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Chapter 1

Happy Birthday

It was the sliver of light that woke her; the brilliant white crack in her bedroom curtains that gradually teased her eyes open. Judy Maddox sat up in bed, in her cosy but shambolic room, and smiled to herself. Finally, the day had arrived. She'd been hearing about it for months; from other kids at school, from adults, even from her parents: a tenth birthday was a special kind of milestone. Today was going to be brilliant.

Moments later, Judy barrelled downstairs in thick winter socks and flannelette pyjamas, tugging the collar tight around her neck to keep out the cold. She hurried into the bare but homely kitchen, following the unmistakable sweet smell of fresh pancakes, and found her raven-haired mother, Iris, serving up a fresh batch onto three plates.

Judy was drawn into a hug. 'Happy Birthday, love. I've made your favourite.'

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‘With cream?’ Judy hoped she wasn’t pushing her luck.

‘And blueberries.’

Judy’s eyes lit up. It must have been a year since she’d tasted berries – the great Kandokan drought had seen the price of fruit sky-rocket, way beyond the means of a family on a nurse and a postman’s wages.

She sat up at the table, legs dangling a few inches from the floor, and spooned a massive ladle of shiny berries onto her steaming hot pancake. What bliss.

‘Your dad’ll be home soon, so tuck in before he scoffs the lot,’ her mum said fondly.

Judy did what she was told, and well and truly tucked. Delicious soft pancakes, mouthfuls of juicy berries and lashings of sugary cream. She ate and ate until she was overcome with intense satisfaction, then slumped back in her chair.

Soon she heard the front door open, and the unmistakable sound of her dad’s work shoes clip-clopping on the scuffed floorboards. In came Doland in his navy and red postman’s uniform, satchel slung over his shoulder, and kissed Judy on top of her head.

‘Happy birthday, sweetheart.’ His voice was soft and warm and tinged with a North Kandokan accent. He tossed his cap onto the table, barely registering the slap-up breakfast in front of him, and crossed to

Iris at the cooktop. They kissed, but Judy noted that there was a strange tension between them, and something different about her dad.

His smile didn't reach his eyes.

'Give us a minute, Judy,' he asked softly.

Judy lingered at the table while her parents moved into the hallway, watching them from a distance. She couldn't hear all of their hushed conversation, but she caught a few key words from her tense father, like 'boss', and 'technology'. Something about 'damned robots' and another word she didn't understand: 'redundancy'. Then she watched Iris draw Doland into an embrace, followed by something she'd never seen before.

Her dad was crying.

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Chapter 2

The Village

Forty-six-year-old Judy Maddox opened her eyes. Through the crack in the curtains, she could see a sliver of daylight. She glanced to the holographic clock on the wall opposite her bed; without her glasses, the red glowing numbers were blurred, but she could tell it was 5.55am. All the fives. As the last number flickered into a six, Judy threw back her blankets and got up.

By 6.34, Judy was back in her sparse, modern bedroom facing the full-length mirror by the door, straightening the collar of her smart grey suit. On went the glasses and a touch of lipstick, and there she was: Judy Maddox, Head of People. A kind, wise face, sparkling blue eyes and thick blonde hair styled in a no-nonsense practical cut. Ready for another big day.

‘Good morning, Judy,’ intoned the robot TeamMate stationed outside her worker’s cottage. Its fixed smile

and glowing eyes were a strange parody of human features, due to years of testing and research that had established that the population preferred humanoid AI interfaces to their earlier, more rudimentary robotic counterparts. The same counterparts that had robbed so many humans of their jobs generations ago, provoked riots in the streets, consigned people to unplanned retirement, and spiralled workers into poverty or depression. Or worse.

Judy stared back at the TeamMate, standing there in its navy uniform and jaunty baseball cap, its flesh-coloured metal hand waving away. She regarded its fixed smile with a flicker of resentment as she remembered her poor dad. Then she buried those feelings like she always did, smiled back, bid it good morning and went on her way.

The village was a short jugger-ride from the warehouse complex where the workers were employed, buried in a pocket of greenery that backed onto the lush artificial parklands of the Kandokan moon. Thousands of identical habitation cottages with tidy little gardens were arranged along paved roads, separated by shared recreational spaces: gymnasiums, sports venues, restaurants and theatres. Everything a worker could ever want was here, within five minutes' walk of their temporary home. Unless they really wanted to, they never had to leave.

Judy surveyed the cottages from the back of a jugger, a squat automated open-top buggy that ferried groups of twenty workers to and from the warehouse. As more and more employees joined her at the various jugger-stops, she greeted them in her usual cheery manner, bantering and laughing and raising spirits, providing positivity and encouragement at every turn. In a world filled with fear and uncertainty, the least Judy could do was brighten their day; she respected and appreciated her workers, and hoped that made a difference.

Kira Arlo was one of her favourites – a diligent, caring, eternally optimistic young employee who regularly impressed with her work ethic and team spirit. Judy patted the empty seat beside her as Kira clambered on board, beaming her sunshine smile, launching into a self-deprecating story about her morning exercise routine and how she'd ended up face-down in a ditch with a robot FitnessMate.

They laughed. They hooted.

Then a lone voice cried out as the jugger pulled away from its stop, and Judy saw young Charlie Duffy scrambling out of his shared cottage, running late as usual. In his olive cleaners' overalls, with a mop of unruly red hair, Charlie charged after the jugger – sprinting to catch it before it got to full speed.

‘Charlie, be careful,’ warned Judy, as her young employee flung his work bag onboard and prepared to pounce. As the jugger picked up speed, Charlie sprinted faster . . . and faster . . .

Then he jumped.

A split second too late.

Judy could see it all in slow motion: Charlie’s mistimed jump . . . his flailing arms . . . the jugger inches out of his reach . . .

Until . . .

Kira reached out and snatched Charlie’s wrist, wrenching him onboard in a flurry of limbs. Charlie flew into the open cabin and sprawled awkwardly over Judy and Kira.

Breathless and red-faced, he looked up at his sweet, dark-haired rescuer with an embarrassed smile. ‘Thanks.’

‘You okay?’ Kira asked, helping him to sit up.

‘Yeah,’ Charlie stammered back.

‘Misjudged that.’

‘Yeah.’

They stared at each other as the jugger rolled on, with Judy watching, amused. ‘I think you can let go of Kira now, Charlie.’

Mortified, Charlie quickly released Kira’s wrist and scrambled into the vacant seat across the aisle. ‘Sorry about that.’

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