

ONE

Fremantle, Western Australia – September 1999

For Zoë the birthday tea is a sort of torture; it's particularly awful this year because there are so few of them. She picks up the knife and offers it, handle first, to Eileen.

'Would you like to cut it, Mum? It's your birthday cake, after all.'

Eileen peers at the cake and sniffs. 'Fruitcake again, I suppose?'

Zoë musters a tight, artificial smile; fruitcake is the only cake her mother will eat but whenever she makes her one, it is greeted with disdain and the trademark sniff. Jane, sitting alongside Eileen on the settee, smiles at Zoë and rolls her eyes.

'Mum makes the best cakes of anyone,' Gaby says, reaching for matches to light the candles. 'No! Don't cut it yet, Gran, we haven't sung "Happy Birthday".'

Shame is at the heart of it, Zoë knows that, her mother's shame and her own; it's been this way for decades, long before she was old enough to name it. There is disappointment too and resentment. This birthday business is easier when everyone is at home, but this weekend Archie is away on a fishing trip, Rosie is helping out at her university open day and Dan . . . well, who knows where Dan is, not that Eileen is the least bit concerned with his whereabouts. As the elder granddaughter, though, Rosie's absence has already been commented on with disapproval. Archie gets away with it because Eileen thinks the sun shines out of his bum.

So here they are: Eileen; her friend Betty from the retirement village; Zoë's cousin Jane; herself; and Gaby, who is struggling with a final, recalcitrant candle.

'Oh look, Auntie Eileen,' Jane says, 'isn't that lovely! God, you're good, Zoë, it's about a hundred years since I made a cake.'

'Right,' Gaby says, shaking out the match. 'Ready? One, two three *Happy Birthday to you . . .*'

Zoë, Jane and Betty join in.

'Very nice I'm sure,' Eileen says. 'A pity Archie isn't here, I like a good baritone.'

'Me too,' Betty agrees, 'but I think we did rather well without the men. Are you going to blow out the candles now, Eileen?'

Eileen makes a big production of inhaling and then deflates. The candle flames flicker. 'Only seven,' she says, looking across at Zoë. 'Why are there only seven?'

'One for each decade, Mum.'

'But seventy-seven is closer to eighty, so there should be eight candles.'

Zoë, who knows that eight candles would also have been wrong, opens her mouth and shuts it again.

'Well, you couldn't have eight, dear, could you?' Betty says. 'I mean, you might not make it to eighty.'

There is a small, icy silence.

Betty flushes. 'None of us might make it. I'm younger than you, Eileen, and I might not make it. None of us might be here tomorrow, for all we know.'

Jane stares at Zoë, her mouth twitching in an attempt to suppress a laugh. 'That's a cheery thought on your birthday, Auntie Eileen; better have some cake quick before we all cark it.'

Gaby snorts with noisy laughter and rolls back on the lounge.

Eileen looks around in disapproval, before once again drawing breath and blowing out the seven candles with a single puff.

'Splendid!' Betty cries, clapping her hands. 'Well done.'

'There you go then, Gran,' Gaby says, pushing the knife towards Eileen.

It will all be over soon, Zoë tells herself. In another hour or so, Jane, who has nobly collected Eileen and Betty from the retirement

village, will pack them back into her car and spirit them away, and she and Gaby will have the place to themselves. Until then, she just has to keep smiling.

By six o'clock they are gone and the house is unusually quiet; peaceful, Zoë thinks, or perhaps just lifeless. No music drifting from Rosie's room, no one banging around in the shed or the garage, no drone of sports commentary or early news. Thank god Archie will be back tomorrow; she hates it when he's away. Dan, though, could be anywhere by now, it's all hush-hush as usual. Sometimes – often – Zoë really hates the army and the SAS in particular. And when he's away in some secret location, when she has no idea when he'll be back, or whether he's lying wounded in a desert or jungle, or crushed beneath a bombed building, she feels rage that she has to live with this burden of anxiety time and time again.

Outside, the light is fading and there's a wintry chill in the air; wrapping her arms around herself, Zoë wanders out to the garden. The lantana, which defies all her efforts to contain it, needs cutting back again and there is something both irritating and admirable about its persistence. But the star jasmine, which is supposed to be climbing up the lattice along the side of the deck, seems to be struggling.

'What *is* up with you?' Zoë asks it. 'The woman in the nursery told me you would smother this lattice with lovely little white flowers.' She strokes a leaf, and crouches to feel the texture of the earth around the stem. 'Just get a move on, will you?'

Suddenly, it comes upon her again like a freak storm. Not just a hot flush but a fierce, overwhelming heat that foreshadows panic. Last time this happened she was in the supermarket, and she'd abandoned her trolley, walked blindly back to the car and sat there until she felt able to drive home. No one warns you about this, she thinks; they tell you about the hot flushes, mood swings, sleepless nights, but no one mentions panic attacks or their aftermath of despair. The panic grips her like a steel band closing around her chest, and she reminds herself it's just the

hormones. The mind, though, is resistant, it nags. Sooner rather than later, they'll all be gone; Dan, Rosie, even Gaby, and then what? Archie always says that'll mean more time for themselves and each other, 'to do our own thing'. But that's what bothers Zoë. Her thing is the kids, Archie, being a family, knowing that she keeps it all afloat, even if sometimes it seems as though they don't actually see her. Some nights she dreams she's looking down on herself from a high place and she is shrinking, becoming paler, weaker, fading into the landscape. She wakes from those dreams bathed in sweat, gets up quietly so as not to wake Archie, makes chamomile tea, and sits alone in the darkness watching old black-and-white movies or women with glowing skin, impossibly perfect teeth and Californian accents promoting beauty products or exercise equipment. No one, Zoë thinks, tells you what menopause is really like. No one mentions the scale of the effort required to mask the physical challenges and roller-coaster emotions with normality.

