

PART ONE

LAUREL

One

Rural England, a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere, a summer's day at the start of the nineteen sixties. The house is unassuming: half-timbered, with white paint peeling gently on the western side and clematis scrambling up the plaster. The chimney pots are steaming and you know, just by looking, that there's something tasty simmering on the stove top beneath. It's something in the way the vegetable patch has been laid out, just so, at the back of the house; the proud gleam of the leadlight windows; the careful patching of the roofing tiles.

A rustic fence hems the house and a wooden gate separates the tame garden from the meadows on either side, the copse beyond. Through the knotted trees a stream trickles lightly over stones, flitting between sunlight and shadow as it has done for centuries; but it can't be heard from here. It's too far away. The house is quite alone, sitting at the end of a long dusty driveway, invisible from the country lane whose name it shares.

Apart from an occasional breeze, all is still, all is quiet. A pair of white hula hoops, last year's craze, stand propped against the wisteria arch. A teddy bear with an eye patch and a look of dignified tolerance keeps watch from his vantage point in the peg basket of a green laundry trolley. A wheelbarrow loaded with pots waits patiently by the shed.

Despite its stillness, perhaps because of it, the whole scene has an expectant, charged feeling, like a theatre stage in the moments before the actors walk out from the wings. When every possibility stretches ahead and fate has not yet been sealed by circumstance, and then –

‘Laurel!’ A child’s impatient voice, some distance off. ‘Lau-*rel*, where are you?’

And it’s as if a spell has been broken. The house lights dim; the curtain lifts.

A clutch of hens appears from nowhere to peck between the bricks of the garden path, a jay drags his shadow across the garden, a tractor in the nearby meadow putters to life. And high above it all, lying on her back on the floor of a wooden tree house, a girl of sixteen pushes the lemon Spangle she’s been sucking hard against the roof of her mouth and sighs.

It was cruel, she supposed, just to let them keep hunting for her, but with the heatwave and the secret she was nursing, the effort of games – childish games at that – was just too much to muster. Besides, it was all part of the challenge and, as Daddy was always saying, fair was fair and they’d never learn if they didn’t try. It wasn’t Laurel’s fault she was better at finding hiding places. They were younger than her, it was true, but it wasn’t as if they were babies.

And anyway, she didn’t particularly want to be found. Not today. Not now. All she wanted to do was lie here and let the thin cotton of her dress flutter against her bare legs, while thoughts of him filled her mind.

Billy.

She closed her eyes and his name sketched itself with

cursive flair across the blackened lids. Neon, hot pink neon. Her skin prickled and she flipped the Spangle so its hollow centre balanced on the tip of her tongue.

Billy Baxter.

The way he stared at her over the top of his black sunglasses, the jagged lopsided smile, his dark teddy-boy hair . . .

It had been instant, just as she'd known real love would be. She and Shirley had stepped off the bus five Saturdays ago to find Billy and his friends smoking cigarettes on the dance hall steps. Their eyes had met and Laurel had thanked God she'd decided a weekend's pay was fair exchange for a new pair of nylons—

'Come *on*, Laurel.' This was Iris, voice sagging with the day's heat. 'Play fair, why don't you?'

Laurel closed her eyes tighter.

They'd danced each dance together. The band had skiffed faster, her hair had loosened from the French roll she'd copied carefully from the cover of *Bunty*, her feet had ached, but still she'd kept on dancing. Not until Shirley, miffed at having been ignored, arrived aunt-like by her side and said the last bus home was leaving if Laurel cared to make her curfew (she, Shirley, was sure she didn't mind either way) had she finally stopped. And then, as Shirley tapped her foot and Laurel said a flushed goodbye, Billy had grabbed her hand and pulled her towards him and something deep inside of Laurel had known with blinding clarity that this moment, this beautiful, starry moment, had been waiting for her all her life—

'Oh, suit yourself.' Iris's tone was clipped now, cross. 'But don't blame me when there's no birthday cake left.'

