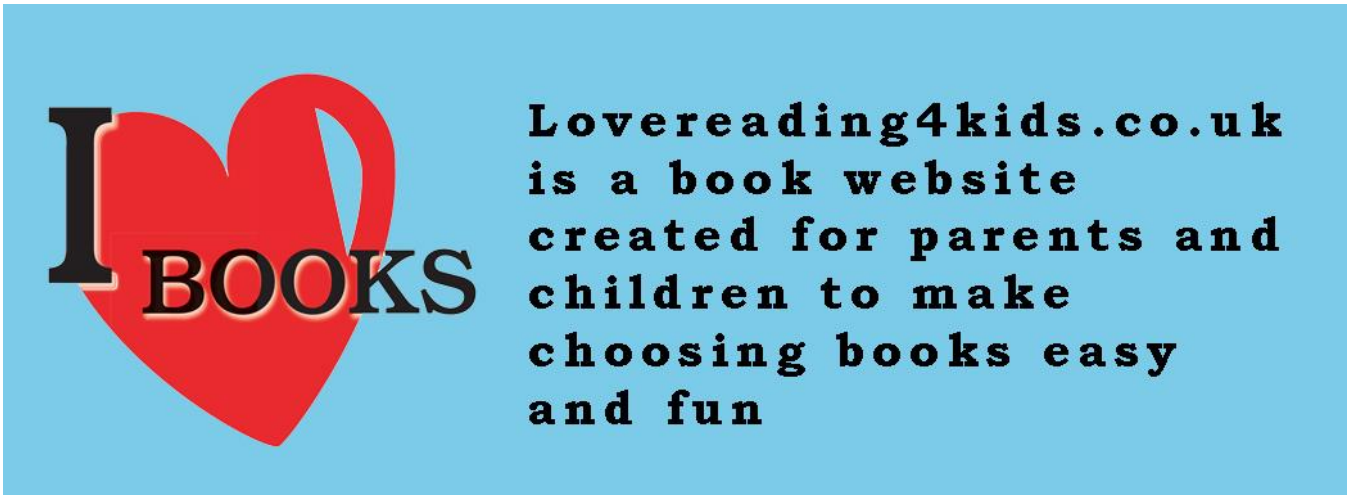


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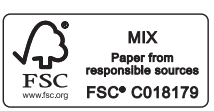
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PROLOGUE

May

I am at the top of a hill, and although I know I have done something terrible I have no idea what it is.

A minute or an hour ago I knew, but it has vanished from my mind, and I didn't have time to write it down so now it is lost. I know that I need to stay away, but I don't know what I am hiding from.

I am standing on the ridge of a mountain in an impossibly beautiful icy place. Far below me on one side is a stretch of water, with two rowing boats pulled up on the shore beside it. On the other side there is nothing; mountains stretch as far as I can see. The sky is the deepest blue, the sun dazzling. There is light snow on the ground, but I am hot, because I am wearing a big fur coat. This is a bright, snowy place. It cannot be real. I am in a place inside my head, hiding.

When I look back I see that there is a hut far below me, down near the boats: I have scrambled away from it, up the hill, away from whatever is inside it. I should not be out here on my own because I know that there is something dangerous.

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I would take my chances in the wild rather than face the thing that is in the hut.

As there are no trees I must cross the ridge before I can hide. As soon as I am over it I will be in the wild. There will be just me and the mountains and the rocks and the snow. I stand on the ridge and take two smooth stones from my coat pocket. I don't know why I am doing this, but I know it is essential. They are black, and together they fit neatly into the palm of my hand. I throw the stones, one after the other, as hard as I can, as far as I can. They disappear among the snow-covered rocks and I am pleased.

Soon I will be out of sight. I will find a place to hide, and I will not move until I remember what it is that I have done. I don't care how long it takes. I will probably stay here, in this cold place, for the rest of my life.

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PART ONE

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CHAPTER ONE

The music is too loud, the room too crowded, and it feels as though there are more people in this house than any human being could possibly know. The low notes vibrate through my body. I have been standing in the corner for a while: I take a deep breath and start to push my way between strangers.

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

'I can see that,' I tell it, though I don't know why I am here.

The air is thick with sweat and alcohol and perfume, mingled together into something nauseating. I need to get out of here. I want to smell the outdoors. I want to go to lean on a railing and stare at the sea. The sea is outside this house.

'Hi, Flora,' says someone. I don't recognize him. He is a tall skinny boy with no hair.

