

Penguin



Readers

EMILY BARR

The One
memory of
Flora
Banks

be
brave

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CHAPTER ONE

The party

The music is too loud and the room is too crowded. There are more people in this house than any human could possibly know. I have been standing on my own in the corner for some time. I take a deep breath and start to push my way through strangers.

I look at my hand. **PARTY**, it tells me, in thick black letters.

The air in here smells strange. I want to smell the sea. The sea is outside of this house.

“Hi, Flora,” says someone. I don’t **recognize** him. He is a tall, thin boy with no hair.

“Hello,” I say back. I try to look normal. The boy is wearing jeans. All the boys here, and most of the girls, are wearing jeans. I am wearing a white dress with a pair of yellow shoes that don’t fit me very well. I probably dressed for what I thought a party was like.

I look at my hand. **I am 17**. I look down at myself again. I am a teenager, but I don’t feel like one.

When I was younger, I loved dressing up to go to parties. People told me that I looked like a princess in my party dresses. But I am too old for that now. I want to write that on my arm: “I am older than I think”. I should not wear party dresses now. I should wear jeans.

“Do you want a drink?” asks the tall boy.

He is nodding towards a table that has bottles and paper cups on it. I look at my arm. **Don't drink alcohol**, it says.

"Just water, please," I say. My arm also says that **Drake is leaving. P's boyfriend**. This party is happening because Drake is leaving. "P" is Paige. Paige's boyfriend is leaving. Poor Paige.

The tall boy gives me a cup of water. I feel better holding a cup – everyone here is holding cups. I move through the crowd of people, looking for Paige.

I am 17. This is a party. Drake is leaving. Drake is Paige's boyfriend.

A woman puts a hand on my arm and stops me. I turn to look at her. She has blonde hair, and she is older than most of the people at the party. **She is Paige's mum**. I don't know why, but she doesn't like me.

"Flora," she shouts over the music. She is smiling with her mouth but **not** with her eyes. "Flora, you're here and you're all right."

"Yes," I shout back, nodding.

"I'll tell your mother," she says. "She's already texted me three times to check on you."

"OK," I say.

"I'm going out now. Will you be all right? I know that you always need a lot of help," she says.

She is being unkind. She looks at me, then she walks away. That woman is Paige's mum, and this is her house.

The people around me are jumping around and doing the kind of dancing that I could not possibly copy. They

seem very pleased with the new jumpy song.

“Put the Pixies back on!” someone shouts, close to my ear. I jump and drop water down the front of my dress.

I need to leave and get away from here. Parties are not the way that I thought they were, with princess dresses and games and cake. I can’t see Paige. I have no one to talk to.

I am walking towards the door and the smell of the sea, when the music stops and people stop talking. It sounds like someone is hitting a glass with a spoon. I turn towards it.

The person with the glass is standing on a chair. This is Drake. He is Paige’s boyfriend, and Paige is my best friend. I met Paige when we were four and started school for the first time. We were both very nervous. I remember the games that we used to play in the playground. I remember helping her to learn to read. I helped her with her school work, and she found us trees to climb.

I see Paige near Drake. When I look at her, I am surprised that she is an adult. Drake has dark hair and thick black glasses.

“Hi, everyone. Thanks for coming,” Drake tells this room full of people, “and thank you for having this party for me. I’ve only been in Penzance for five minutes! Well, five months actually. It’s been amazing staying with Auntie Kate and Uncle Jon. It’s been great making so many new friends here. If any of you want to come to Svalbard and visit me in the most amazing place on Earth, please do it. I’ve dreamed of living in Svalbard for *ever*. I feel so lucky to be going to Svalbard.”

Someone behind me says quietly, “Can he say ‘Svalbard’ any more times?”

Someone with them laughs.

I have a phone in my hand. I use it to take a photo of Drake to **remind** me why I am here. I don’t know what Svalbard means. It is a strange word but I can see that Drake likes it.

“Of course,” Drake says, “while I was here, I was lucky enough to meet the lovely Paige.” He stops and smiles and goes a bit red.

“And through her,” Drake continues, “I met lots of you. I’ll miss you. I’ll always remember Penzance, and Paige. Anyway, I’ll put lots of snowy pictures online for you all. Thanks to Paige and her parents for letting us have a party in your house. Thanks, everyone!”

People start clapping, and Drake steps down from the chair. Paige looks over at me. She gives me a look that means “Are you OK?” and I nod that I am.

Paige is beautiful, with long, thick black hair and creamy skin. Today she is wearing a dress that is bright blue and short, and she is wearing it with heavy black boots. I look again at my stupid white “party” dress and try not to look at my horrible shoes. I feel all wrong.

I walk as quietly as I can through the side door, but nobody notices me leaving. The cool air hits me in the face, and the sea fills my ears and chest. I close my eyes for a second. **Thank goodness** I am out of there.

I am standing in the middle of the road, and it is night. A car comes towards me and makes a loud noise, then it disappears down the dark road. I should not be out on my own. Why am I out in the dark? Why am I alone? Where is my mum?

I am ten years old. I don't know why I am in an adult's body. I hate it, and I want to go home. I run across the road to the beach.

I look at my hand. **FLORA**, it says, and that is me. Under that, it says: **be brave**. I don't know why I am here, but I will be all right.

I am 17, it says.

On my other hand it says: **PARTY** and **Drake is leaving. P's boyfriend**. On my arm it says: **Mum and Dad: 3 Morrab Gardens**.

I know that I have parents, and I know where I live. That is good.

I find a place to sit on the stony sand and stare out at the sea. The sea is black. It mixes with the black night sky. Only the moon lights up the water. I hear someone coming up behind me but I don't look round. Then someone is sitting next to me.

"Flora," says the boy with a big smile.

I look at him. He has dark hair and thick black glasses. I move away from him a little.

"It's Drake," he says. "Flora, are you all right?"

"You're Drake? Paige's boyfriend," I say.

"Yes, I'm Drake. I've known you for months," he tells

me. “And I *was* Paige’s boyfriend. We’re not together any more because I’m going to Svalbard.”

I am not sure what to say to him.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. “Here on the beach.”

I look at my left hand. **Drake is leaving**, it tells me again.

He takes my left hand and reads it. “I love the words on your hands,” he says. “Do they work? Do they help you to remember?”

Now he is holding both my hands. I like the way his warm hands feel on mine.

The night has got colder, and there is a wind coming straight off the sea and into my face.

“What’s it going to be like where you’re going?” I ask quickly, because I am uncomfortable.

“It’s going to be amazing,” he says. “I’ve been once before, a long time ago. We went on holiday to Svalbard to see the midnight sun. I was ten and I’ve wanted to live there ever since. Now, after nine years, I’m finally going to do it. My course is taught in English because people go there from all over the world.”

He moves closer to me so that we are touching all the way down our sides. I lay my head on his shoulder since I have nothing to lose.

“You’re nineteen,” I say. “I’m seventeen.”

It seems important to remember that.

Drake puts his left arm around me.

“Paige and I broke up,” he says.

He turns his face to me and I turn mine to him. When