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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

PROLOGUE

2050, Montreal

'How did we end up here? In this time, in this horrible mess?'

Waldstein studied his audience: rows of pale ovals receding into the dimly lit conference hall. A gathering of the brightest minds, innovators, businessmen, entrepreneurs at this, the world's very last TED Talk. There were going to be no more. Organizing them in this increasingly chaotic and dangerous world was becoming impossible.

The question he'd just asked, of course, was rhetorical. He was going to tell them.

'Greed. Greed and complacency. Back at the turn of the last century, when we were busy being very excited that we were all entering a new millennium, *then* . . . we assumed oil was going to last forever. We now know, of course, with hindsight, that as the clocks and calendars ticked over into the new century and everyone was celebrating at a party somewhere, we quietly hit the "peak oil" moment. The moment when mankind finally reached the halfway mark of this world's fossil-embedded fuel store.'

He paused for effect. The holographic autocue waited for him.

'The "tank" was half empty. There were a few geologists back then sounding the alarm, telling all who'd listen that we'd better get a move on and find a substitute for oil. But no one did

listen. Why? Because oil was still coming out of the ground easily enough and it was still cheap. Why upset the apple cart, right? Let's face it . . . at a fantastic party, who wants to listen to the guy in the corner muttering about the end of the world?

'We did nothing to wean ourselves off oil addiction. And so, fifteen . . . twenty years into the new century, when the big oil-producing nations started finding their oil wells drying up, one after the other, things started to turn nasty.

'That was the first Big Problem we should've fixed . . . and we didn't. The second . . . ? Again, back at the beginning of the century, there were economists calculating what the global population figure was likely to be for the middle of the twenty-first century – ten billion. *Ten billion*.'

His audience stirred.

'It turns out their estimate undershot by about a billion and a half. But who's perfect, eh?' Waldstein's laugh sounded dry and hollow. Certainly no laughs were coming back from his audience.

'Once again warnings were given. Ten billion? There's no way Earth's ecosystem could be leveraged to feed ten billion mouths indefinitely! But were people listening? Of course not. *You're telling me I can't have more than two children? How dare you! How dare you tell me what I can and cannot do!* So, that problem was never dealt with and not long after "peak oil" we had "peak food". . . "peak drinking water", all symptoms of a resource-exhausted world: a world desperately struggling to provide at least fifteen hundred calories every day to over twelve billion hungry mouths.'

Waldstein sighed. 'So, we had two big problems facing us: resource scarcity and a population explosion. Both could have been prevented; neither were. And these two problems were compounded by a third and final one.'

He thumbed his palm and a giant animated holograph appeared above his head, as large as the round stage he was standing on. An image of Earth playing through fifty years of gathered data: polar ice caps shrinking, the blue of the ocean swelling, expanding, like ink spreading across blotting paper.

'We let this world warm up too damned much. Some of that was down to burning all that oil – that certainly didn't help things much. But what really did it for Earth's fragile ecosystem was the sheer number of people on the planet. So . . . just when we needed as much land as possible to grow enough high-yield crops to feed us all, that lowland, that *farming* land, was being swallowed up by the advancing oceans. Farmland . . . and, of course, many of our great cities.'

He tapped his palm and flicked through shimmering slides: New York, now just the island of Manhattan protected by giant levee walls; New Jersey, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens . . . all now a mottled patchwork of submerged streets and rotting rooftops. London, a city of tenement blocks crowding each other like weeds straining for sunlight, emerging from a fog of pollution. The Thames, a menacing, swollen river again held at bay by enormous levee walls.

'The first fifty years of this century, we should have devoted to fixing these problems. Instead, what did we do? We fought like children. The First Asian War in the late twenties, over twenty years ago. Then the start of the various Pacific Oil Wars. The ten-year anniversary last week of the Thirty-Day War between the Arabian Coalition and Israel . . . and, God help us, that one wasn't even over oil . . . but something as archaic, as *irrelevant* as religious ideology! Over what name we should call a God that *doesn't even exist*!'

The hologram above Waldstein played a montage of images:

the rusting wrecks of tanks and mech-walkers, the irradiated ruins of Jerusalem and Damascus.

'Now we are where we are. Living in a world that we've exhausted. Poisoned. A world that some say is quite rightly turning against us. But this, in the much larger context of time, is merely another cycle. It's happened before. The dinosaurs had their time and now we've had ours. The world is simply rebalancing itself. Wiping the slate clean ready to start again.'

He was no longer reading from the autocue. The conference organizers had been given an advanced copy of his talk: some uninspiring, meaningless fluff about 'responsible entrepreneurialism in difficult times'.

What he wanted to say this morning – what he was going to say – was memorized.