'Hello,' I say back, with as much dignity as I can muster. The boy is wearing jeans. All the boys here, and most of the girls, are wearing jeans. I, on the other hand, am sporting a

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shiny white dress with a sticking-out skirt, and a pair of yellow shoes that aren't even nice, and which don't fit me properly.

I imagine I dressed for what I thought a party was like: I stand out as the person who has got it wrong.

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

When I was younger, I loved dressing up to go to parties. I would put on a party dress, like I have tonight, and people would hug me and tell me I looked like a princess. But I am not young enough for that any more. If I had a pen in my hand I would write that on my arm to emphasize it: 'I am older than I think I am'. I should not wear party dresses any more. I should wear jeans.

'Drink?'

The boy is nodding towards a table which has plastic cups and bottles on it. I look at my wrist. *Don't drink alcohol*, it says. Everyone else here is drinking whatever is in the bottles. It might be alcohol.

'Yes please,' I say, to see what happens. My hand also informs me that *Drake is leaving. P's boyfriend*. This is a party that is happening because someone is leaving. P is for Paige. Paige's boyfriend. Poor Paige. 'That red one, please.'

I lick my finger and blur *Don't drink alcohol* until the words are no longer legible.

The tall boy hands me a plastic cup filled to the brim with wine. I wince at the first sip, but holding a cup of alcohol makes me feel that I belong here, and so I set off, looking for Paige.

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I am seventeen. 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 face her. She has whitish blonde hair cut in feathery shapes, and I can tell that she is older than everyone else because there are lines on her face. She is Paige's mum. I don't know why, but she doesn't like me.

'Flora,' she shouts, to be heard above the music. She is smiling with her mouth but not with her eyes. I do the same back at her. 'Flora. You're here and you're all right.'

'Yes,' I shout back, nodding vigorously.

'Well, I will inform your mother of that fact. She's only texted me three times so far to check up on you.'

'OK,' I say.

'Dave and I are going out now. Will you be all right? I know you always need a baby-sitter.'

She is being a bit mean.

'Yes, of course.'

She looks at me for a while, and then she turns and walks away. That woman is Paige's mum, and this is her house.

The music stops and I sigh in relief. It was loud and shouty. However, more music immediately starts up, and now the people around me are jumping around and doing the kind of dancing that I could not possibly copy. They are, clearly, pleased with the new, bouncier song.

'Put the Pixies back on!' yells someone, close to my ear. I jump and drip red wine down the front of my dress. It looks like blood.

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A girl steps back and stands on my foot. She has very short hair and huge earrings and bright blurred lipstick that makes her mouth look like a wound.

'Oh, sorry,' she says, and turns back to her conversation.

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

I am heading for the door, and the smell of the sea and the sound of not-music, and my home, when something makes a tinging noise, and a 'shhh' spreads across the room. Conversations grind to a halt and I stop in my tracks and turn my face in the direction of all the other faces.

He is standing on a chair. This is Drake. Drake is Paige's boyfriend, and Paige is my best friend. I am on sure ground with Paige; I met her for the first time when we were four years old and starting school. She had her hair in plaits, and I did too, and we were both nervous. I remember the skipping games that we used to play in the playground. I remember learning to read alongside each other: I already knew how, and I helped her. As we grew up, I helped with her school work and she wrote little plays for us to perform, and found us trees to climb. I remember starting our last year of primary school together, excited that we were going to go to secondary school.

I know Paige, and when I look at her, I am surprised to see that she is an adult. That means Drake is her real boyfriend.

I notice he has dark hair and black-framed glasses. He is wearing jeans, like everyone else. I don't recognize him.

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He scans the crowd: when our eyes meet he smiles for a moment and looks away. That means that, even though I don't recognize him, we know each other. There is a blonde-haired girl standing next to his chair, gazing up at him. She is too close. I think I have seen her before. She should not be looking at him like that, not if he is Paige's boyfriend.

'Hey – thanks, guys, for, you know, coming,' he tells this room full of other people. 'I never expected an actual party. I mean, I've only been in town for, like, five minutes. Or five months, to be more accurate. It's been amazing staying here, with Aunty Kate and Uncle Jon, and I never expected to make a whole pile of new friends while I was at it. I just thought Cornwall would be a little outpost of London and that I'd ride on double-decker buses and, y'know, eat terrible British food and become a soccer hooligan. Instead, I've had the greatest time. Keep in touch. If any of you want to come to Svalbard and visit me in the most amazing landscape on Earth, please do it. I've dreamed of living there for *ever*, and I'm so lucky to have the opportunity. But that's not to say that Cornwall hasn't been amazing, because it has.'

