

## Seven Days

Fleur Ferris

If your life can change  
In one day  
One hour  
One minute  
One second  
Imagine what can change

In one week

### Friday

#### The Blow

The second he walks in the door I know something is wrong. It's either work or Mum. They're the two things that usually set him off. He will walk straight to the stairs without acknowledging me in the lounge, go to his room, take a shower and be broody for the night. Over the weekend he will mutter enough snark for me to know which one set him off, but I never get the full details. It's never an actual conversation.

It's disappointing. This was supposed to be a happy night. But Dad doesn't go up the stairs. Instead, he puts his briefcase on the kitchen counter and glances my way. I pause my game. Something's wrong. Different wrong. He takes a few paces towards me, pauses partway between the kitchen and the lounge room, like he's uncertain about where he wants to go. The look on his face isn't anger or annoyance. I'm not sure what it is, but it makes me wonder if someone has died. When he sits on the couch beside me, he still hasn't even said *hello*. I sit up and brace myself for bad news.

'A situation has come up at work,' he says. 'And it changes things.'

'Who for?' I ask, although I already know. If it didn't change things for me this conversation wouldn't be taking place.

'My boss had a car accident and broke his leg.'

'Is he all right?'

'Yes. But he'll be off work for six weeks.'

'So why does that change things for me?'

'I have to step into his position until he comes back.'

My shoulders drop. 'And?'

Dad takes a deep breath, purses his lips and swallows. 'He was supposed to go to America on Sunday. Now, I have to go.' Dad's face is deadpan. It's clear I'm not invited. 'It's that big project I was telling you about. We've been given the go-ahead and have to secure everything before anyone can protest.'

'Even though the waste from the plant will contaminate the water?'

Dad doesn't say anything.

'Are you serious, Dad? At other people's expense?

That's their health, their home. We don't need more money.'

'You're judging what you don't understand.'

I look away from him in disgust. 'How long will you be gone for?'

'Only one week.'

'That's half of the school holidays.'

Dad breathes deeply, like he's tired of this conversation. 'I've arranged for you to stay with Uncle Ian and Aunt Christine up at Manibee.'

My jaw drops.

Now that he's delivered his final blow, his tone toughens. 'It will be good for you to spend some time with Josh. He's your only cousin, and you hardly know him.'

'What?' I screech.

Josh is my age, but taller. Bigger and stronger. And annoyingly ignorant. Uncle Ian and Aunt Christine call him Josh-man, like he's some kind of superhero, and he rides skateboards, pushbikes and motorbikes like he wants to break every bone he has.

Manibee is a small town two hours north of Melbourne, and Uncle Ian is a psychologist there. He talks heaps about everything and thinks it's *good for the soul* for everyone to go camping and rock climbing in the mountains, even when it's freezing or stinking hot. He exercises anytime, anywhere, at random. You could be talking to him and then, *bam*,

he's on the ground doing push-ups and counting each one like his life depends on it.

Aunt Christine is a park ranger and is super nice, but she brings wild animals inside the house. Last time I was there she'd had a baby kangaroo living inside Josh's library bag, which was the most use it had ever had. They had also rescued a goose from a farm in New South Wales, near where Aunt Christine grew up, from a family who believed fairies lived in their garden and feared the goose would eat them. Aunt Christine had brought the goose home and let it roam wherever it liked, and it had hissed and chased me every time I walked out the front door. Josh thought that was hilarious. He'd rolled around in hysterics every time it happened. And if all that wasn't bad enough, their TV was the size of our toaster – that's no exaggeration – and they had download limits on their Wi-Fi so no one could use it.

'It's the best option –' Dad begins.

'No, no, no, no. No way!' I interrupt him. 'Arrange something else.'

'There is no one else.'

'Call Mum.'

'She's on her honeymoon.'

'I don't care. I'll call her.'

'Ben, we're not calling your mother.'

I glare at him and fight back hot, angry tears. 'I'm not going there. You said you'd be here. You promised.'

'I'm sorry. I have no choice.'

'Josh nearly killed me last time I was up there. Remember, on the motorbike? Remember my broken arm? It's dangerous going there.'

'Ben, it was an accident that could have happened anywhere. You just have to be careful when you're trying new things.'

'I'm not going,' I persist.

Dad takes a deep breath. 'It's not for negotiation.' His voice is stern, and I know, no matter how much I argue, that his decision is final. That the arrangements have already been made.

*I've* been arranged.

Story of my life, and I'm sick of it. It's all that ever happens to me. I get dropped from one house to the next. I'm what my parents *negotiate* and use against each other. I'm the thing that always gets changed, cancelled, postponed. The hurdle standing in the way of the important things happening in their lives. Unless it's Christmas. Then they fight about who gets me, and that feels bad, too.

I get up to leave the room and stop at the door. I turn.

'You say I don't understand, but you're wrong,' I say, as our eyes bore into each other's.

'It's *you* who doesn't understand. The way you think about business and money, and how you'd walk over anyone for it, is repulsive. I never want to be like you –it's my single biggest goal in life. I'm going

to go out of my way to do right by people, even if it means I lose out. And what you said before about choice is rubbish. You always have choices, you just never choose me.'

I climb the stairs to my room and close the door behind me. I lie on my bed and look at the new leaves growing on the trees outside my window.

One week in Manibee.

What an absolute nightmare.