'But, ladies and gentlemen, unlike the dinosaurs, we almost certainly won't be rendered extinct. We will, though, in the latter half of this century, *inevitably* experience a resource starvation that will whittle our numbers down to perhaps a few tens of millions. Perhaps even a few hundred thousand. And those that survive will adapt. Will hopefully be wiser and understand that this fragile world of ours must be treated with respect.'

Waldstein noticed his audience stirring uneasily.

He smiled. 'Yes, I'm sure you've figured out I'm no longer reading the text that was approved for today's lecture. But there is something that needs to be said . . .'

His gaze settled at the back of the audience, on the bank of cameras ranged there. This was going out on a dozen news-streams. Waldstein knew this was going to be seen live or re-streamed by virtually everyone on the planet – 2050, the last TED Talk. The very last of them.

A perfect platform for him.

'I'm afraid things don't look so good for us. Changes we can't avoid . . . are happening whether we like it or not. But here's the thing. I believe the Big Die Off will not be an end for us. It'll be a transition. A difficult one – a terribly hard one – but a transition, not an ending.'

Off to one side he could see movement, someone attempting to attract his attention.

They want me off the stage. They want me to finish.

'Mark my words, the next twenty years will be hard years for all of us. Painfully hard ones. As things worsen, there'll be those who will say that we could wind time back, use displacement technology to learn from all our stupid mistakes and have another go at these last fifty years, at making this a better world. To those people who will argue for that, I say this in response now . . .'

He wagged a cautionary finger at the cameras out there in the auditorium recording him. 'If we do that – if we actually are reckless enough to meddle with time – that foolishness will end up being the *biggest* of all our many mistakes.'

One of the event organizers – Dr Rajesh – was making his way across the stage towards him.

Waldstein nodded at the man. 'So, let me then finish . . .' It would look foolish if they attempted to force him off the stage. Foolish for him. Foolish for the organizers. The news story would be all about some undignified scuffle and not the message itself.

'*In conclusion*, I'll finish with this . . .' Dr Rajesh seemed to acknowledge that. He stopped where he was and allowed Waldstein to wrap things up.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we've made so many, many mistakes and in the coming years we are going to be relentlessly tempted to go back and try to undo them, for ourselves, for our children.

But time travel is an open doorway to Hell itself: a Pandora's box that cannot be closed once opened. If we dare to play God with this technology, then that really will be the end of absolutely everything. Quite literally *everything*: this small, remote, isolated blue ball of life we call *Earth* and everything on it.'

Waldstein hadn't expected much in the way of applause and he was quite right not to. He walked offstage, past an ashen-faced Dr Rajesh, amid a deafening silence.

CHAPTER 1

1889, London

7 February 1889
So, I sort of got into the habit of typing a log of 'agency' events back in Brooklyn. I figured I might as well continue doing it here, even though I'm not even sure we're 'in' the agency any more.

Anyhow, it's been a weird time. Compared to the time after we got recruited up until coming here, it's been quiet. Peaceful even. All of that time before relocating here seems like a blur. So much happened to us. When I play the memories back – the Nazis, the mutants, those dinosaur things, Colonels Devereau and Wainwright, Adam Lewis – it's like some crazy B-movie. Those guys seem like characters from a book. A book that'll stay with you for the rest of your life.

Of all of them, though, I do find myself thinking about Adam the most. I wonder if we could have let him stay with us, like we did Rashim and that moronic robot of his. We could have, couldn't we? I realize that now. But back then I was so certain that everything had to be tidied up. Everything had to be put exactly where it was.

So, I let him go back to work. I let him die.

Maddy looked at the screen in front of her.

Such a stupid, stupid, girly thing. She'd known him for no more than two days. Two days and then he was gone. And here she was countless months – a lifetime and a half – later missing him. Pining away like some precious fairy-tale princess.

Pfft. As if they'd actually 'been' something.

Mind you, they might have. If she'd made a different decision.

'Sheesh, let it go, Maddy,' she chastened herself, then looked over her shoulder to see if SpongeBubba was listening. He had a habit of sidling up silently and just standing behind you, batting big-lashed eyes and grinning like a simpleton. But he was on the other side of the dungeon perfectly inert – eyes closed and one green light on his side panel showing he was in standby mode. The others were out. Rashim, Liam and Bob had gone out that morning to visit an illegal gambling house: their stock of money was running low. Sal and Becks were down at the dockside buying some food for supper.

Maddy was still feeling a bit twitchy about the female support unit. After all, the very same clone had been hell-bent on killing them all three months ago. They'd managed to decommission her, then *reboot* her: a rather messy affair that Maddy didn't really want to dwell on. The artificial intelligence that was installed in the unit right now was the default AI. Perhaps, at some point, she might try experimenting with installing parts of Becks's old consciousness, but for the moment . . . this felt safer. The downside was that the support unit was back to square one, learning from scratch how to appear less like an ice-cold, sociopathic killing machine.