Someone behind me says quietly, 'He should bang on about the Arctic a bit *more*,' and someone else laughs.

I have a phone in my hand. I use it to take a photograph of him, to remind me of why I am here. I don't know what Svalbard means. It is a strange word. I can see that he likes it, though.

I drink the last of the wine, which is still horrible, and look around for more. I feel quite sick.

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'Of course,' he continues, 'while I was here, I was lucky enough to meet the beautiful Paige.' He pauses, and smiles, and goes a bit red.

The person behind me mutters, 'Punching *well* above his weight,' to a snort of agreement.

'And through her,' Drake continues, 'I met lots of you lovely people. I'll miss you. Anyway. Thanks, everyone. I'll put up the snowy pictures on Facebook for you all. That's pretty much it, I think. Oh, and thanks to Paige and Yvonne and Dave for letting us take over their house, when I was planning just to go to the pub. Now keep drinking and try not to smash up the place.'

There is a little round of applause as he steps awkwardly off the chair, but it is a muted one as everyone is holding a drink and clapping in a strange, non-clappy way.

I try to piece together what he has just said. He is leaving. He is going somewhere snowy, and he is excited about it. He has been here in Penzance for five months, staying with Aunty Kate and Uncle Jon. Paige arranged this party for him.

Paige is in a corner, with a group of people around her. She looks up and asks, using only her eyebrows, whether I am OK. I signal, with a tiny nod, that I am.

Paige is beautiful, with long black hair that is thick and slightly curly, and creamy skin, and cheeks that dimple when she smiles. She looks like a china doll. Today she is wearing a dress that is bright blue and short and figure-hugging, and she is wearing it with thick tights and clumpy boots. I tug at my stupid white 'party

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dress', and try not to look at my horrible shoes, and feel all wrong.

I wonder what I would look like in a mirror. I can't see one anywhere.

There is a little note on the inside of my arm. *Cinema with Paige tomorrow*, it says. *Cheer her up.*

I refill my plastic cup with red wine and walk out through the side door as surreptitiously as I can, as if anyone would notice or mind my leaving. The cool air hits me in the face, and the sea fills my ears and lungs. I close my eyes for a few seconds. Thank God I am out of there.

I am standing in the middle of the road, and it is night. I look around, trying to work it out. There is a white line under my feet. This is the exact middle of the road. A car comes towards me, fast, and honks its horn. I stare at the headlights as they come closer, but it swerves and carries on going, its horn still sounding as it vanishes into the distance.

I should not be out on my own. I shouldn't stand in the middle of roads. I have only just been allowed to start crossing roads without a grown-up. Why am I out in the dark? Why am I alone? Where is my mum?

I am wearing a white dress and weird yellow shoes. The dress has a red stain down the front, but when I touch it, it doesn't hurt. In my hand there is a plastic cup filled with Ribena. I have spilled a bit onto the white line.

I am ten years old. I don't know why I am in a grown-up's body. I hate it and I want to go home. I run across the

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rest of the road and find I am on the pavement beside the sea. There is the sound of music from somewhere. I lean on a railing, and try not to panic.

I take a sip from the cup and wince. This is not Ribena; but the horrible taste is familiar to my mouth, so I must have been drinking it already.

I look at my hand. FLORA, it says, and that is me. Those marks on my hand spell out my name. I hang onto that. I am Flora. Under that word, it says: *be brave*. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and gather myself. I don't know why I am here, but I will be all right.

I am 17, it says.

My other hand says: PARTY and *Drake is leaving. P's boyfriend*. Something else is blurred and impossible to read. On my arm it says: *Cinema with Paige tomorrow. Cheer her up*. On my wrist it says: *Mum & Dad: 3 Morrab Gardens*.

I know who Paige is. She is my best friend. I met her when we started school, when we were four. Drake is her boyfriend, but he is leaving, and Paige needs cheering up.

I know I have parents and I know where I live. I live at 3 Morrab Gardens. I need to go home, and that is what I will do. It feels unusual inside my head. I am dizzy.

