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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

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PROLOGUE

2034

Roald Waldstein stared at her almost serene face. 'Does it hurt?'

'No,' she replied, her voice barely more than a whisper. 'There's no pain. Just . . . I just feel . . . fluffy . . . drifty . . .' Her thick voice cleared. 'Is . . . is Gabriel OK?'

His wife didn't know the full news yet. And she didn't need to.

'He's fine, Eleanor,' he lied. He struggled to keep any trace of emotion out of his voice. 'Quite fine.'

She sighed. 'Thank god.'

The freighter pod had hit her e-Car side on at a busy intersection. Apparently the freighter's auto-drive software had glitched and the twenty-ton vehicle had considered the cluttered intersection to be wide-open road and had sped forward, barrelling into Eleanor's small bubble car. Their son, Gabriel, was pronounced dead by the paramedics the moment they arrived on the scene. To be honest, there'd been little left of him amid the twisted and shredded wreckage for them to work on.

Eleanor, on the other hand, was found alive, but had been cut clean in half by a panel from the driver-side door, a jagged edge of carbo-plastic as sharp as a surgeon's knife had cut straight through her just above her belly button. Through skin, through organs, through spine and halfway into the driver's seat.

She'd been severed completely in two.

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The paramedics had managed to stabilize her. But it was a temporary measure only. Eleanor was going to die. The damage to her body was far too catastrophic to salvage any chance of life. But with several drips running into her they were able to buy her a couple of hours: barely enough time for a loved one to be contacted and rushed in to say a final goodbye. Failing that, a chance to set up and run a neural scan recording.

This they'd done: a digital recording of her dying brain. The data storage of a human mind was so immense that only the final minutes were usually recorded. A simulation, a software version of the very last moments of a life.

The data – several hundred terabytes of it burned on to a data-waffle – was a chance for the absent bereaved to say a final goodbye to a *simulation* of their loved one.

A chance to say goodbye over and over.

For some people, it was an indispensable therapy. For others it was a grim piece of Frankenstein fetishism. Some people chose never to run the simulation. The data, a recording of the activities of the last moments of billions of brain cells, was linked to heuristic AI, creating a simulation of a mind that was sometimes almost a completely convincing facsimile of the departed. Talking with it, a response might seem odd, but mostly, on the screen or via a voice-synth modulator, right there was their loved one, momentarily arisen from the dead, albeit only for a minute or two.

Waldstein looked at the screen in front of him now. The computer monitor was on a desk cluttered with screwed-up paper, soya-snack wrappers, food-encrusted bowls. He preferred talking to Eleanor with just the text in a dialogue box, not the synthesized speech. Although the voice-synth almost sounded like her, it could never truly emulate Eleanor's distinct voice.

Six years ago now he'd lost them both. Every day without

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fail he started the morning in his small scruffy workshop having a conversation with his dying wife. Mostly it was an near-identical conversation, but on occasion he would take it in different directions and the software would accurately produce the responses that Eleanor would most likely have given him if she'd been standing there with him.

For *Simulated Eleanor*, every time they spoke would be the very *first* time this parting conversation took place . . . and, also for her, the very *last* time they would ever speak. An eternal loop of heartbreaking sadness that occurred every time Waldstein decided to punish himself and run the software. Yes, it was just code . . . but it really was, in a way, a piece of Eleanor.

> You . . . you'll tell Gabriel about me, Roald? Won't you?

'Of course, my love.' Waldstein pressed his lips, forcing himself to sound upbeat. 'I'll tell him all about you. How beautiful you were. How much you loved him.'

> . . . Thank you . . . but don't make him too sad thinking about me . . . I want him to be a happy child . . . The cursor paused, as if she was sighing.

> . . . I just want him to remember he once had a mother . . .

Waldstein nodded. 'He'll know all about you. And be proud of you.'

> And you . . . my love. Find someone else. Someone who'll love you as much as I have . . .

That was *so* Eleanor. So utterly selfless.

> . . . Promise me, Roald . . . promise me **you won't live a lonely life . . . promise me you'll find someone else, someone who'll make you happy . . . someone who'll love Gabriel . . .**

Not every time, but most times he ran the simulation, she

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demanded that same promise from him. And every time she did, he lied. 'I promise.'

> . . . Good . . . Thank you . . .

He gazed past the screen into the past and remembered how she'd looked all those years ago on the hospital bed, surrounded by machines and tubes and liquids being piped into her, the shredded remains of her lower body hidden beneath a sheet. He'd been there to hold her hand, look into her eyes and have this conversation for real. He recalled her beginning to slip away. At this stage in the simulation and back then, her mind was starting to close down. She'd smiled wearily, the important matters settled. She was getting ready to let go.

> . . . Good . . .

