

NEVER

LAURA

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Warning: This book contains overt references to suicide and sexual abuse. If you are struggling, help is available. Visit www.samaritans.org.

Nobody told me why I should live; I would have to find out on my own.

I had no idea what killed those three billion people – made them jump from skyscrapers and bridges, hang or drown themselves, take pills, cut veins, put plastic bags over their heads. Whatever made them do it spared me. I tried to die – it didn't let me. What a waste. I didn't need to live; I had no friends, and my parents didn't love me enough to stay alive. I hated them; I hated this world.

The third wave of the suicide pandemic was over, but even now, years later, there were still plenty of cases and no official explanation. The Church blamed people and machines; people blamed machines and the Government; and after a few sloppy statements, the Government refrained from blaming anyone – they didn't know what was going on. People took their own lives without a reason. Theories proliferated, involving aliens, viruses, AI, parallel worlds, autocrats and other antagonists, keeping people entertained but on edge.

I was on edge because every day I woke up in the world I hated, and every day I had to find something, usually a new fixation – a new source of mayhem to help me push through the existing pain.

* * *

Black night primed the canvas of the city and neon lights painted the portrait of its drunken soul. The pinks and purples bled through my windows, filling the apartment with rich magenta. Looking at my reflection in the floor-length mirror, I thought about the hidden ad for *Dirty Castle* and the experience of *ultimate freedom* they sold there.

Transcend the limitations of your body. Free yourself from the boundaries of your mind.

The delayed targeted ad, which probably came with drugs I'd taken yesterday, played in my head. It showed a woman lying on a bed, eyes closed. Euphoria parted her full lips – and they were the most delicious lips I'd ever seen. I wanted whatever she was experiencing, whatever made these lips so hypnotic. A wreath of energy hovered over her, illuminating her amber skin with turquoise and purple light. Her freckled face zoomed into the forefront of my field of vision as the voice continued.

Discover your true nature. Find out who you really are.

The visual was fading. Like any other hidden ad, it felt like a dream that I would forget – unless I thought about it long enough to let it convince me I needed what it offered.

I thought about it.

I'd try anything that promised to free me from the prison of my body and its memories – although, of course, none of these promises were ever fulfilled. My purpose in life was to find one that eventually would. It was my entertainment, it kept me busy. I didn't have the slightest idea what the experience in this particular ad was – a drug, some new tech, or a mix of both – but in my mind I had already created an image of how something would shift in my brain, a secret door would open, and I would see in myself something very different to what I saw in the mirror. I was such an easy target for scammers, but I didn't

mind. Death never scared me – it didn't want me – and the lack of fear took me out to the streets, which grew darker and more dangerous with each new attempt to liberate myself from myself. At this point, I didn't necessarily want to die, but to see where my exploration would lead. And in this city there were no limits.

I put on a strappy silk dress, red lipstick and a black woollen coat, and walked out of my building. A police bot stopped in front of me. Green laser beams fanned out from a rectangular glass surface where human eyes would have been and swept across my features – a random check. It thanked me for my cooperation and rolled off down the street on its single wheel, its head rotating from side to side, the web of green light catching the identities of strangers.

More and more police robots guarded this for-ever-lost place, and as theories about machines stealing our souls spread, more and more people resisted them. I didn't mind the bots – they were just heaps of metal, and besides, they were everywhere now. A third of the world's population had killed themselves; the other two thirds were either suicidal or permanently high, scared out of their minds. Someone had to feed those still living, cut our hair, serve us drinks, synthesise our drugs, maintain our roads and build our cars, fix our teeth and replace valves in our hearts, write poetry and music for our souls and make all sorts of executive decisions. These robots probably didn't like being here either, watching us, their creators, excel in self-destruction – that sight would depress anyone, even a thing with no heart.

