



Chapter 1

Mum, will you listen?

Mum's talking to Nanna. She said she'd only be a minute. That's such a lie. A minute means an hour in Mum time.

Oh no, I'm right. Mum has put the kettle on. She's going to the cupboard.

Two mugs, crackers, cheese and tomatoes. Poor Nanna. Mum is always on a diet. Nanna won't like those crackers and cheese. That doesn't mean Nanna is thin, or even sort of average. No, she is definitely round and walks with a wobble and she loves cookies. I love cookies too. Mum is average in height and weight, except she hates her thighs and the top of her arms. She is very funny when she starts to do star jumps in the middle of making chicken soup. Mum's short blonde hair fluffs up when she jumps. My sister, Samantha, loves it when Mum does that and she jumps with her. It wasn't so funny when Mum did it in the car park the other day. What if someone from school saw her? I

told Mum that I wouldn't help her with the shopping if she goes nuts like that in the car park.

"Mum. I've got to talk to you."

"Yes, Jack."

I give her the stare. She knows it is private.

"Jack, Nanna and I are talking about something important. Can it wait?"

No. It can't. "Mum, I need to talk, " I grit my teeth. Mum can see I'm stressed.

"All right, then." Mum and Nanna look at me.

This is PRIVATE, Mum. Nanna is grinning at me. It is VERY private. I give Mum the eye. Like she has to know. I want to speak to her alone. But what does she do? She just sits there with Nanna waiting. Mum always says I can talk to her any time about anything. It doesn't look like it, does it?

Nanna interrupts. "What is it Jack?" She smiles with her brand new teeth. Her last ones fell out at the dinner table. She was so embarrassed when we went teeth hunting under the table. I found them but two of the front ones had fallen out and the left front tooth was cracked.

“It’s nothing Nanna.” But it’s not nothing. It’s really hard to talk about this and it’s taken me ages not to feel guilty about bringing it up. I sigh loudly, but Mum just eats crackers and Nanna’s a bit deaf. They start talking again. I give up. Mum doesn’t care about me and I’m in a rotten mood. I may as well bother my sister. Samantha’s one year younger than me, that means she’s ten and a good person to bother.

Samantha’s bedroom door is open. She’s doing her hair. She’s always doing her hair. How stupid is that? How can someone do their hair for hours?

“Just go away, Jack. What are you laughing at? Go away.” Samantha’s ears have gone red. You can see her red ears really well, because she’s put her hair in bunches. She ignores me. I run my fingers through my prickly hair. Mum’s boyfriend, Rob cut my hair two weeks ago with his new hair clippers. It didn’t take long and it looked great. He shaved it pretty close to my head. Sort of bald really. Mum was so mad and that’s really rare for Mum.

Rob always gets a number two cut, which is quite short. Mum doesn’t mind it on him. Why is she worried about my hair cut? Usually I’ve got straight brown, ordinary hair. My hair’s growing out a bit now. When I put gel in it, it stands up. I really like that. Mum’s got better about my hair and laughs every time she sees it. She calls me Prickly. Samantha says it looks great and she’d know. I think Samantha is going to be a hairdresser when she grows up.

I'm going to check if Mum and Nanna have stopped talking. I stick my head through the doorway. Notice me, notice me, pleasssse ... "Yes Jack darling," Mum looks at the doorway.

Mum knows she's not allowed to call me darling. The last time Christopher heard her call me darling, he kept repeating it for ages. "Darling Jack, come and have a look at this. "Jack, Darling let's play ball. "Darlingest, let's go to the park." Eventually he stopped, only because I ignored him and in the end he got bored with calling me darling. When I told Mum, NOT to call me darling, she eventually agreed, but she didn't understand why and she breaks down and forgets.

"Mum, don't call me darling. You promised."

"But you are my darling."

"Mum, we've had this discussion before and just, please don't." I look at Nanna. "Is Nanna going home now?"

"Soon, Jack. Do you *want* Nanna to leave?" That's such a mean question. As if I'd hurt Nanna's feelings like that. Luckily Nanna didn't hear the question. I told you she's a bit deaf.

"No Mum. I want Nanna to stay," but just NOT NOW. Oh no, Mum makes another cup of coffee.

They go back to their endless talking. It's about Rob. This could take hours.