The sun had slipped past noon and a slice of heat fell through the tree-house window, firing Laurel's inner eyelids cherry cola. She sat up but made no further move to leave her hiding spot. It was a decent threat – Laurel's weakness for her mother's Victoria sponge was legendary – but an idle one. Laurel knew very well that the cake knife lay forgotten on the kitchen table, missed amid the earlier chaos as the family gathered picnic baskets, rugs, fizzy lemonade, swimming towels, the new transistor, and burst, stream-bound, from the house. She knew because when she'd doubled back under the guise of hide-and-seek and sneaked inside the cool, dim house to fetch the package, she'd seen the knife glinting by the fruit bowl, red bow tied around its handle.

The knife was a tradition – it had cut every birthday cake, every Christmas cake, every Somebody-Needs-Cheering-Up cake in the Nicolson family's history – and their mother was a stickler for tradition. Ergo, until someone was dispatched to retrieve the knife, Laurel knew she was free. And why not? In a household like theirs, where quiet minutes were rarer than hen's teeth, where someone was always coming through one door or slamming another, to squander privacy was akin to sacrilege.

Today, especially, she needed time to herself.

The package had arrived for Laurel with last Thursday's post, and in a stroke of good fortune Rose had been the one to meet the postman, not Iris or Daphne or – God help her – Ma. Laurel had known immediately who it was from. Her cheeks had burned crimson, but she'd managed somehow to stutter words about Shirley and a band and an EP she was borrowing. The effort of obfuscation was lost on Rose,

whose attention, unreliable at best, had already shifted to a butterfly resting on the fence post.

Later that evening, when they were piled in front of the television watching *Juke Box Jury*, and Iris and Daphne were debating the comparative merits of Cliff Richard and Adam Faith and their father was bemoaning the latter's false American accent and the broader wastage of the entire British Empire, Laurel had slipped away. She'd fastened the bathroom lock and slid to the floor, back pressed firm against the door.

Fingers trembling, she'd torn the end of the package.

A small book wrapped in tissue had dropped into her lap. She'd read its title through the paper – *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter – and a thrill had shot along her spine. Laurel had been unable to keep from squealing.

She'd been sleeping with it inside her pillowcase ever since. Not the most comfortable arrangement, but she liked to keep it close. She *needed* to keep it close. It was important.

There were moments, Laurel solemnly believed, in which a person reached a crossroads; when something happened, out of the blue, to change the course of life's events. The premiere of Pinter's play had been just such a moment. She'd read about it in the newspaper and felt an inexplicable urge to attend. She'd told her parents she was visiting Shirley and had sworn Shirley to deepest secrecy, and then caught the bus into Cambridge.

It had been her first trip anywhere alone, and as she sat in the darkened Arts Theatre watching Stanley's birthday party descend into nightmare, she'd experienced an elevation of spirits the likes of which she'd never felt before. It

was the sort of revelation the flush-faced Misses Buxton seemed to enjoy at church each Sunday morning, and while Laurel suspected their enthusiasm had more to do with the new young rector than the word of God, sitting on the edge of her cheap seat as the lifeblood of the onstage drama reached inside her chest and plugged into her own, she'd felt her face heat blissfully and she'd *known*. She wasn't sure what exactly, but she'd known it absolutely: there was more to life and it was waiting for her.

She'd nursed her secret to herself, not entirely sure what to do with it, not *remotely* sure how to go about explaining it to someone else, until the other evening, with his arm around her and her cheek pressed firmly against his leather jacket, she'd confessed it all to Billy . . .

Laurel took his letter from inside the book and read it again. It was brief, saying only that he'd be waiting for her with his motorcycle at the end of the lane on Saturday afternoon at two thirty – there was this little place he wanted to show her, his favourite spot along the coast.

Laurel checked her wristwatch. Less than two hours to go.