Under my feet wet asphalt glittered. It was autumn. It always drizzled at night at this time of year. A group of young people – two girls and three boys – passed by me, juggling chatter and giggles. Their eyes had barely dried from daytime tears, but their minds were already rescued from reality by their drug of choice. One of the boys turned around, called me beautiful and sent me an air kiss. No, nothing could mask the lack of life in human eyes, not laughter or air kisses, not sequin dresses or red leather trousers and all the rebellious sex drive bursting from

underneath them. Not even skin screens, which were supposed to make you feel more alive in a body that was less your own. Like animals in the zoo, we all looked the same – different faces, different expressions, extravagant clothes and otherworldly prosthetics, but always the same lifeless substance animated for the night with alcohol or drugs.

‘Come with us!’ yelled the boy. Snake scales glistened on his face.

For a moment I considered it. Habit, I suppose. But tonight I was going to find out how to *free myself from the boundaries of my mind* – sex and alcohol would have to wait. I kept my hopes high. *Ultimate freedom* was what every fraud promised, and I had met many, tried what they offered, and always remained disappointed – and yet, I hoped that this one would deliver. Then again, I had hoped that all of them would; I was addicted to this state of anticipation. The interval between the expectation and disappointment was where I lived. It wasn’t a bad place to be, I thought, considering the alternative was a continuous homogenous numbness.

I turned the corner into a side street. It was narrow and dark – no neon signs, no holo-banners; only a few old-fashioned wall-mounted yellow lights. In a noodle shop across the road, a bot in a white chef’s bandana spun a thick snake of dough. The storage room in the back probably led to a themed bar that led to a VR sex club that was connected to another spot, and another and another. The whole city was a web of clubs within clubs within clubs – a subway system of its own. Once you started down this road, you’d be lucky to get out within a few days. This rich nightlife infrastructure catered to the recently developed segment of orphans, both the young and the grown-up like me – although I didn’t feel like an adult. I was twenty-six, but mentally I was stuck in an indefinite ageless state. What did it even mean to grow up when there was no childhood to begin with?

I kept walking.

And there it was – *Dirty Castle* – a small, distressed sign, barely readable, on a rusty metal door. You didn't knock on these kinds of doors, you waited. You stood there, acting cool and feeling lucky to have found a gem like this, and waited for as long as it took. It was a place that offered something you hadn't yet dreamed of. And whatever it was, it wasn't cheap.

After waiting for fifteen minutes – a critical point when they'd had time to scan my retina, get information on my bank accounts and find out that I lived on a humble monthly allowance paid out of my trust fund – I faced one of the cameras on the right above the door and sucked my middle finger: a gesture that said I didn't give a damn what happened to me and was ready to strike any bargain.

In a few moments the door opened.

A bouncer dressed in a black suit gestured me in. At the end of a corridor, another guard eyed me up and down and pointed at a full-body scanner. I stepped inside. The machine checked me for everything from knives to bioweapons hidden in my intestine or woven into my flesh. The man glanced at a tablet in his hand, nodded and opened a door, which revealed the main hall. The place looked like an enchanted theatre, with a stage at one end, and it was filled with small tables, around which chairs were gathered. The scent of tobacco, leather and vanilla compounded into a powerful spell. The room was dark, and a heavy mist of amber light seeped out from somewhere. There was no music, only muffled voices and the occasional trickle of liquor. Almost all of the chairs were occupied, although many of the guests wore robes or dark clothes, with hoods and masks. Some were modified so much they likely wouldn't recognise themselves in the mirror.

The spectators sat still, facing the stage. A girl moved between tables, placing something into their open mouths – drugs or mind links. The guests didn't look at the girl, didn't speak to each other; their eyes were glued to the stage, as if afraid to miss a single beat of what was going to unfold

before them. Although I couldn't see their faces, I could see the tension in their erect postures, could read impatience in their outstretched necks, and I could picture animal hunger in their eyes. The anticipation made me curious – but not enough to wait for the show to begin; I came here for the experience offered in secret rooms, and my desire to buy into it had already grown into an obsession.

After I was security-screened by another guard, I entered what looked like a laboratory – a big space divided into glass cubicles. Inside, people were smoking, getting injections. Some lay dead still, deep in illusions; others were sleepwalking.

I had seen many of these before – drug hotels – only not as opulent as this. In such places you could rent a room or a bed, choose a drug and be under the influence for as long as you wanted, or for as long as it was safe. Trained staff would check on you to make sure your dose feed was right, your vitals in order.

