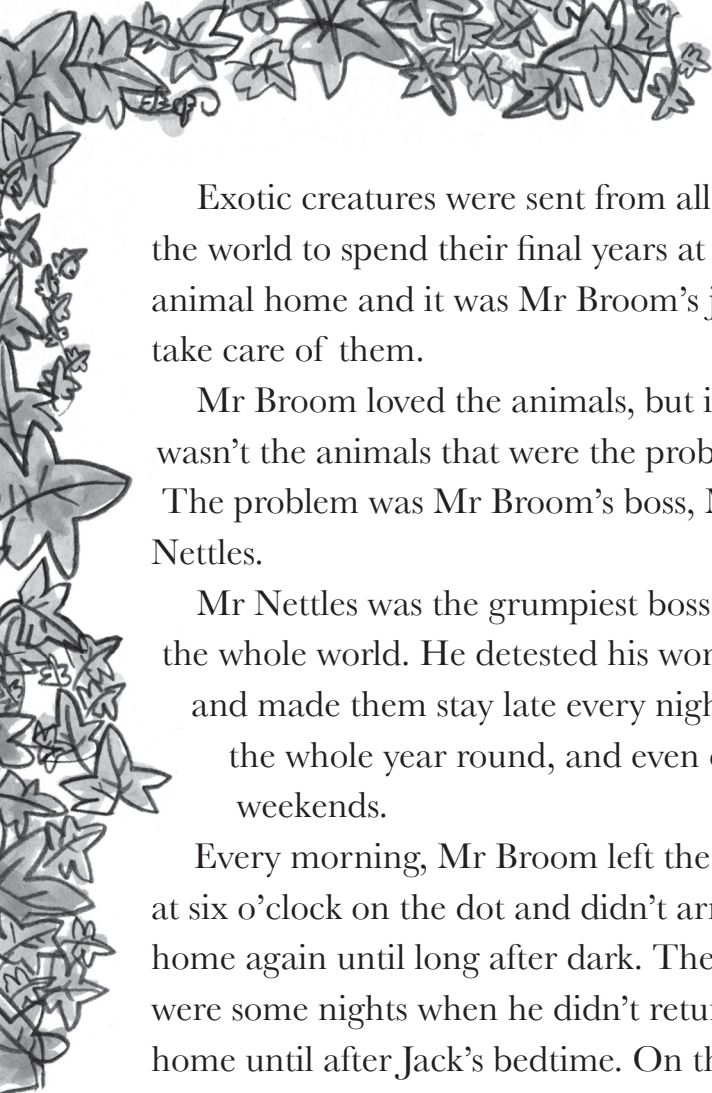
looked down, you could see far and wide over a beautiful landscape of fields and forests. In the distance, just under the horizon, there was a lake and whenever the sun hit it, the water would sparkle and shimmer as if it were dancing. It was a magnificent view from up there and the air was fresh and clean.

But none of this cheered Jack as he reached his home at the top of the hill. And that was because Jack knew his house would be empty.

Jack's mum wasn't around any more. She had left when Jack was only three years old. So Jack lived alone with his dad, Mr Broom. But Mr Broom worked hard, all day and most of the night, so Jack didn't get to see much of him either.

Mr Broom worked at the Retirement Home for Old Animals.





Exotic creatures were sent from all over the world to spend their final years at the animal home and it was Mr Broom's job to take care of them.

Mr Broom loved the animals, but it wasn't the animals that were the problem. The problem was Mr Broom's boss, Mr Nettles.

Mr Nettles was the grumpiest boss in the whole world. He detested his workers and made them stay late every night, the whole year round, and even on weekends.

Every morning, Mr Broom left the house at six o'clock on the dot and didn't arrive home again until long after dark. There were some nights when he didn't return home until after Jack's bedtime. On these occasions, Jack would make himself a jam sandwich for supper. After that, he would make another one for his father and leave

it on the table wrapped in kitchen roll before going up to bed.

Although Jack missed his father very much, it wasn't all bad. He was lucky in some ways, he told himself.

Being by himself at night meant that Jack got to do things that other children didn't. Such as turn the TV up really loud or jump up and down on the bed. Jack could stay up as late as he wanted, and there was nobody there to tell him to brush his teeth or go to bed.