He'd nodded when she told him about the performance of *The Birthday Party* and how it made her feel; he'd spoken about London and theatre and the bands he'd seen in nameless nightclubs, and Laurel had glimpsed gleaming possibilities. And then he'd kissed her, her first proper kiss, and the electric bulb inside her head had exploded so that everything burned white.

She shifted to where Daphne had propped the little hand mirror from her vanity set and stared at herself, comparing the black flicks she'd drawn with painstaking care at

the corner of each eye. Satisfied they were even, she smoothed her fringe and tried to quell the dull sick-making sense that she'd forgotten something important. She'd remembered a beach towel; she wore her swimsuit already beneath her dress; she'd told her parents that Mrs Hodgkins needed her for some extra hours in the salon, sweeping and cleaning.

Laurel turned from the mirror and nibbled a snag of fingernail. It wasn't in her nature to sneak about, not really; she was a good girl, everybody said so – her teachers, the mothers of friends, Mrs Hodgkins – but what choice did she have? How could she ever explain it to her mother and father?

She knew quite certainly that her parents had never felt love; no matter the stories they liked to tell about the way they met. Oh, they *loved* each other well enough, but it was a safe old-person's love, the sort expressed in shoulder rubs and endless cups of tea. No – Laurel sighed heatedly. It was safe to say that neither had ever known the *other* sort of love, the sort with fireworks and racing hearts and physical – she blushed – desires.

A warm gust brought with it the distant sound of her mother's laughter, and awareness, however vague, that she stood at a precipice in her life made Laurel fond. Dear Ma. It wasn't her fault her youth had been wasted on the war. That she'd been practically twenty-five when she met and married Daddy; that she still trotted out her paper boat-making skills when any of them needed cheering up; that the highlight of her summer had been winning the village Gardening Club prize and having her picture in the paper. (Not just the local paper, either – the article had been

syndicated in the London press, in a big special about regional happenings. Shirley's barrister father had taken great pleasure in trimming it out of his newspaper and bringing it round to show them.)

Ma had played at embarrassment and protested when Daddy stuck the clipping on the new refrigerator, but only half-heartedly, and she hadn't taken it down. No, she was proud of her extra-long runner beans, *really* proud, and that was just the sort of thing that Laurel meant. She spat out a fine shard of fingernail. In some indescribable way it seemed kinder to deceive a person who took pride in runner beans than it was to force her to accept the world had changed.

Laurel hadn't much experience with deceit. They were a close family – all of her friends remarked upon it. To her face and, she knew, behind her back. As far as outsiders were concerned, the Nicolsons had committed the deeply suspicious sin of seeming genuinely to like one another. But lately things had been different. Though Laurel went through all the usual motions, she'd been aware of a strange new distance. She frowned slightly as the summer breeze dragged strands of hair across her cheek. At night, when they sat around the dinner table and her father made his sweet unfunny jokes and they all laughed anyway, she felt as if she were on the outside looking in; as if the others were on a train carriage, sharing the same old family rhythms, and she alone stood at the station watching as they pulled away.

Except that it was *she* who would be leaving them, and soon. She'd done her research: the Central School of Speech and Drama was where she needed to go. What, she wondered, would her parents say when she told them that she

wanted to leave? Neither of them was particularly worldly – her mother hadn't even been as far as London since Laurel was born – and the mere suggestion that their eldest daughter was considering a move there, let alone a shadowy existence in the theatre, was likely to send them into a state of apoplexy.

Below her, the washing shrugged wetly on the line. A leg of the denim jeans Grandma Nicolson hated so much ('You look cheap, Laurel – there's nothing worse than a girl who throws herself around') flapped against the other, frightening the one-winged hen into squawking and turning circles. Laurel slid her white-rimmed sunglasses onto her nose and slumped against the tree-house wall.

The problem was the war. It had been over for sixteen years – all her life – and the world had moved on. Everything was different now; gas masks, uniforms, ration cards and all the rest of it belonged only in the big old khaki trunk her father kept in the attic. Sadly, though, some people didn't seem to realize it; namely, the entire population over the age of twenty-five.

