CHAPTER 1

Seventy Looks Different from This Side of the Cake

The bakery employee asks how many people the cake should serve.

You tell her twelve.

She shows you a cake designed to serve twenty.

“That gives you a little extra.”

You appreciate her understanding of birthdays.

There will be twelve people at the table, but several of them have been known to interpret a small slice as a temporary arrangement.

You examine the choices.

Chocolate.

Vanilla.

A combination that would have seemed wonderfully extravagant when you were ten and is now described as the basic option.

Then comes the writing.

“What would you like it to say?”

You have considered this.

Happy Birthday would be sufficient. Your name could follow if space permits. People attending the lunch will

know whose birthday it is, but there is no harm in giving the cake clear instructions.

“Would you like the age?”

There it is.

The number.

You look at the sample photograph.

An enormous 70 occupies most of the top, leaving the birthday person’s name squeezed into a corner as though it arrived without a reservation.

“Perhaps a smaller seventy.”

The employee nods.

She has probably had this conversation before.

You are perfectly willing to turn seventy. You would simply like your name to remain the main event.

A week earlier, a friend asked whether you were excited.

You said you were looking forward to lunch.

She lowered her voice slightly.

“No, I mean about being seventy.”

Apparently, the meal and the birthday are separate subjects.

You consider the question.

You have had years that began well and became difficult. You have had years you worried about that turned out to contain people and experiences you would never willingly give back.

The number alone has not been a particularly reliable guide.

Still, seventy has a sound to it.

It feels more definite than sixty-nine, which has spent an entire year behaving as though it is just passing through.

Seventy seems prepared to stay, put down its bag, and ask where you keep the coffee.

You may need a little time to get acquainted.

At home, cards begin arriving.

One says you are a classic.

Another says you are vintage.

A third suggests that you are now old enough to know better and young enough to do it anyway.

You set that one where you can see it.

The greetings are affectionate, though several appear to have been written by people who believe every birthday after fifty requires a joke about memory.

You remember who sent them.

This may prove useful later.

On the morning itself, your phone begins making announcements before you have finished getting dressed.

Messages.

Photographs.

A short video in which a grandchild sings with more confidence than accuracy.

You watch it twice.

Then you notice that somebody has sent the same animated cake four times.

The cake rotates.

Sparks emerge from the candles.

You would like to thank the sender without encouraging further deliveries.

A heart seems appropriate.

You get dressed in something you enjoy wearing.

There may be a new outfit involved. There may be a familiar one that has served you well through several occasions and can be trusted to behave through lunch.

The important thing is that it feels like you.

At seventy, there is little pleasure in spending your own celebration pulling at a neckline selected by somebody else.

You arrive at the restaurant.

The table looks lovely.

There are flowers, cards, and just enough decorations to establish the occasion without blocking conversation.

Your family has done well.

Then you see the birthday button.

It is round.

It is shiny.

It announces that you are seventy in a type size more confident than anything the bakery proposed.

“Put it on!”

You look at the person holding it.

There are situations in which a woman should be permitted to negotiate.

“I’ll wear it for the picture.”

Agreement is reached.

The button goes on.

A photograph is taken.

A second photograph is taken because someone was looking at the first photographer.

You remove the button and place it beside your plate.

It can enjoy the rest of the lunch from there.

People settle in.

There is the usual exchange of information that begins with where everyone parked and somehow leads to a discussion about a road that has been under construction since the last major birthday.

You listen.

You laugh.

You feel your shoulders relax.

This part is familiar.

Whatever the number on the cake, these are people whose company you wanted.

One of them has remembered a story from your school years.

Another has brought a photograph you have not seen in decades.