I stare out at the moon's chopped-up reflection in the sea. There is a poster tied to the railing. MISSING CAT, it says. BLACK AND WHITE CAT WITH NO EARS. MISSING SINCE TUESDAY. There is a phone number to call if you've seen it. I take a photograph of the poster, and then another, and then another. I don't like the thought of a black and white

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cat with no ears wandering around lost. It will not be able to hear the traffic. I need to look for it.

I turn the phone round and take a photograph of my face. When I look at it I see that I look different. I am older than I ought to be. I am not ten.

There was a party. Drake is leaving. Paige is sad. I am seventeen. I need to be brave.

The water is black; it is a huge expanse of blankness that stretches into the night. The moon's reflection glimmers off the darkness. The bright esplanade is where the land runs out.

I wonder whether to go down to the beach and ruin these strange yellow shoes that I am not sure if I like or not by walking through boggy stones and sinking into patches of wet sand.

I could sit there and drink the cup of red drink that I am holding, and stare at the water for a bit longer. I walk carefully down a set of steps that has been worn away to dips in the middle, and set off across the stones. My heels do not sink after all. The stony sand is more solid than it looks. I find a place to sit, and stare out at the water.

The waves suck noisily at the stones as I hear footsteps coming up behind me. I don't look round. Then someone is sitting next to me.

'Flora,' says the boy, with a big smile, and he is beside me on the stones. Our shoulders are touching. 'That's wine, is it?' He takes the cup from my hand and sips from it. I

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look at him. He is wearing glasses, and he has dark hair, and he is wearing jeans.

I edge away a little.

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

'You're Drake?'

'Yes. Oh. Yes. I see what's happened. It's OK, Flora. I've known you for months. I was Paige's boyfriend.'

I am not sure what to say to him.

'It's all right. Honestly. But drinking wine? That's not like you.'

I want to say something, but I have absolutely no words. I want to try to pretend to be normal. This is Drake. He had a party, and now he's on the beach.

'What are you doing here?' I ask. 'Here, on the beach?'

I look at the words on my left hand. I can just make them out by the light from the street lamp, behind us. Drake is leaving, my left hand tells me again. The bit underneath it is unreadable. The right reminds me, again, to be brave.

He takes my left hand and reads it. His hand is warm on mine.

'*Drake is leaving*,' he says. '*P's boyfriend*.' We stare at the words together. '*Flora be brave*,' he says, reading the other hand. 'I love the words on your hands. Does it work? Do they help you remember?'

He is holding both my hands.

He says, 'I was Paige's boyfriend.'

I don't know why he is here. He is leaving. He's going somewhere else.

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

'What's it going to be like? Where you're going?' I talk fast, because I am uncomfortable.

He still has my hands. I like the way his warm hands feel on mine. I can see from the look in his eyes that I should already know the answer to my own question.

'It's going to be amazing,' he says. 'Cold. I've been once before. Like, 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. It's going to be epic.' He sighs. 'My course is taught in English because people go there from all over the world. Which is lucky for me really, because I'm shit at languages.'

He shifts up a little so that we are touching all the way down our sides. He lets go of my left hand and holds my right hand tighter.

It is impossible to focus on what Drake is saying because all the skin on my body has developed a life of its own. It has become hypersensitive, and all it wants, every part of all of my skin, is for him to touch me.

He is Paige's boyfriend and I don't know what he is doing here.

'Lucky for you,' I manage to echo. I lean my head onto his shoulder, since I have nothing to lose. 'You're nineteen,' I say. 'I'm seventeen.' It seems important to remember that. I take my head away, because he is my friend's boyfriend.

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Drake stretches up, puts his left arm around me, and pulls my head towards his shoulder. I lean on him, feeling his arm encircling me.

'Paige and I broke up,' he says.

He turns his face to me and I turn mine to him. When his lips touch mine I know this is the only thing in the world I can do.

Cars go by, above us. The waves crash in and out close to our feet. I am kissing Drake. I want to sit on the beach with him for ever. I have no idea how or why this is happening, but I know that it is the only good thing that has ever happened in my entire life. Lights flash. The rest of the world vanishes.

I manage to pull myself back to reality. A wave crashes to the shore and the wind blows my hair all over the place.

'Hey,' he says. 'Look. Do you fancy going somewhere with me? Like, now? We could spend the night . . .'

I stare at him. We could spend the night. Everything inside me tenses. I want to spend the night with him. I would have no idea what to do. He wants me to spend the night with him. The night. This night.

I have to go home.