But a lot of the time, Jack felt lonely, and as he let himself into his house on the last day of the summer term, he couldn't help but wish there was someone around to celebrate with.

The house was quiet as Jack turned the key in the lock and let himself in. A sudden sting of emptiness grabbed at his chest as

he kicked off his shoes. He left them by the front door and walked upstairs to his room.

He climbed on to his bed and lay there staring blankly up at the ceiling. The only sound was the faint ticking of the clock by Jack's bed.

He could feel himself longing for the simple pleasure of having another heartbeat in the house.

'Meowwww,' came a sound from the hallway.

'Ah, Ozzie,' said Jack, 'at least there's you, I suppose.'

Ozzie wasn't the best company, though. He was an old cat with long bushy white whiskers and most of his days were now spent sleeping under the radiator in the hall.

With a sigh, Jack turned over on to his side and stared at the wall next to his bed. It was covered with

an enormous collage of postcards. There were hundreds of them, showing pictures of faraway places, sandy beaches, shining modern cities and colourful fields filled with beautiful flowers.

The postcards were from Jack's mum. Jack was too young to remember the day his mother had left. His father had told him she'd wanted to see the world. And so one day she'd packed her suitcase and flown off in a plane. Jack had never really known her, but he still missed her and always looked forward in a sad sort of way to a postcard landing on the doormat.

Just as the silence was beginning to close around him, Jack heard a thumping sound coming from the other side of the wall behind his head.

THUMP THUMP THUMP

Jack sat bolt upright on his bed.

A loud voice from behind the wall

shouted, 'That's *disgusting*, Rocco. *Get out of my room!*'

This was followed by laughter and more thumping.

Even through the wall the shouts were deafening. Jack felt a little thrill of excitement. He slipped off his bed, pulled his window open and looked out.

That same moment, the window to his right was thrown open, and a scruffy head appeared, shortly followed by a body, which clambered out through the window and sat itself down on the window ledge. Its owner was a grubby little thing. His spindly legs were covered in crusts of dry mud and blades of grass were sticking out of his ears. His face was crinkled up in a frown, and he was wafting his hand in front of his nose, as if something in his room had gone off.

Jack was about to go back inside – he didn't want to look as if he was spying on

him – when the boy looked over in his direction and grinned.

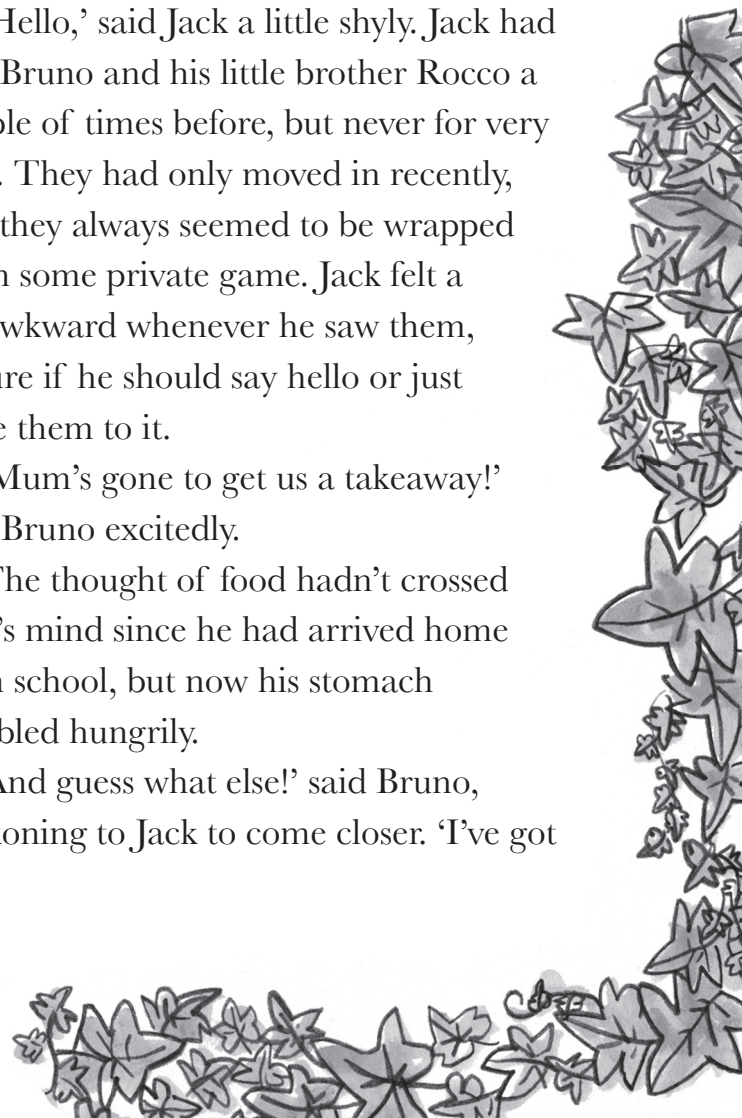
'All right?' he said, swinging his legs over the ledge.

