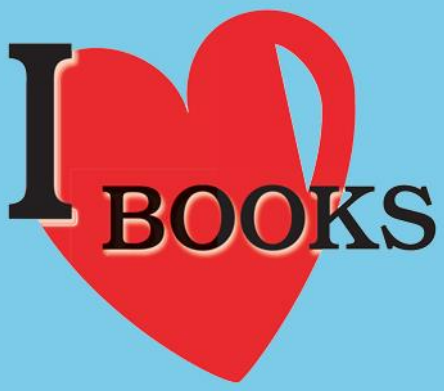

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Opening extract from

Holiday Ha Ha Ha!

Written by

Various Authors including Joanna Nadin, Jeremy Strong, William Sutcliffe and others

Published by

Simon & Schuster Children's Books

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First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

PB ISBN 978-1-4711-4622-0
eBook ISBN 978-1-4711-4623-7

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Typeset in Caslon by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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BETTER THAN PEANUT BUTTER

CANDY HARPER

MONDAY

It was the first day of the holidays. Some kids love doing crazy new things in the summer. My best friend, Josh, was going to learn to windsurf, and my next-door neighbour, Rhys, was going to stay in a yurt halfway up a mountain. But I wasn't interested in that stuff; I had no plans to do anything new this holiday and I was really pleased about that. Instead, I would spend my time doing all the things that I already knew I liked, starting with eating peanut butter sandwiches while watching every episode of my top TV programme, *Silver and Gold*, featuring ace detective Sam Silver and his sniffer dog Goldie. Absolutely no dangerous sports or visiting any strange new places with weird food for me. Just relaxing with all my favourite familiar things.

At least that's what I'd thought.

'You'd better get packing, Daniel,' my mum said, as she barged into my room. 'We've got to leave early tomorrow morning.'

'Where are we going?' I asked.

Mum started pulling clothes out of my wardrobe and piling them on my bed.

'Don't pull that surprised face at me. I told you about this weeks ago. Tomorrow, your dad and I are going to France to your cousin Louise's wedding and you and Simone are going to stay with Great Granny on her farm for the week. Now pack your bag.'

Mum stomped out of the room. Unbelievable! Why was *she* so grumpy? I was the one being sent away. Right at the beginning of the holidays, too. I would miss Josh's birthday and his swimming party. Also, David Chaplin, the most annoying boy in the school, had challenged me to a battle on my favourite computer game, *Vampire Vengeance*, in ten days' time and I really needed to practise. This was the worst possible time for me to go away. Why hadn't Mum warned me properly? I sort of remembered her saying something about a wedding, but I'd thought it was weeks away. Why would anyone spoil the start of the holidays by visiting people?

I flopped back on my bed. I'd never been to the farm and I hadn't seen Great Granny since I was a baby. My mum is always saying that I should try new things because I might be pleasantly surprised, but I don't like going to new places, and I especially don't like eating at other people's houses;

they eat weird vegetables instead of nice things, like peanut butter sandwiches. It didn't matter what Mum said, I already knew what this holiday would be like: the food would be disgusting, the farm would be stinky and boring and so would Great Granny.

I packed my stupid bag, (just to be on the safe side I put in a jar of peanut butter), and then I spent the rest of the afternoon eating and trying to work out how to get out of going. After three packets of crisps and seven biscuits, I decided the best idea would be to go on a hunger strike. No munching for me. Not a thing. I used all my willpower and I stuck to my strike.

Then my sister Simone yelled up the stairs, 'DINNER TIME, MONKEY FACE!'

The smell of the shepherd's pie was too tempting. I thought maybe I'd go on hunger strike after I'd had pudding.

At the table Mum said, 'Daniel, you won't need all those computer games you've packed, so I've taken them out of your bag.'

I dropped my fork. This was terrible. 'I do need them!' I said. 'I've got to play *Vampire Vengeance* every day.'

It was bad enough when I thought that my practising might get interrupted by Great Granny, but if I couldn't play at all, there was no way I'd be able to beat David. 'I have to take them with me,' I said.

Mum ignored me. She's a bit rude like that.

'Why can't I take them?' I asked.

Mum sighed. 'It's only for a week. You've got the rest of the holidays to stare at a computer screen. Besides, you need the room in your bag for really essential things.'

'What essential things? There's nothing more essential than computer games. What could I possibly need more?'

'Clean pants,' Mum said.

Simone laughed. 'He'd rather keep his games and have a smelly behind!'

I threw a pea at her. 'I could take pants *and* computer games. How much room can pants take up?'

'Yours could fill a suitcase,' Simone said. 'They have to be big to cover your ginormous bum.'

'That's enough, Simone,' Dad said. 'Daniel, there's no point in taking those games, Great Granny doesn't have a computer.'

I nearly spat out my shepherd's pie. 'How can anyone not have a computer?'

'Great Granny hasn't,' Dad said.

'But how does she live? How does she do her shopping?'

'Some people still like to do their shopping in shops,' Mum said.

'How does she send emails? Or play games? Or look up stuff about animals? Or find out what's on telly? Or … or have any fun at all?'