Billy said she wasn't ever going to find the words to make them understand. He said it was called the 'generation gap' and that trying to explain herself was pointless; that it was like it said in the Alan Sillitoe book he carried everywhere in his pocket, adults weren't supposed to understand their children and you were doing something wrong if they did.

A habitual streak in Laurel – the good girl, loyal to her parents – had leapt to disagree with him, but she hadn't. Her thoughts had fallen instead to the evenings lately when she managed to creep away from her sisters, when she

stepped out into the balmy dusk, transistor radio tucked beneath her blouse, and climbed with a racing heart into the tree house. There, alone, she'd hurry the tuning dial to Radio Luxembourg and lie back in the dark, letting the music surround her. And as it seeped into the still country air, blanketing the ancient landscape with the newest songs, Laurel's skin would prickle with the sublime intoxication of knowing herself to be part of something bigger: a world-wide conspiracy, a secret group. A new generation of people, all listening at the very same moment, who understood that life, the world, the future, were out there waiting for them . . .

Laurel opened her eyes and the memory fled. Its warmth lingered though, and with a satisfied stretch she followed the path of a rook casting across a graze of cloud. *Fly little birdie, fly.* That would be her, just as soon as she finished school. She continued to watch, allowing herself to blink only when the bird was a pinprick in the far-off blue, telling herself that if she managed this feat her parents would be made to see things her way and the future would unfurl cleanly.

Her eyes watered triumphantly and she let her gaze drop back towards the house: the window of her bedroom, the Michaelmas daisy she and Ma had planted over the poor, dead body of Constable the cat, the chink in the bricks where, embarrassingly, she used to leave notes for the fairies.

There were faint memories of a time before, of being a very small child, collecting winkles from a pool by the seashore, of dining each night in the front room of her grandmother's seaside boarding house, but they were like

a dream. The farmhouse was the only home she'd ever known. And although she didn't want a matching armchair of her own, she liked seeing her parents in theirs each night; knowing as she fell asleep that they were murmuring together on the other side of the thin wall; that she only had to reach out an arm to bother one of her sisters.

She would miss them when she went.

Laurel blinked. She would *miss* them. The certainty was swift and heavy. It sat in her stomach like a stone. They borrowed her clothes, broke her lipsticks, scratched her records, but she would miss them. The noise and heat of them, the movement and squabbles and crushing joy. They were like a litter of puppies, tumbling together in their shared bedroom. They overwhelmed outsiders and this pleased them. They were the Nicolson girls: Laurel, Rose, Iris and Daphne; a garden of daughters, as Daddy rhapsodized when he'd had a pint too many. Unholy terrors, as Grandma proclaimed after their holiday visits.

She could hear the distant whoops and squeals now, the faraway watery sounds of summer by the stream. Something inside her tightened as if a rope had been pulled. She could picture them, like a tableau from a long-ago painting. Skirts tucked into the sides of their knickers, chasing one another through the shallows; Rose escaped to safety on the rocks, thin ankles dangling in the water as she sketched with a wet stick; Iris, drenched somehow and furious about it; Daphne, with her corkscrew ringlets, doubled over laughing.

The plaid picnic rug would be laid out flat on the grassy bank and their mother would be standing nearby, knee-deep in the bend where the water ran fastest, setting her latest

boat to sail. Daddy would be watching from the side, trousers rolled up and a cigarette balanced on his lip. On his face – Laurel could picture him so clearly – he'd be wearing that customary look of mild bemusement, as if he couldn't quite believe his luck that life had brought him to this very place, this very time.

Splashing at their father's feet, squealing and laughing as his fat little hands reached out for Mummy's boat, would be the baby. Light of all their lives . . .

The baby. He had a name, of course, it was Gerald, but no one ever called him that. It was a grown-up name and he was just such a *baby*. Two years old today, but his face was still round and rich with dimples, his eyes shone with mischief, and then there were those deliciously fat white legs. Sometimes it was all Laurel could do not to squeeze them too hard. They all fought to be his favourite and they all claimed victory, but Laurel knew his face lit up most for her.

