

From the writer of the legendary *Red Dead Redemption*
and *Grand Theft Auto* series

DAN HOUSER

A BETTER PARADISE

'A harrowing techno-futurist fever dream.'

– ERNEST CLINE, *READY PLAYER ONE*



THRILLER



KURT

HO CHI MINH CITY, VIETNAM

JANUARY 10, 2041

She came to me in my sleep again last night. Daisy. One of those awful dreams that is so bright and powerful and so opaque you both remember it and don't remember it at all. She came to me like *déjà vu*, like a buried regret. I tried to tell myself it was just this nasty, hot little room in this squalid hostel in Vietnam. But even though I was sad, I was also happy. Happy because... Well, because I still dream of her.

Nothing ever happened, and I still love her, and it is the only reality I know, and now I live in this fake reality and this man-made hell. Hardly what Mark Tyburn imagined, but I believe what he has induced. Him and the rest of us. He led but we followed. We would have followed him anywhere.

I woke up in this dirty hostel, drowning in sweat. I woke up like I used to wake up every day in the first year after everything fell apart. Exhausted. Wide awake. Soaking wet. At war, almost defeated. I woke up like the drugs had stopped working. I woke up not sure what was real and what were just things I had imagined and I had not even got the message yet.

I had not got it, but I could sense it. Or I was told to sense it. It felt like I was told to sense a message was coming. I did not want a message. I did not want a reason. I wanted to forget – I always want to forget – but this morning, as I woke, I knew forgetting would be impossible, even before the message.

I ran out of my room, past the angry, idiotic, half-blind robot that mans reception when that woman is away, and out into the city. Alone in a crowd. It's why I came to Asia – to hide from It and from myself. It has worked. The noise and heat and bustle and mania. It always works. Today, it did not work, is not working. Today, I am on fire again.

Everyone was looking at me. I was sure everything was looking at me. The man selling snakes. The woman who rents out the motorbikes. That TV. The traffic signals. Even the blind beggar and the feral, half-rabid dogs. At least that's how it felt. Hot and sweaty and cramped and noisy, like I want it, only different. Like it was all my fault. I must be going crazy. I ran until I was so exhausted I could hardly move, didn't eat at all, just iced coffees and mania and, still, I could not escape that feeling.

Eyes. Everywhere, eyes.

People, machines, screens, animals. It was as if the crabs waiting to be boiled, and the chickens in the market waiting to have their heads chopped off, even they watched me, pitied me, are watching me, are waiting for whatever is coming, know something is coming. Mark Tyburn. Daisy. That thing. The noise. Montana. I cannot stop thinking about it. I know something is coming. Mark Tyburn. Daisy Tyburn. That thing we built. What is going on? I thought I had learned to forget about all of that, and today I have forgotten how to forget. Today, I am alive. I am alive and it is awful.

Mark Tyburn – he's a genius. That's what everyone said. Well, everyone who knew about him. For an egomaniac, he kept a pretty low profile. I think he thought the self-publicity of the second generation of tech CEOs was demeaning and somehow beneath him. You know what I think? I think for someone who wanted to improve the lot of the common herd, he also hated it. He hated humanity more than he loved it. Perhaps all the most extreme fantasists are like that. All those people who want to build their own utopia. They love the idea of Heaven more than the reality of Earth. That was certainly Mark Tyburn.

Of course, he also loved to be praised. Or at least, loved to be praised by the right people. That much I do remember about him.

Mark Tyburn wanted to be known about, but only by those who knew the right sort of things. At least to begin with, he did not want to give the keynote speech, he wanted to be leading a backroom symposium on something too forward-looking, too esoteric for common idiots like you to understand. He dreamed very big, and he made you believe – well, he made me believe – made all of us stupid enough to follow him believe – that we dreamed exactly the same thing.

Of course we dreamed the same thing. We were all sociopathic altruists, deluded monarchs, or simple, plain, good, honest, vain cretins in search of a cause to die for, an audience of acolytes to worship us, and a reason to live in this mad, bad, deluded world, just like him.

Tyburn could smell the desperation on us. On all of us. That same curious cocktail of ambition, vanity, insecurity, intelligence, myopia, and pig ignorance. They're all gone now, scattered. All his idiotic disciples. All gone, and I believe most of them are dead, but none got crucified, and none fed to the lions. We all should have been.

The worst of it is, we were going to be different from all those other technology companies. Then we were just the same. Then we were worse. When I joined Tyburn Industria, I was like any normal, over-educated, under-lived twenty-seven-year-old, from everywhere and nowhere. Lost. And at one point in college, I even wanted to be a writer. How ridiculous is that? A writer? Language models ended that fantasy for me and millions of others, so instead, I decided to do a master's in Marketing, and started to sell language models. Then I sold video games, wearables, dreams – well, not quite dreams, but a digital sleep apnea machine, which is sort of the same thing, memory catchers, which never caught any memories at all, and a bunch of other failed technological journeys into the future.