In recent years when he'd run this simulation he'd wanted to mention a shred of hope that he was holding on to. That he was working on something that might just change everything; that could just mean she and Gabriel might not have to die; that they could be together again in a version of this world in which some other unlucky soul had been in the path of that runaway freighter pod.

But there were only two minutes of time in which to talk and, in the end, if he promised her hope, promised her that he could change things . . . then what was he doing? Providing 'hope' for a piece of code that was about to reach the end of its two-minute run-time.

What would the *real* Eleanor have made of that? What would she have made of the idea that he was hoping to travel back in time to make it so she never died in a traffic accident? She would probably tell him that it was a fool's goal. That fate had a certain way it intended to go for everyone.

That what would be, would be. *Que sera, sera*.

And so, this morning, Waldstein ended the conversation in

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the same way he always ended it. 'I love you, Ellie. I always have. I always will.'

> . . . I know, my dear. I know . . .

'Gabriel and I are going to be just fine.' That same painful lie each time.

> . . . Thank you . . .

He pressed a finger to his lips. Kissed it, then touched it against the grimy computer screen in front of him, on the black dialogue box, against the winking cursor. 'You go to sleep now, my love. Go to sleep.'

> . . . I will . . .

He recalled the conversation ending just like that six years ago and her eyes closing heavily. The slightest smile on her lips and another minute of silent machine-enforced breathing, before one of the machines linked up to her indicated with a soft beep that the brain signal had finally flat-lined.

The simulation ended with a menu that offered him the choice to run it once again. He never did. Not twice on the same day. That would be too much to bear.

'Goodbye, my love,' he whispered.

Then smiled. 'I'll be seeing you soon.'

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CHAPTER 1

1889, London

Saleena Vikram won't exist yet. Not for another hundred and thirty years. But she will. The real me. You know, it feels so strange . . . I feel like something unreal, like a ghost.

Sal watched the morning bustle of Farringdon Street from the flatbed back of the coffee cart. Smoke rose from one end of the cart as the barristo roasted coffee beans in a skillet over a bed of hot coals. Across the busy street a baker was busy setting up an unlicensed kerbside stall, ready to sell buns and loaves of bread until a bobby pounding the street gruffly moved him along.

She cupped the mug of coffee in both hands, savouring the warmth and watching curls and twists of steam rise and vanish in the cool morning air. No, not exactly a ghost . . . she didn't feel like a ghost. More like the disembodied soul of a life yet to start; a soul waiting patiently for the correct body to be born so she could attach herself to it. Make it whole, complete.

And without that body being born, without that real Saleena Vikram, she would be damned as an eternally lost soul.

Actually, the more she thought about it, yes . . . a ghost. That's what she was. A lost soul. She put down her mug and picked up the pen in front of her. A biro. She shouldn't really be using that outside the archway. But her mitten-covered hand concealed it

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well enough, and anyway she was the only customer sitting here on the coffee cart.

I know Maddy and Liam haven't decided yet what it is we should be doing. But I have. I believe history should remain unchanged. And if sometime in 2070 we all end up wiping ourselves out, then that's the way it has to be. That's our fate.

You can't sidestep destiny. You can't cheat. If that is really what is meant to happen, then you just have to let it happen. I've seen enough altered presents and futures to know there are plenty worse outcomes than that.

In truth, mankind having another one hundred and eighty-one years from now was a pretty generous destiny as far as she could see. All humankind seemed interested in doing was having, having, having. Sucking this world dry like a parasite sucking life from its host. She'd read an article on the net, back when they were in New York, about a thing called the 'Gaia Theory'. In short, the article had talked of the world being very much like a living, breathing organism, with the ecological system performing functions not dissimilar to the biological system of an organic body. Thinking on that scale, humans were little more than mites, like microbes on a person's skin. Bacteria even. And perhaps the shift in weather patterns, climate change, was that 'body' reacting to the irritant on its skin.

She wasn't entirely sure she bought into the theory, but as a metaphor it worked nicely. Ultimately it was this world that counted. This one delicate blue orb in a desolate and infinitely lifeless universe. If this world really was the *only* place in the universe that carried life, then surely the preservation of this unique biochemical accident was far more important than the

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preservation of any one particular species? Dinosaurs had their time. Mammals had their time. Humans had their time, and so something else inevitably would follow.

There was something very reassuring in thinking about things that way. Life would go on after 2070. Just not human life.

But before all that, before it all ended for mankind, a young girl called Saleena Vikram would be born and live a full and hopefully happy life. Well, as happy as a life could be amid a starving, polluted, exhausted, drowning world.

Sal sipped her coffee again and realized, as she watched the baker finish up setting out his wares, that she, if not the others, already had a mission, a game plan. Even if Liam, Maddy and Rashim were still pondering what the hell it was they were supposed to be doing. She knew.

Waldstein is right. History has to go the way it was meant, even if we don't like where it will eventually take us. You just can't cheat. And I won't let them.

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