Unthinkable, then, that she should miss even a second of his birthday party. What had she been playing at, hiding in the tree house so long, particularly when she planned to sneak away with Billy later?

Laurel frowned and weathered a hot wave of recriminations that cooled quickly to resolution. She would make amends: climb back to the ground, fetch the birthday knife from the kitchen table and take it straight down to the stream. She'd be a model daughter, the perfect big sister. If she completed the task before her wristwatch ticked away ten minutes, she would accrue bonus points on the imagined score sheet she carried inside her always. The breeze blew

warm against her bare sun-browned foot as she stepped quickly onto the top rung.

Later, Laurel would wonder if it all might have turned out differently had she gone a little more slowly. If, perhaps, the whole terrible thing might even have been averted had she taken greater care. But she didn't, and it wasn't. She was rushing and thus she would always blame herself in some way for what followed. At the time, though, she hadn't been able to help herself. As intensely as she'd earlier craved to be alone, the need now to be in the thick of things pressed upon her with an urgency that was breathtaking.

It had been happening this way a lot lately. She was like the weather vane on the peak of the Greenacres roof, her emotions swinging suddenly from one direction to the other at the whim of the wind. It was strange, and frightening at times, but also somehow thrilling. Like being on a lurching ride at the seaside.

In this instance, it was injurious, too. For in her desperate hurry to join the party by the stream, she caught her knee against the wooden floor of the tree house. The graze stung and she winced, glancing down to see a rise of fresh blood, surprisingly red. Rather than continue to the ground, she climbed back into the tree house to inspect the damage.

She was still sitting there watching her knee weep, cursing her haste and wondering if Billy would notice the ugly big scab, how she might mask it, when she became aware of a noise coming from the direction of the copse. A rustling noise, natural and yet separate enough from the other afternoon sounds to draw her attention. She glanced through the

tree-house window and saw Barnaby lolloping over the long grass, silky ears flapping like velvet wings. Her mother wasn't far behind, striding across the meadow towards the garden in her summery home-made dress. The baby was wedged comfortably on her hip, legs bare beneath his playsuit in deference to the day's heat.

Although they were still a way off, through some odd quirk of the wind current Laurel could hear quite clearly the tune her mother was singing. It was a song she'd sung to each of them in turn, and the baby laughed with pleasure, shouting, 'More! More!' (though it sounded like 'Mo! Mo!') as Ma crept her fingers up his tummy to tickle his chin. Their focus on one another was so complete, their appearance together in the sun-drenched meadow so idyllic, that Laurel was torn between joy at having observed the private interaction and envy at being outside it.

As her mother unlatched the gate and started for the house, Laurel realized with sinking spirit that she'd come for the cake knife herself.

With every step Laurel's opportunity for redemption receded further. She grew sulky, and her sulkiness stopped her from calling out or climbing down, rooting her instead to the tree-house floor. There she sat, stewing darkly in a strangely pleasant manner, as her mother reached and entered the house.

One of the hula hoops fell silently to hit the ground, and Laurel took the action as a show of solidarity. She decided to stay where she was. Let them miss her a while longer; she'd get to the stream when she was good and ready. In the meantime, she was going to read *The Birthday Party* again and imagine a future far away from here, a life

where she was beautiful and sophisticated, grown-up and scab free.

The man, when he first appeared, was little more than a hazy smudge on the horizon, right down at the furthest reach of the driveway. Laurel was never sure, later, what it was that made her look up then. For one awful second when she first noticed him walking towards the back of the farmhouse, Laurel thought it was Billy, arrived early and coming to fetch her. Only as his outline clarified and she realized he was dressed all wrong – dark trousers, shirt sleeves and a black hat with an old-fashioned brim – did she let herself exhale.