Back inside the house she finds Gaby stretched out on the lounge, wielding the remote control.

'What's that you're watching?' Zoë asks, putting on her glasses to read the TV guide.

Gaby waves the DVD cover at her. 'A documentary – *The Decade That Changed the World*.'

'A documentary?'

'For school. We're doing the sixties. Each team has to take one year and do a presentation. I'm the team leader for our year.'

'Which is?'

'Nineteen sixty-eight. It's awesome – the year all the important things happened. The year that most changed the world.'

Zoë looks vague. 'Did it?'

Gaby looks at her in amazement. 'You should know, you were there. You must know heaps about it.'

'Not really,' Zoë says as the screen flickers with an opening montage of black-and-white images: anti-Vietnam banners; cars burning on the streets of Paris; a Viet Cong holding a gun to the head of a manacled prisoner; then a tall, pale-faced man addressing a crowd. 'Who's that?'

'Alexander Dubček, Prague Spring.' Gaby rolls her eyes.

'Of course, and there's Martin Luther King,' Zoë says. 'And that's a demonstration in Trafalgar Square and there's Vanessa Redgrave, I never knew she was there.'

Gaby hits the pause button. 'Don't you remember *any* of it?'

Zoë shrugs, 'Bits, I suppose.'

'How can you *not*?'

'In those days I didn't read the papers or listen to the news.'

'But you worked at the BBC.'

'Answering letters for a radio soap opera.' Zoë knows she sounds defensive.

Gaby shakes her head in disappointment. 'But you were living in *London*.'

'Look, I was nineteen, and Jane and I were living in a damp old house in Kilburn having a good time. We were more interested in pop music, clothes and boyfriends. I was only a couple of years older than you are now and I don't notice you taking much interest in current affairs.'

'There's nothing much happening that's interesting now. Not like then.'

'You don't always notice history happening around you.'

'Yeah, okay, but *this much* history? Didn't you march or protest, or *anything*?'

'I did go on a march once – a huge anti-Vietnam rally – but I wasn't thinking about the cause. I was in love and trying to make an impression.'

'That is *so* pathetic.'

'Maybe, but at the time falling in love seemed like the most important thing in the world. Well, that and all the sex, of course.'

Gaby's head shoots up. 'Sex?'

Zoë nods. 'Everybody seemed to be doing it, except me at first, and so getting a boyfriend, finding someone to do it with . . .'

Gaby holds up her hands. 'Too much information.' She presses play and the screen comes back to life.

Zoë curls back into her chair, gazing at the images, thinking how full of hope she'd been then; how, once she got to London,

anything had seemed possible; how she had been both desperate for experience and terrified of acquiring it. Everything she knew about sex she had learned from whispered conversations in the school cloakroom, and it didn't correspond with Eileen's tight-lipped warnings that sex was nasty and dangerous. In Kilburn, sex was part of everyday life. There were no rules about not staying out late or bringing boys home, and virginity was a quaint and embarrassing encumbrance that everyone else had disposed of. The beds were unmade and frequently shared; linen was rarely washed; milk turned to sour, lumpy clouds in the ancient fridge; and cleaning was rare. The freedom from Eileen's close and critical surveillance was intoxicating. And then, of course, there was Richard.

'It *was* pretty amazing,' she says softly, too softly for Gaby to hear. And she closes her eyes, recalling the wet and windy afternoon on Beachy Head when she lost her virginity in the backseat of Richard's car; one arm dead from pins and needles, and the window winder digging into her back. 'It all seems so long ago,' she says, aloud this time. 'I was only nineteen, it seems like another world.'

'Duhhh!' Gaby says, rolling her eyes. 'It *was* another world. The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there.'

'That's it, exactly. I've heard that before.'

'It's in that book *The Go-Between*, the one about the boy who carried the messages.'

Zoë shakes her head. 'Haven't read it.'

'No,' Gaby says accusingly, 'you haven't. You were supposed to read it for book club and you didn't but Rosie and I did, and you got Rosie to make notes for you to take to the meeting.'

'Did I?'

'Yes, and she wrote you a whole lot to say about that "past is a foreign country" thing and then, when she'd done it, you decided not to go and she was really pissed off with you.'

'Ah yes, I do remember that. She *was* pretty upset. I wish I'd read it now. "The past is a foreign country", it's so true. The people are like foreigners when you look back. You even feel like a foreigner to yourself. I mean, I hardly knew who I was in those

days. Mind you,' she adds with a laugh, 'I'm often not sure who I am *these* days.'

Gaby sighs and rolls her eyes again. 'Well, I'm always going to know exactly who I am however old I get.'

'I hope so, darling,' Zoë says, almost managing to suppress her amusement. 'For your sake, I really do.'