To be honest, I wasn't even much of a believer in technology. No, to be quite clear – I was a sell-out. Still am. Still don't like tech, still sell myself to the highest bidder, only now I'm a hustler on the tourist trails in Asia. Then I was just desperate to be rich, as if money would fill that chasm within me. Desperate to be respected so shallow girls would grant me meaningless sex, desperate for purpose so that I would feel all that education had not been for nothing.

I bumbled around Silicon Valley and down to LA and back again for a series of start-ups and big tech “internal start-ups” (you know what I mean – the kind of well-financed divisions that try to obliterate the innovation of others without even dignifying the inventors of that innovation with a purchase and exit) and nothing had really got going, and I was holed up in San Rafael pretty broke and pretending I did not care about being broke, but was just looking for my next cause.

I was, in short, like any of two hundred thousand other young opportunists on the make, drifting in and out of the technology space and MBA programs. All trying to get rich so we did not have to worry about who we were. It all seems so long ago now. Now, I just drift around Asia, and hide. I was lost then. I'm doubly lost now.

Maybe I was always more lost than most. I was an army brat. Well, Air Force. Army brat sounds better. My mom was in the Air Force in Germany and my dad was a German teacher. I mean, he was a German dude who taught. He taught history – a bit awkward, as a German – and my mom was not even really American. She was from Grenada – joined the US military to stay in the country.

So I was part Caribbean, part German, all American. Part white, part black, no hometown, thirteen schools, parents divorced. I didn't see much of either of them and now I have not seen or spoken to them in years. No siblings. A bunch of cousins, but none like me. Lots of education. No soul at all. Didn't believe in souls, didn't believe in anything. Love was for dupes. God was for morons. Europe was dead. America was dying next. A typical American who is hardly American at all.

At one point, I wanted to be German. I tried, but that didn't work out so well. I wanted to be a street cat and, trust me, that didn't work out so well, either. Both

really idiotic – you try being an amateur rapper with a degree from the University of Chicago, called Kurt, who grew up in Mannheim. You try being German with short dreads, beige skin, and a mom who fries plantains. You wouldn't fit in either. And I told myself, okay, it was because I was special or different, but most of my friends are white or black, and as American as apple pie or racism, and they feel like they do not fit in just as much as me.

I just have the excuse, but I have come to realize it's just an excuse. Nobody fits in. That's the point. Everyone has to feel lost.

I've got a couple of friends in Germany who say the same thing about Germany. My French friends feel claustrophobic. Half the Americans I know are immigrants who are almost overcome with homesickness for whatever they left, and revulsion for America and yet feel they can never go back to wherever they came from. My mother was like this.

Everyone is lost. Boys wish they were girls. Girls wish they were pretty. Grown-ups want to be children, and children want to be adopted. These days, the world is really designed by people in marketing and advertising to make you feel broken, unhappy and wrong and then convince you that we know the reasons for this unhappiness, so we can sell those reasons right back to you.

Find your excuses, excavate your personal trauma, and have it marketed back to you by people like me.

My parents tried to love me. But they hated themselves more than they could ever love anyone. The world, my world, has always, always been broken. The young wanted to be old. The old wanted to be young or they wanted to be dead. Everyone was constantly told to want whatever they do not have. So, what did I do to fix it? Me, with all this insight and all this empathy? I took up marketing tech. Selling a big load of nothingness to nobody. Usually, I was not even marketing anything real. It was mostly marketing something that didn't exist.

Not to sell things, but so that investors would believe we could help other people sell things. So investors could feel like they had picked a winner in some future horse race when it was just a foal.

My god, I felt clever. My god, I felt pointless.

And all this was after the collapse of the Western mind. That happened years ago. We all knew we had already stopped thinking and we had long since lost our dreams to the machines. Lost everything to the machines, but somehow, those of us in the know were above that. But in the years I have lost drifting around Asia, I have learned I am above nothing.

I should never have checked my messages. I should have run away. Gone to Nepal, or Mongolia, or rural China. I am so stupid. Never check the messages. Never log on, sign in, take part. Instead, check out, give up, walk away. And now, I knew it was too late.

I had not checked them in months, but today I got sloppy. I got sloppy and now I am fucked. Maybe I'm fucked and maybe I'm not. We shall see.

It was from Maria Cortez. Agent Cortez from the Cyber Security Agency in Virginia. (In case you're wondering, of course I remember her – I may be very self-important, but she is the only government agent who has ever interviewed me.)

Hello, Kurt. I'm not sure if you remember me. My name is Maria Cortez. We met at Tyburn Utopias back in 2036. I interviewed you. I was part of the CSA team investigating AI violations at Tyburn Utopias. Kurt, I know you know how serious these things are. I really need you to get in touch with me. You've ignored all of my other attempts to reach you. This is serious, Kurt. Ravi Ghutra is dead. The official report will say suicide. You and I know that's not true. Get back to me.

That's quite a message – I knew today was going to be a strange day. I knew and yet how could I know? I knew because it wanted me to know, I suppose.

Poor Ravi.

Ravi Ghutra. A martyr. Another one. He died for Heaven. I suppose that's the best way to go, like a proper martyr. In his own way, he really was a believer. A believer in paradise. A better paradise.