'Hello,' said Jack a little shyly. Jack had met Bruno and his little brother Rocco a couple of times before, but never for very long. They had only moved in recently, and they always seemed to be wrapped up in some private game. Jack felt a bit awkward whenever he saw them, unsure if he should say hello or just leave them to it.

'Mum's gone to get us a takeaway!' said Bruno excitedly.

The thought of food hadn't crossed Jack's mind since he had arrived home from school, but now his stomach rumbled hungrily.

'And guess what else!' said Bruno, beckoning to Jack to come closer. 'I've got



even *better* news ...'

He was rubbing his hands together and grinning with the look of someone who had just come up with an evil plan.

Jack pushed his window open as wide as it would go and carefully swung out first one leg then another so he was sitting on his window ledge too.

But before Bruno got a chance to say more, another head appeared in the window next to Bruno's.

'Hello,' said Rocco, looking over at Jack with a grin. Rocco had messy hair and sticky-out ears and was wearing nothing but a baseball cap and a pair of bright red underpants.

'I said, *get out of my room, Rocco!*' Bruno ordered. 'Or I'll tell Mum you ate all her special chocolates!'

'I did not!' Rocco shouted.

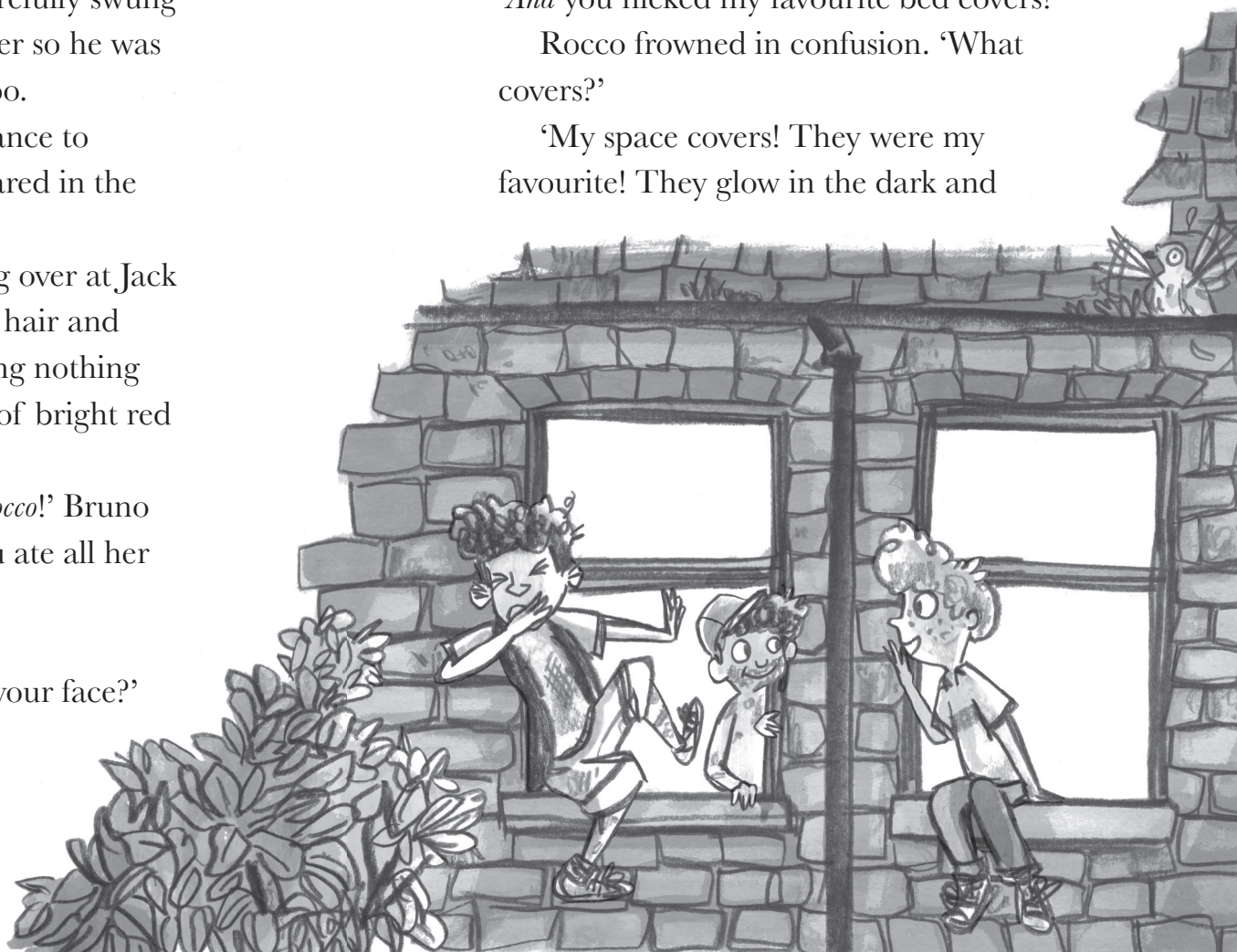
'Then what's all that over your face?'