So, Maddy was alone right now and had a chance to put her thoughts on-screen.

She deleted her last sentence: *And I miss him*.

Missing people? Falling in love? Having feelings? That was for real people with moms and dads, right? Not vat-grown meat products. Real people with real hearts and souls. She turned her attention back to the screen.

'Enough with all that dewy-eyed girl crud.'

We've been here in London for two months or so. Not bubble-days now, but actual, real one-after-another ones. I like that better. I like the fact that each morning I step out of our side door on to Farringdon Street and I watch the coaches and hansom cabs go past, and the traders setting up their stalls, that each day is a brand-new one with a possibility all of its own.

And that makes up for some of what I know now. So, I'm a 'product'. Liam and Sal too. And everything we thought of as our lives before we 'died' is a complete sham. But, like Liam says, 'We're here now. We've got each other.' He's right. The past may have been 'borrowed' from someone else. But screw all that: the future's ours.

She smiled. Wasn't it just? All theirs.

We have our new goal. We're not agents of preservation any more. Our role isn't to faithfully maintain a doomed timeline – to make sure the Titanic hits the iceberg, to make sure American Airlines flight 11 hits the north tower.

To make sure mankind destroys itself.

No.

We're going to watch. And wait. And perhaps, if the opportunity presents itself, steer this doomed world to a happier time in the

twenty-first century. If that chance comes along, then we'll take it and to hell with 'history was only ever supposed to go one way'. Because, the way I see it, who knows what the 'right' timeline is? Maybe the virus that Rashim told us about – the Pandora Event, the complete annihilation of human civilization in the year 2070 – maybe that's a faulty timeline. Something that wasn't meant to happen. Maybe Waldstein is wrong to believe that's the destiny that must be preserved. And if that isn't enough to do my frikkin' head in . . . how about this?

Maybe Waldstein was never meant to have been born – never meant to invent a time-displacement device in the first place.

How's that for a complete head trip?

She closed the document. Enough head-scratching for one morning. She eased out of the rocking chair, not wanting to wake up SpongeBubba. She checked. His standby light was still on; his long-lashed plastic eyes gazed sightless out into the gloom.

Right now their dungeon still smelled of freshly pan-roasted coffee beans. Liam and Rashim's treat this morning before setting off: coffee and freshly baked bread with a thick slice of salted pork.

Maddy grabbed a shawl and stepped over to their low doorway. She lit the candle beside it, pulled aside a privacy curtain they'd rigged across the small archway then eased the door's bolt back, and the oak door creaked open. She checked that there was no sign of Delbert, their nosy landlord, or his string-bean assistant, Bertie, hovering in the space beyond. They used it occasionally to store some of their dubious wares and, of course, took every opportunity while they were fussing around in there to try to sneak a peek past their door and the curtain.

No sign of them this morning.

She stooped through the doorway, candle in hand, and stood up. The candle picked out the arching brick roof above her and the wooden packing crates of spices and luxury goods, shipped from all corners of the British Empire, that had all somehow managed to 'fall off the back' of various delivery carts. To her right a thin sliver of daylight smeared a dull glow across the scuffed and grime-covered paving-slab floor.

Maddy pulled a long iron key from the pocket of her dress and tugged the woollen shawl tightly round her shoulders. It was cold that morning. She approached the door – their own side door on to Farringdon Street – turned the key and, with a deep *clack*, the heavy door swung inwards, suddenly bathing the dim interior with daylight. She emerged, stood on the step up from the pavement and blinked at the bright morning.

Blue, a brilliant blue – postcard blue – sky above her. She narrowed her eyes against the glare of thick snow on the ground and on the rooftops and chimney pots where home hearths had yet to be lit. Farringdon Street was going about its business: ruddy-faced workers blowing clouds of condensation; a team of horses pulling a brewer's cart, steam rising from their flanks. A lovely, invigorating February morning, like something out of Dickens; like a scene from that Scrooge story. Maddy was almost tempted to summon some street urchin to her doorstep, toss him a farthing and ask him to go fetch her the large goose hanging in the butcher's window down the street.

She chuckled at that notion, blowing steam from her nostrils.

A man striding past in a dark morning coat and top hat touched the brim politely at her as he passed by. 'Lovely day, my dear, isn't it?'

'Yes,' she said, grinning at him. 'That it is.'

She watched the gentleman cross the busy street, weaving between delivery carts and hansom cabs, then filled her lungs with air that was crisp and cool and scented with the pleasing, ever-present – but never tiresome – tang of woodsmoke.

Oh God, I so love it here.