With the advent of new drugs, the Government claimed there was no addiction, and all legal drugs were safe to use. Many were developed in an attempt to cure the suicide pandemic, but none of them were successful. Since a lot of money was invested in the research, they had to do something with all that junk – and besides, how else would they manage millions of hurting orphans? Diagnosing us was a major pain; we had too many things wrong with us to get it right. Non-addictive, smart recreational nano-drugs were a great idea, I thought – better than us all overdosing on some illegal rubbish. I'd heard there was a small dosage of antidepressants with long-lasting effects in most of these new substances – of course, that might have been just one of the thousands of rumours circulating; but maybe it wasn't. Those who wanted to stay off drugs for a while could do so with the help of a pill – a vac, a cleaning lady – available at any pharmacy and anywhere where they sold drugs. This cleaning pill would make you crave clarity of mind, level out your emotions and help you get through day without resorting

to perception alteration, which recreational drugs provided. It never worked for me; and the result didn't last unless you took it systematically like birth control. Who had the brain for that? One slip and the pain became too uncomfortable again, and you'd go back to the sweet salvation of modern chemistry. It was a natural thing to do. When people could choose 'safe' perception alteration, there was no way they were going back to real life. Not this life, anyway.

A woman in a lab coat came out of one of the glass cubicles, closed the door and entered a code. After a buzz, a clicking sound followed. She walked by me without so much as a look in my direction, as though I wasn't even there. I walked over to the room she had just left, and peered through the door. On the other side was the thing I had seen in my mind's eye in the ad: a man lay unconscious on a bed in the middle of the room, and overhead a wreath of purple and turquoise light danced. His body twitched from time to time, his eyeballs moving under his eyelids as the wreath of energy changed shapes and colour.

Suddenly, the energy erupted and hit the glass in front of me. I recoiled, losing my balance, but someone's strong hands grabbed my shoulders, preventing me from falling. I pivoted on my heels.

A man in a dark suit towered over me. 'Captivating, isn't it?' he said.

He walked over to the next cell, leisurely, a subtle smile on his clean-shaven face, enriched with shallow wrinkles expressing profound satisfaction.

'It amazes me to see what we are made of. The multiformity of our layers. So many interconnected relationships operate in one body – a body so primitive it can never truly experience the gifts it bears.' The disappointment in his voice was superficial.

He stared into the glass cubicle, at the swaying mass of energy, hands clasped behind his back, a golden watch flickering from under the cuff of his white shirt. A dark-grey

tie matched the colour of his three-piece suit, and was elevated from his chest with a golden collar bar. He stood erect, his chin up, eyes steady on the subject of his interest. He didn't waste a single motion – I imagined he even inhaled and exhaled at precisely the same intervals.

I looked around the lab again. It teemed with tech I'd never seen before. The clients around the place were wearing clothes that cost more than a car, and the man in the cubicle before me had more money invested in implants and jewellery than my apartment was worth. These people didn't come here to satisfy their sickest pleasures or indulge in some sophisticated drug-induced delirium. I'd expected to discover something along these lines – it wasn't the first time I found myself in an exclusive club – but this was a whole different level. I felt like a little kid in a wonderland, and nothing scared me more than being a kid again.

'A soul – what an intricate module,' the man continued. 'I'll use my human ignorance license and allow myself to call it, perhaps, one of the most beautiful structures in the universe.'

While my skin prickled, repelling the man's energy, my brain swallowed what he'd said and was asking for more, and my ears were open to anything that would come out of his mouth. He stirred my impatience by remaining silent for a time, allowing me to accumulate desire slowly, to work a little for what he would make me want.

'Human soul?' I asked.

'In its luminous glory,' he said, and grinned.

'Where is it?'

'They travel anywhere they want,' he said, and pointed to another cell, at a bright conglomeration of light particles. 'Look at her. First true steps towards absolute freedom.'

'It can't escape the cell?' I asked.

'No. You don't want your soul to leave you for ever, do you?'

How would it feel to see my own soul? Could I talk to it? Could I control it? I wondered.