'But my mum –' I say. We stare at each other, and I can't finish my sentence. I cannot look away from his eyes. I lean in to kiss him again but he edges back.

'Your mum,' he says. 'Oh God. I'm sorry. That was a terrible idea. I mean. What the hell am I . . . I didn't –'

He stops. I cannot speak, so I nod. He is looking at me with an expression that is difficult to read.

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'I'm OK,' I tell him.

'Oh, I'm sorry. I . . . I'd . . . I never . . .'

I take a strand of hair and pull it into my mouth. I can't finish my sentences. I want to tell him that I never expected this to happen to me. That I am sure it never has before. That I am confused and still trying to pull myself into the moment. That I will love him for ever for making me feel normal. That I would love to spend the night with him. Yet I cannot be this disloyal to my friend; and I cannot stay out all night, because I just can't.

'She'd call the police,' I add, thinking of my mother.

'The police. Jesus. I am an *idiot*. Forget I said it.'

The hairs on my arms are standing up with cold. The sea is chopping, blowing around, and the moon and all the stars have vanished behind the clouds. The sky is as blank as the sea.

'The thing is,' says Drake, 'I can say this, because, like, what the hell? You won't remember anyway. I would be, like, in the pub with you and Paige and looking at you, all like pretty and blonde and different from every other girl in the world, and wondering what it would be like to be with you. You're so different. And you always smiled at me. And I wanted to look after you and listen to the things you say because they're different from the things other people say.' He takes my face in his hands. 'Will you be OK, Flora?'

I nod. I want to write down that I kissed him, right now. It would be weird to scrawl on my arm while he's talking. I want to write down that he wanted to take me

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somewhere for the night. I don't want to forget that. Maybe we could do it. I could find a way. I could have a night of being normal, like a grown-up.

'I'll be fine,' I say. 'Look. If we go somewhere now, I could. I'm sure I could. Make it OK.'

'No. Sorry. My fault. We can't. But you know – maybe we can keep in touch? Just – let me know you're all right? You will, won't you?'

'Keep in touch.' I want to kiss him again. I want him to keep kissing me. Now that I have kissed him I want to delete everything in the world around us until nothing exists but Drake, me and a beach.

The water is close now, so we are edging back on an ever-smaller strip of beach. He takes a deep breath and squeezes my hand more tightly.

'Flora Banks,' he says. 'Look after yourself. Don't tell Paige about this. Don't tell your mum. Don't write it on your hand.' He picks up a stone from the beach and holds it out in the flat palm of his hand. It is a small stone, a smooth one. Even in the moonlight I can see that it is perfectly black, though most of these pebbles are slate grey.

'Take it,' he says. 'This stone is for you.'

He puts the stone into the palm of my hand and closes my fingers around it.

'I'll keep it for ever,' I tell him.

We both stand up. I am freezing, and stiff, and confused. I want to crawl into bed and relive these moments relentlessly. Drake stands too, and we stretch and look at one another.

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'Well,' he says. 'Well, I'll . . . Oh, I can't go back to Paige's tonight. Not now. I'll go, and in the morning I'll leave quietly.'

He kisses me again, on the lips. I lean against him and feel his arms encircling me. I know I will never feel this way again.

'Shall I walk you home?' he asks, but I shake my head. I stand on the beach and watch him leave. He reaches the steps and goes up to the real world. He stops and waves before he walks out of my life for ever.

I kissed the man of my dreams. And he is moving to somewhere cold and far away, with a midnight sun. I look up at the dark sky.

When I get home, my mother is waiting, in her dressing gown, her hair loose down her back, holding a cup of tea. She kisses my cheek, and looks me up and down.

'Good time?' she says.

'Yes.'

'You've been drinking.'

'Tiny bit.'

'Look at that stain on your dress. Never mind. Was it OK?'

I beam at her. 'Yes. It was lovely, thank you, actually. Absolutely completely lovely.'

'Good. Did Paige walk you home?'

'Yes.'

'Lovely. I'll have my shoes back then.'

I kick off the yellow shoes and go upstairs. In my bedroom I change into my pyjamas, and write down every

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single detail of my encounter with Drake. I write it at the back of an old notebook so Mum won't think to look there, and hide the book under all the other stuff in the box under my bed. I write a post-it note to remind me that it's there, and in the morning I wake up and read it over and over again.

I read it, but I don't need to, because I can remember it.

The black stone sits on my bedside table. I can remember. I am seventeen.

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