'Calm down,' Dad said. 'Life without a computer can be quite jolly. You'll find out how much fun you can have on a farm.'

My parents are always trying to persuade me to do things that they say will be 'fun' or 'jolly' or 'a good experience' but it usually involves eating something disgusting or going somewhere new where I don't know anyone. I like things to be the same. I like knowing exactly what I'm going to do and what it will be like.

'I don't want to do anything "jolly" and you can't make me,' I said.

Dad didn't say anything, but he raised his eyebrows. This is Dad sign language for 'we'll see about that'. I was losing the battle. 'I'm not going,' I tried again.

'You are,' Mum said. She's a bit childish as well as rude.

I thought that if I was going to lose then I ought to get something out of it. 'I'll go if you give me a dog,' I said.

Mum tutted.

'You're the one who says I should try new things.'

'I meant drama club, and clean finger nails and broccoli.'

'I thought you said that good behaviour was always rewarded.'

Mum looked at Dad.

Dad said, 'It is, but it doesn't work like that. You can't make deals. You'll be rewarded when you're not expecting it.'

'All right, I'll act really surprised when you bring the dog in.'

'You are *not* getting a dog.'

'Just think about it for a minute. If you gave me an animal

whenever you wanted me to do something, imagine how well behaved I'd be! It doesn't have to be a dog every time. Small jobs could be a guinea pig or a rabbit, maybe a mouse for cleaning my teeth.'

Mum shook her head. 'I'm not talking about this any more. You're going to the farm and that's final. You know, there might even be a dog there.'

I did like the idea of a dog. But it didn't make up for the fact that they were leaving me with an old lady I couldn't remember, who would probably make me do things I didn't like.

Mum thought she'd found a way to get me interested.

'There'll be lots of other animals for you to play with too.'

'But I don't want weird animals with horns and feathers and stuff. I just want a pet. I don't like the kind of animals that smell bad and make funny noises.'

'Neither do I,' Simone said. 'But Mum still makes me spend time with you.'

'If you bought me a dog then I would promise not to wallop Simone when she says horrible things,' I said.

'I'm not buying you a pet because you're not ready for the responsibility,' Mum said. 'I can't trust you to remember your PE kit, let alone to feed an animal. And who is going to walk a dog? I can never get you out of the house even on a sunny day.'

'That's because all the good stuff is indoors. If you'd buy

me an iPad I could watch episodes of *Silver and Gold* and walk the dog at the same time.'

'You've watched that dumb series a million times,' Simone said.

'But I'd be watching it and getting some exercise.'

'That's not the point,' Mum said.

'Don't start trying to explain the point to him,' Dad said to Mum. 'Daniel never gets the point unless you take the point and poke him in the eye with it.'

I thought that was a bit unfair. Just because I don't always understand what people are going on about. This was exactly the reason they shouldn't be sending me off to stay with a stranger.

'We haven't got time for any more explaining,' Dad said to Mum. 'You need to pack. Last time you packed it took longer than the holiday itself.'

So Mum went upstairs and Dad said, 'Right, Daniel, it's your turn to clear the table.'

'What will you give me for it?' I asked.

'Nothing,' Dad said. 'Just get on with it.'

'Oh, come on, it's got to be worth at least a goldfish.'

'You can have this,' he said.

And he threw a pea at me.

After I'd washed up, I went to my room and stared at the case for *Vampire Vengeance* on my desk. If David Chaplin beat me, I would never hear the end of it. I wished Mum and Dad could understand that all I wanted was to be left

alone to play it, instead of being stranded in the middle of the countryside, where I just knew everyone would be super boring and talk about the weather and growing vegetables. I sat on my bed and screwed up my face in concentration. What I needed was an idea; I would stay here until I had come up with a brilliant plan like the kind that detective Sam Silver would think of. Something so clever that it would get me out of going to the farm.

TUESDAY

When I got up the next morning, I still hadn't thought of anything even a tiny bit brilliant, so I decided I'd lock myself in the bathroom.

The thing about our bathroom is that it's downstairs, past the kitchen. Everybody else was upstairs so no one noticed I was in there for a long time. I heard Dad stomping about shouting, 'Where are my socks? Who's had my socks?' Which is a joke because the last thing anyone would want to steal is Dad's cheesy socks. Mum and Simone were having an argument. Mum said, 'Simone, every single item of clothing in your bag is black.'

Simone made this huffy noise and said, 'So?'

And that was the end of the argument.

I started casually whistling, hoping that Mum would hear. She didn't. I tried drumming a solo on the back of the door with a tube of toothpaste and the loo brush. Still nobody

came. I ended up singing *The Grand Old Duke of York* using a toilet roll like a megaphone and finally Mum knocked on the door.

'Are you all right, Daniel?'

'No,' I said.

'Are you having trouble trying to do a poo again?'

'No, I am not!'

'Because all that noise sounded like you've got constipation.'

Which is pretty much what Mrs Murphy said when my mum made me audition for the school choir.

'I am not having toilet trouble!'

'Well, if you haven't got a problem, you need to get a move on.'

