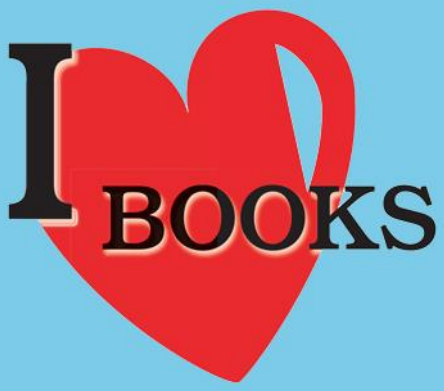


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Opening extract from

Out for the Count

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Chapter 1

A Perfect Cage

11.04 a.m.

Hugo James MacFee sat on the newspaper spread all over his empty bedroom.

"So, can I have a gerbil?" he asked his father.

"No," his father said as he painted round the last corner.

"I promise I'd look after it properly."

"I'm sure you would," his father said. "But that's not the point. Think of the gerbil. How would you like to spend your whole life stuck in a cage?"

"I'd let it out," Hugo said.

"But you're at school all day."

Hugo counted up on his fingers. "I'm only out for seven hours," he said.

His father painted over the last of the yellow with the new blue.



"It's a very long time to sit in a boring old cage all by yourself, with nothing to do," he said.

"I could give it things to play with while I'm gone."

"That might not be enough to keep it happy."



"But it would be clean and safe and comfy."

His father looked around at the four fresh blue walls. "This bedroom's clean and safe and comfy," he said. "A perfect cage, in fact, for someone of your size. But you wouldn't want to spend seven hours in here, all by yourself."

"I'd be all right," said Hugo.

His father dropped the paint brush into the tin. "Prove it," he said. "Spend the day in here."

Hugo looked round the empty room. "In here? The whole day?"

"For seven hours," his father said. "The time that you'd be out on a normal school day."

Hugo looked at his watch. It was eleven in the morning.

"Start at twelve," said his father. "Take an hour to get organised, then see if you can stick it. Midday until evening. Twelve o'clock till seven."

