

PROLOGUE

JOY

1 August 2023

4.34 pm

There were only five minutes left for Joy Moody and her twin daughters. They were ready, and expecting, to be gone at 4.39 pm exactly, and Joy was nothing if not exact. It was the first of August and she had long been preparing Cassie and Andie for this moment: their twenty-first birthday and their return to 2050.

Time seemed to pass in an excruciatingly slow manner, but it was the same slow, steady beat that it had always been, of course. They could rely on something as orderly and consistent as time. Unlike Joy's memory, which was now neither of those things. Her deceit had fused into truth, and she was about to realise what Andie had figured out weeks ago – they were going nowhere. There would be no trip through time; they would remain in the small courtyard, under the peppercorn tree, behind the building that was both their home and livelihood.

Four minutes remaining. The supermoon would rise soon, but not before Joy's agitation launched into overdrive. She had felt remarkably calm as she and the girls sat on the weathered wooden bench as their final minutes in that time and place drew to a close.

Now that calmness was long gone. She bit down hard on her lip to try to retain her composure.

Three minutes left.

4.37 pm.

4.38 pm. Donna watched them from the top of the fence, her feline contempt obvious, as if she already knew Joy was a fool.

4.39 pm.

Joy feared she was at risk of passing out if she didn't remember to breathe. She sucked in huge gulps of air and checked the girls either side of where she sat. Her arms were tightly linked through theirs so there was no risk of one going without the others. The nearness was a comfort, despite her angst.

Cassie had scrunched her eyes closed, leaned against her mother's shoulder and was coiled in readiness. Andie, however, was staring right back at her, a look on her face similar to the cat's. Andie had been a mess all day, ranting about the impossibility of time travel and a father she was sure she had found in the here and now. She was a stubborn girl when she wanted to be, just like Joy herself. Something Joy could hardly resent her for, given she was probably the reason Andie had learned such an inflexible attitude.

4.40 pm. Joy checked her watch, scanned the sky, and muttered about unreliability being quite intolerable.

They waited some more, the minutes excruciatingly long.

4.48 pm.

4.49 pm.

At 4.50 pm Joy stood, leaving a mother-sized gap on the bench between her daughters. As if to really drive home the point that they were nowhere new, Joy caught a waft from their nearby rubbish bin.

'We don't appear to have gone anywhere,' Joy said through clenched teeth.

‘No shit.’

The obnoxiousness of Andie’s words roiled Joy so quickly and thoroughly that she turned and slapped her across the face before she could give it a second thought. Cassie gasped, Andie cried out and Joy pulled her hand back as if it had touched fire.

‘I didn’t mean that,’ she said quickly, but the damage was done. It was the first time she’d ever raised a hand to either of the girls. Her eyes blurred, both from tears and the tickle of a headache that was dogged in its pursuit of her. ‘Something’s wrong,’ Joy insisted, shaking her head, hoping to avoid what she’d just done. ‘Maybe we’re early? What’s the time?’

Cassie shook her watch free from under her jumper. Andie kept a close eye on her mother, one hand pressed against the red mark ballooning across her cheek.

‘Almost five.’ Cassie sounded apologetic.

What must the girls think of her? That she was going mad? Or just a downright liar? Joy inhaled deeply, almost painfully, and looked up, hoping to find the all-important supermoon they’d waited so patiently for.

It was nowhere to be seen. A moment of panic; maybe she *was* going mad.

‘Where is it? Where’s the moon?’ she muttered. Neither daughter replied. Andie pulled a packet of Fruit Tingles from her jeans pocket and flicked one into her mouth, crunching down hard and loud, as if she was trying to irritate her mother.

Joy paced the yard, looking skyward. She hurried to the trunk of the hulking peppercorn that was too big for the space, a mistake far too deeply rooted in the ground by the time Joy had moved in. She peered into the spot she’d always used to communicate with the year 2050. A simple but effective system that kept them off the radar of The People. She put her hand in the gap, feeling for an envelope or a rolled piece of paper, but there was nothing. No explanation for

the lateness, or rescheduling of plans, which had happened the year before so it was always a possibility.

Joy spun around, an errant branch scraping across her face, feeling like fingernails digging into her skin. She clapped her hand to her cheek and found it wet with blood. There was no time for that now; she could deal with a silly scratch later. The idea of time was suddenly very tenuous; they had so much of it, but simultaneously none at all.

Joy ran her fingers through her hair, scratched hard at her scalp and looked at her daughters. 'Something is not right, not right at all.'

'You can say that again.' Andie remained defiant, although she looked more sheepish now, and wary of her mother. Joy's fingers were still imprinted on her daughter's face. She felt like a monster.

'It's all right, Mum.' That was Cassie, always so sweet, always ready to come to her defence. Joy saw the glance she gave her sister. She could usually read her girls like pages of a book but this exchange wasn't clear, like it was from a story she'd never read. She'd been *so sure*. Now doubt was clawing at her mind. Was she wrong? *Had* she lied?

'No, no, no, no, no.' Joy couldn't stop once she'd started; she tapped at her forehead. 'No, no, no.' Her headache turned from a niggle to a firecracker. She hated what was happening to her. The fence rattled as Donna leapt off it, down into Monty's yard on the other side. Even the cat was done with them.

Joy moved back to the peppercorn and put her hands on its trunk, wondering at everything this tree had seen in its years. It had seen her girls grow, had watched her kiss the only man she'd been with besides Arthur. It had seen what had happened to Britney.

Oh, good God, Britney! Joy had gone and told the police where to find her, thinking she was doing the right thing. But only because she was supposed to be long gone; the three of them were meant to be twenty-seven years from now and out of reach.

Joy readjusted the bag she had slung across her chest so the strap didn't rub on her neck. It was heavier than she'd expected, her life savings just about the only thing she thought warranted being carted through time. Apart from her girls, of course, but that was a given.

'I'm going to get Monty,' Andie said. 'He'll know what to do.'

Joy ignored her; she was busy trying to work things out. She realised she was actually muttering aloud and wondered if Cassie and Andie had heard her talking about Britney. Would they realise what she meant? She was really making a mess of things. She'd been so careful, for so long, only to drop her bundle at the eleventh hour. If there was an eleventh hour. There was a chance, a sliver of suspicion creeping in, that this wasn't the end. But if it wasn't the end, she had no idea what that meant for her family. She supposed they'd just stay put and keep working in the laundromat and be of no significance. The Daughters of the Future Revolution would just remain her daughters. Nothing more, nothing less. Was that enough? Could Cassie and Andie forgive her? Things were not okay.

'I'll wait here,' Cassie said, and Joy heard the back gate creak open as Andie hurried off.

Joy caught sight of the moon then. The illuminated orb usually had a calming influence on her, reminding her of her place, their size in the scheme of things. They were all just specks. Hands pressed firmly on the sturdy trunk, she carried on talking to no one in particular. 'The supermoon is here now. We were in time. They need them. Right date. Right time. It was right. I checked it. The moon is up. Now. We are here.' And then her voice dropped, so low it was almost imperceptible even to her own ears. 'What have I done? *What have I done?*'

There would be no time travel, nor was it ever a possibility. This was one of the things Joy had meant to put right long ago, before she'd forgotten.

However, something she'd told the girls *would* come to fruition. She would be gone by the end of the day, just not in the manner she had expected.

Joy Moody would be dead by midnight.