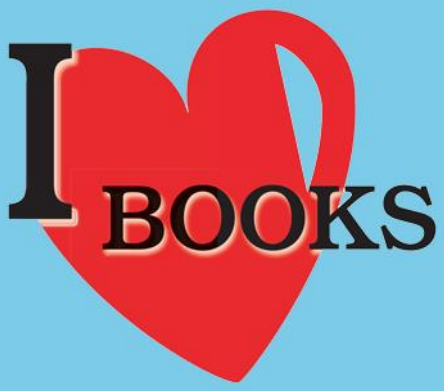


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Opening extract from

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Published by

Barrington Stoke Ltd

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Many thanks to the 27th Woolwich (Wesley Hall) Scout Group

First published in 2017 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

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

ISBN: 978-1-78112-571-7

Printed in China by Leo

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Chapter 1
Down a Drain

"Are you all right?"

Lena Lenik nodded. "I'm good." She smiled at her friend – but it was a thin little effort.

Bobbie Kemp wasn't letting it go at that. "You came into the playground looking like your dinner-money's gone down a drain," she said.

"No, I'm all right."

"You can tell me, Leens," Bobbie said. "Best mates means best mates. What's up, girl?"

"I'm OK, Bobz. Believe me. Would I lie to you?"

"Yes!"

And Bobbie was right. Lena wasn't OK. A long way from it. That morning her mother had done something she'd never done before. She'd rung the school where she worked and said she was 'unwell'. And Lena could see that she was. Her face had lost its golden look and her swirly blonde hair looked more like a wet mop.

The sounds coming from the bathroom had been really scary.

"Mama, what is it?" Lena had called.

"Leave me! Go away, Lena!"

"You sound really bad."

"Don't come in! *Odejdź!*"

When Mama said things in Polish, she really meant them. Lena made Jan his breakfast and they walked together to school. He talked about football and Lena worried. Mama was never ill. She never missed a day teaching at Parkside. At the Polish Club she was always so lively, singing and dancing and chatting to everyone. But that wasn't the Mama in the bathroom today. She was sick, and it had to be something really, really bad.



*

"Lena Lenik, have you left your brain behind this morning? It seems like it to me."

Lena looked up as Ms Julien loomed over her.

"I didn't come to work to ask every question twice over!" the teacher went on. "Get that sleep out of your eyes." She made a snort down her nose like a runaway horse.

Callum Spike sneered across at Lena. But that didn't bother her today. She had something serious to worry about – her sick mother. That's what was turning her insides over.