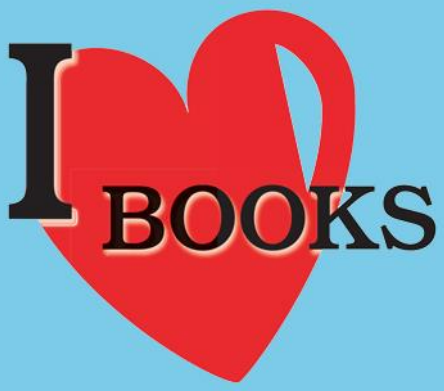


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The Front Room

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For Lexie Hamblin, with thanks

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CHAPTER ONE

Luck

Hannah woke up with a start. Her face was to the wall, and she felt again that awful presence behind her. She took a deep breath, gritted her teeth, and forced herself to look round. In the half-dark, shadows moved. She pushed herself out of bed, sprinted across the room and turned on the light.

All Hannah could see was her bed up by the window, a faded sofa, two armchairs, a

shabby carpet, and a table and two chairs up against the wall by the door. Even so, she decided to keep the light on. Her parents would be furious if she woke them up for the fourth night in a row. When she had dashed into their room the night before, their patience had snapped.

"There's nothing wrong with that room," her mum had said. "You're acting like a baby. Anybody would think you were two years old – not fourteen."

"You know your mother needs a good rest," her dad said. "If I have any more of this nonsense, I'll stop your pocket money."

Hannah was desperate for that pocket money. For over a year she had been practising on a friend's guitar while she saved up for her own. Her parents had even promised that if she helped out and did some baby-sitting they'd pay her the same as a proper baby-sitter. But she was also desperate not to sleep in the front room.

"Couldn't I sleep with Benjy?" she asked.

Benjy was Hannah's brother. He was three. He slept at the end of the corridor in a small room which led into the kitchen.

"Don't be silly, Hannah," her mum snapped. "It's only a little sofa bed."

“But, Mum –” Hannah had protested.



"That is *enough*," her dad said. "Now cut it out."

Hannah had given up and skulked back to her room. She clambered into bed with a sigh. Ever since Mum had lost the baby, her parents always seemed to be snapping at Hannah and Benjy, and at each other too.

Hannah pulled the curtains aside and stared out at the dark street below. Dad kept saying how lucky they'd been to find this holiday flat at all, and how the old woman who owned the place had gone out of her way to put a bed in the front room for Hannah. But it didn't feel very lucky to her.