Curiosity arrived hot on the heels of relief. Visitors were rare at the farmhouse, those on foot rarer still, though there was a vague memory at the back of Laurel's mind as she watched the man come closer, an odd sense of *déjà vu* that she couldn't place no matter how hard she tried. Laurel forgot that she was sulking and with the luxury of concealment surrendered herself to staring.

She leaned her elbows on the windowsill, her chin on her hands. He wasn't bad looking for an older man and something in his posture suggested a confidence of purpose. Here was a man who didn't need to rush. Certainly, he was not someone she recognized, not one of her father's friends from the village or any of the farmhands. There was always the possibility he was a lost traveller seeking directions, but the farmhouse was an unlikely choice, tucked away as it was so far from the road. Perhaps he was a gypsy or a drifter? One of those men who chanced by occasionally, down on their luck and grateful for whatever work Daddy

had to give them. Or – Laurel thrilled at the terrible idea – he might be the man she'd read about in the local newspaper, the one the adults spoke of in nervous strains, who'd been disturbing picnickers and frightening women who walked alone along the hidden bend downriver.

Laurel shivered, scaring herself briefly, and then she yawned. The man was no fiend; she could see his leather satchel now. He was a salesman come to tell her mother about the newest encyclopedia set they couldn't live without.

And so she looked away.

Minutes passed, not many, and the next thing she heard was Barnaby's low growl at the base of the tree. Laurel scrambled to the window, peering over the sill to see the spaniel standing to attention in the middle of the brick path. He was facing the driveway, watching as the man – much closer now – fiddled with the iron gate that led into the garden.

'Hush, Barnaby,' her mother called from inside. 'We won't be long now.' She emerged from the dark hall, pausing at the open door to whisper something in the baby's ear, to kiss his plump cheek and make him giggle.

Behind the house, the gate near the hen yard creaked – the hinge that always needed oiling – and the dog growled again. His hair ridged along his spine.

'That's enough, Barnaby,' Ma said. 'What's got into you?'

The man came round the corner and she glanced sideways. The smile slipped from her face.

'Hello there,' said the stranger, pausing to press his handkerchief to each temple. 'Fine weather we're having.'

The baby's face broadened in delight at the newcomer and he reached out his chubby hands, opening and closing them in excited greeting. It was an invitation no one could refuse, and the man tucked the handkerchief back into his pocket and stepped closer, raising his hand slightly, as if to anoint the little fellow.

Her mother moved then with startling haste. She wrested the baby away, depositing him roughly on the ground behind her. There was gravel beneath his bare legs and for a child who knew only tenderness and love the shock proved too much. Crestfallen, he began to cry.

Laurel's heart tugged, but she was frozen, unable to move. Hairs prickled on the back of her neck. She was watching her mother's face, an expression on it that she'd never seen before. Fear, she realized: Ma was frightened.

The effect on Laurel was instant. Certainties of a lifetime turned to smoke and blew away. Cold alarm moved in to take their place.

'Hello, Dorothy,' the man said. 'It's been a long time.'

He knew Ma's name. The man was no stranger.

He spoke again, too low for Laurel to hear, and her mother nodded slightly. She continued to listen, tilting her head to the side. Her face lifted to the sun and her eyes closed just for one second.

The next thing happened quickly.

It was the liquid silver flash Laurel would always remember. The way sunlight caught the metal blade, and the moment was very briefly beautiful.

Then the knife came down, the special knife, plunging deep into the man's chest. Time slowed; it raced. The man cried out and his face twisted with surprise and pain and

horror; and Laurel stared as his hands went to the knife's bone handle, to where the blood was staining his shirt; as he fell to the ground; as the warm breeze dragged his hat over and over through the dust.

The dog was barking hard, the baby wailing in the gravel, his face red and glistening, his little heart breaking, but for Laurel these sounds were fading. She heard them through the watery gallop of her own blood pumping, the rasping of her own ragged breath.

The knife's bow had come undone, the ribbon's end trailed onto the rocks that bordered the garden bed. It was the last thing Laurel saw before her vision filled with tiny flickering stars and then everything went black.