'No!' I said.

Mum made a noise like a camel snorting.

'What's the matter now?' I heard Dad say.

'Your son is locked in the bathroom.'

Mum always says 'your son' to Dad when she thinks I'm being difficult.

'I'm not coming out,' I said.

'What, ever?' Dad asked.

'Never.'

'You'll miss your birthday. And Christmas. We'd only be able to get you really flat presents that we could post under the door. Like writing paper and a road map. You wouldn't like that, would you?'

I pretended to not be listening.

'What will you eat and drink?'

'There's lots of water,' I said. 'And I can eat . . .' I looked around the bathroom. 'There are some mints in the cabinet.'

'I wouldn't eat those if I were you. They've been there since before you were born.'

I rummaged around in between the bottles of shampoo and the tubes of cream.

'There's a packet of pills that look like chocolates.'

'Don't eat them!' Mum squealed. 'You know you mustn't take pills you find.'

'If you eat those, Daniel, you'll be pooping like a carthorse and then you really won't be able to come out of the bathroom.' Dad chuckled like everything was fine. 'Come on, son, out you come. Time we all got in the car.'

I clenched my fists. 'I am not coming out. I am not leaving all my best things behind. I am not missing Josh's party. I am not going to spend a week with a great granny I don't even know. AND I AM NOT GETTING IN THE CAR.'

I ended up in the car.

We'd been driving all morning when I remembered Sam Silver saying that there's always an alternative, and suddenly I thought of an alternative for me.

'Can I come to the wedding instead of going to the farm?' I asked.

'They don't want children there,' Mum said.

'Why not? What's wrong with children?'

'Everything,' Dad said.

'Your cousin Louise doesn't want any interruptions during the service.'

'But I'm not a baby. I'm not going to just start crying.'

'You cried when Dad made you go canoeing,' Simone said.

'That was last year! And canoeing is stupid anyway.'

'You cried when you had that dream about the giant spider,' she went on.

'That was ages ago.'

'You cried when I ate the last of the Chocolate Crispies.'

'That was—'

'This morning! Ha!'

I whacked Simone over the head. She punched me on the shoulder.

'Stop it!' snapped Mum. 'That's exactly the kind of behaviour Louise doesn't want in the church.'

'I know how to behave in a church,' I said.

Simone snorted. 'What about that time we went to the Christmas carol service and we got to the quiet bit where everyone was kneeling down and you farted really loudly.'

'That wasn't my fault! Mum forced me to eat those Brussels sprouts for lunch.'

'Anyway,' Mum interrupted. 'The point is that Louise wants a nice, sophisticated grown-up wedding. I'll bring you back a piece of wedding cake.'

'Couldn't you bring me back a puppy instead?' I asked.

'Not unless they're serving them for pudding,' Dad said.

We stopped at a service station for lunch and then it was

back into the hot, sticky car. Hours later, Mum said, 'We're nearly there now.'

I looked out of the window. All I could see was green. Nothing good is green. Cabbage and slime and bogeys are green. We were right in the middle of a big green nowhere.

We turned off the proper road and went down a bumpy track. We pulled through a metal gate and Mum stopped the car. Behind us was a huge barn-type thing. In front of us was a crumbly old house, beyond that were great big hills. Just hills and trees and fields.

Terrible.

I stumbled out of the car. My left foot had gone to sleep. I looked up at the white house with its thatched roof. There was a creak as the front door swung open.

'Granny!' Mum said, stretching out her arms to a tiny old lady who was making her way towards us, leaning on a stick with a carved top in the shape of a snake. She smacked Mum's arms out of the way.

'Don't call me Granny,' she snapped. 'It makes me sound old.'

Personally, I thought there were plenty of other things making her seem old. Like her white hair, the millions of wrinkles and the fact that she must be about a hundred and three. But Mum just said, 'Oh. What would you like me to call you?'

'Scarlett, you can call me Scarlett.'

Mum stared at her. 'But your name is Ethel.'

'Exactly. Darn good reason for you all to call me Scarlett.' She roared with laughter.

She was crazy. I knew she would be. Perhaps she would be too busy doing mad old lady things to make me go outside with all that mud and the scary, stampy animals. Maybe she wouldn't notice if I stayed in bed all day, reading the single *Silver and Gold* book I'd smuggled in my bag.

'Who are these two donkeys?' Scarlett asked. She pointed at me and Simone.

'They're your great-grandchildren, Daniel and Simone.'

Scarlett sniffed. 'When I decided I'd had enough of travelling the world, I chose this farm because it's so remote, but the relatives keep finding me. I knew I should have bought that hut in the mountains.' She looked at me accusingly. 'Relatives coming out of my ears.'

I looked at her ears. The only things coming out of them were bristly hairs.

Mum put on the face she uses when she's explaining my maths homework. She was trying to be nice, but really she was annoyed with Great Granny. 'I know you like your peace and quiet, but you have remembered, haven't you? You agreed that Daniel and Simone could stay for a week.'

'Oh, yes, yes. They can stay if they must. Plenty of room in the pig pen.'

*