Rocco's eyes crossed as they tried to peer down at the smudges of melted chocolate smeared all over his chin. He grinned sheepishly.

'You are such a thief!' shouted Bruno. 'And you nicked my favourite bed covers!'

Rocco frowned in confusion. 'What covers?'

'My space covers! They were my favourite! They glow in the dark and





everything. Where have you hidden them?’

‘I didn’t steal your stupid space covers!’

Rocco shouted. ‘I don’t even like space!’

‘*Everyone* likes space.’

‘Well, I don’t!’ said Rocco stubbornly.

Jack couldn’t help smiling. He wasn’t used to these sorts of sibling squabbles, having never had a brother or a sister himself. But he didn’t mind it. In fact, he thought it looked like fun, having someone to bicker with.

He decided, however, that this might be a good moment to change the subject, before things got more heated.

‘Um, what were you going to say before?’ Jack asked Bruno.

‘When?’ said Bruno.

‘Some good news, you said ...’

‘Oh yeah!’ Bruno replied cheerily. ‘Get this – Mum and Dad are going away! Something about their soppy wedding



anniversary. They’ll be gone for three whole days! Do you know what that means?’

Bruno and Rocco looked at each other and mischievous smiles spread across their faces.

‘No parents means ... no rules!’ said Rocco, and Jack burst out laughing as Rocco started tap dancing madly across the bedroom floor.

‘We’re gonna have some fun tomorrow, Jacky-boy!’ said Bruno, jumping down to join his brother in his silly dance. ‘Come over, if you like?’

Jack’s heart swelled with joy at the invitation. Before he could reply, a loud voice shouted up from below. ‘What are you two doing up there? Your food’s getting cold!’

‘*Takeaway!*’ screamed the brothers.

‘See you tomorrow, Jack!’ shouted Bruno

over his shoulder as he and Rocco went tearing out of the room and down the stairs for dinner.

And Jack was alone again. But this time he felt a little less lonely. He swung his legs contentedly and looked out at the view. From up here he could see all the way across his and next-door's back gardens, to the alley behind, and the old empty house that his granddad used to live in. And beyond that to the left, he could see right down the hill to the town below, the lights all twinkling on as the sun began to set.

Jack smiled to himself as he thought again of Bruno's words ... *We're gonna have some fun tomorrow, Jacky-boy!*

Perhaps the summer holidays weren't going to be so bad after all ...