"Rob changed the oil in my car on the weekend." I can do that too, Mum.

"Rob helped carry up the groceries." You know I do that Mum.

"Rob took Mum to the pictures on Saturday night," and left us at home to mind Nanna.

Mum is thinking of letting Rob move in. He already lives with us four days a week. That's enough. I like Rob a lot, but it's always been Mum and us before and Nanna visiting. Mum talks so much about him. I think she's sort of lonely. Not lonely for kids or Nanna or friends, but lonely for a Dad. I don't want Mum to be lonely.

Rob, Rob, Rob ... BORING. I'm going to see Samantha. "Knock, knock."

"Go away Jack," Samantha says.

"Say, who's there."

Samantha huffs. "Will you go away if I do?"

"Yes," I lie.

“Okay. Who’s there?”

“Samantha.”

“Samantha who?”

“Don’t you know your own name? Ha. Ha. Ha.”

“That was very unfunny, Jack. Very, very unfunny. And you think you’re a comedian!” Samantha goes back to combing her hair.

Samantha’s in for it now. I make great jokes. “Look at your hair. Ha. Ha.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?” Samantha lifts up her chin. “Jack, you’re being irritating.”

“Oh yeah. Who’d wear their hair in pig tails. Only a pig. Squeak. Squeak.”

Samantha flicks the ends of her pigtails up making her light brown hair bounce.

“Leave, Jack. LEAVE.”

I slump onto Samantha's pale blue doona and make a big lump up one end and a big hole in the middle.

"Get off my bed, Jack." Samantha turns her back on me and concentrates on sprinkling gold sparkles into her hair.

I make myself really comfortable and lie back on the doona looking around. Samantha's room is the most colour-coordinated room I've ever seen. Everything is pastel and creams and pale blue. Her CD's are lined neatly on her shelf next to her CD player. Her schoolbooks are piled on one side of her desk and her writing paper is right in the middle. Perfectly framed pictures of a dolphin, a seal and a photo of Puss, our cat, hangs on the wall. I took the photograph. Puss looks great in it. Her eyes stare at you and her coal-black fur shines. Mum bought me a second hand camera last Christmas. Not the new automatic kind that does everything for you; a professional one. I can adjust the lens, focus on the background or the foreground, make pictures dark and mysterious or light and funny. I can take double exposures. I took the best photograph of Mum holding up the sun.

My room is not very tidy, but it has character, definitely character. There are my schoolbooks piled on my desk. On my window sill there are two jars with various life forms in them. I'm combining a few organic things. One jar smells. Something's not working, but the other one is the best. I've grafted an onion shoot onto old wrinkled potato. Imagine, how famous I'll be if I make a new vegetable? I already thought of a name. Jack's Po-onion. Samantha said the

name sounded like poo. She's so stupid, but I have had second thoughts. There could be other people as stupid as Samantha. Maybe I'll call my new vegetable, Jack's Ponto.

I've got all my detention cards framed on my wall. Twenty-two detentions this year. A record. There is a toolbox in one corner. That's the neat corner. Anyone who touches my tools is dead meat. I'm making a coffee table for Mum at the moment and have had a few problems with the height. One leg is shorter than the other three and it's a bit wobbly. I know Mum doesn't mind, but it would be awful if she and Nanna always have spilt coffee and Nanna is a bit clumsy these days.

My joke collection, car manuals and photographs are on the top of my bookshelf.

Mum's voice makes me jump. "Kids, Nanna's going now."

Samantha puts away her ribbons and brushes, then runs to hug Nanna. I follow her. My job is to help Nanna down the stairs. Our unit is up three flights of stairs. Nanna finds it hard to walk these days. Last year she had a bad fall and broke her arm. Sometimes I get sad, because I remember Nanna playing ball with us and pushing Samantha on the swings. She can't do that anymore.

At last, Mum to myself. "Mum, Mum." She is making dinner already and Samantha's helping her with the pasta sauce.

"Later, Jack darling. When I'm finished making dinner."

"Don't call me darling, Mum." I slump onto the lounge. Later. That's a joke. Rob will be here soon and then there'll be dinner, washing up and I have to have a shower and there's homework and television. Mum will be tired. There'll be NO time and I HAVE to talk to Mum.

I think I'm BIG trouble.