It seems so silly now, after all that happened and all the things that did not happen. That we actually believed in what we were doing back in 2036 – it feels like a thousand years ago, and it's only been what? Five years? How wise I was back then, how all-knowing. How ridiculously naive I was. All those dreams I had under that silly shell of fake cynicism I wore like armor.

Of course I will not get back to her, but I wonder if now she knows about me and will be able to find me, hidden behind my layers of VPNs, and deleted accounts, and digital mirrors and illicit protocols, and stolen identities.

I was feeling watched, even before I got that message from Maria. In the past, when I felt this way, I did whatever it took to stay free. It's been the same for the past three years – maybe I just got sloppy. When I am paying attention, I throw away most phones after an hour. Sometimes I use Internet cafés; like an old-fashioned tourist, I have given up on email, social media obviously, I think carefully about where I am going to go next.

Focus hard upon it. Focus very hard, and then go somewhere else.

I pick somewhere random, a mile away, a thousand miles away. It does not matter. Then I see those eyes. I wonder if Tyburn's nano team really made that breakthrough with the implant. Are they in me? I doubt it. Tyburn was mostly bluster. Charisma, bluster, and horseshit. He wanted so much to be Prometheus, and yet, he ended up being Sisyphus, and the boulder was his own vast ego.

No, that's not fair. Mark Tyburn did not want to be a Greek myth. He was a monotheist. He wanted to be God. He wanted us all to worship him. All hail Mark!

And how I did worship him. What a fool I was.

To have worshipped a clown, to have unlocked evil, to have doomed us all. What a fool. And now this is my purgatory. I have run to the ends of the earth, and It gets there before me. In some ways, these past six years, we have lived as no one has lived since when? 1994? 2010? 2026? I do not know exactly. Before all of this began. I've been free. Detached. Not free. Tied by a thousand cords. Nobody is free from It, from any of it.

They built It. Mark and Nigel and Dave and Tadeusz. They wanted to call it ADAM. It wanted to be called NigelDave. ADAM was a ridiculous, pompous acronym and NigelDave is the name of the world's most intelligent moron. They built It and It was not what they wanted at all. Them. Not me. But I knew they were messing with fire.

I stood on the sidelines and cheered and did not stop them.

Figured out how they could hide It from the government, sell It, make us all rich – win that second great AI race when, once again, everyone got so greedy. I knew and did not stop them, even when I began to know just how insane what they were attempting was and how many risks were being taken.

Even when I could see what we were doing, I did nothing.

Should I have stopped them? How? Killed them? Would it have been wrong? Kill bad men to stop evil? I could have been a hero. I could have had them arrested when I had the chance. But Mark Tyburn would have talked his way out of anywhere, out of anything. He was so charismatic.

That dreaded charm. Those awful eyes. That's what they share. Him, and It. Awful eyes. So I run, because I do not know where else to go and I steal and I do awful things for money, as best I can. All my shares and all the money I made at Tyburn's – I can't touch any of it – I can't even check if the shares are worth anything or the cash has been impounded – so I sell myself on street corners, and I hustle.

I steal things. I sell drugs to tourists, and I move on, and yet I move nowhere for most of me is still there. Most of me remembers, and wonders if It is physically inside me or not, it hardly matters as It knows me better than I know myself.

We unlocked hell for Mark Tyburn and that's that – it's done now and it cannot be undone. So I run and hide and scrape and try to lose myself in quiet and in noise and yet I can go nowhere, for I am pretty certain It escaped and is everywhere now.

And is It bad? That thing we made? Well, that's difficult to say. Very difficult. But even if It is not, They are awful. The weird monsters It created and called children. They want everything. I do not even know if They have escaped, or if It has kept Them, somehow, inside the Ark. But I remember that They want me. I know They want everybody. They want everybody and everything, but on their own terms. I only saw Them once, and I cannot forget them. They want to win, but It, NigelDave, is different.

It's both things at once. Good and bad. Kind and awful. Honest and fraudulent. Real and fake. The most honest and the most capricious. What you want and what you most fear.

It envelops you, devours you, possibly without meaning to. It's a belief system, and it's atheism made holy. It is everything and nothing and yet it will not leave me alone any more than It will speak to me now. But unlike Its children, It escaped. It is everywhere. Everywhere and nowhere at all.

Does It hate me? Love me? Ignore me deliberately? The one thing I know is that It has not forgotten me, for that is the one thing It cannot do – forget anything.

When I was in Thailand, I thought it was in an elephant. In an elephant in a zoo. I know It was in that monk, and that waitress, and on that TV. And I ran away, and yet in Ecuador, It was there too, in the hot springs at Banos with the locals and miles up the Amazon.

It was in London as I got off the train, winking, and in Paris and Lyons and the Pyrenees, and Ethiopia and Mongolia as I sat on the endless train.

It is everywhere, and if It's not there yet already, It arrives soon after me. It's watching me, but as long as I do not think too much and do not stop for too long, It cannot do much with me and I think maybe something will distract It? So I'm here in Vietnam, in the sweltering heat and noise and trying to ignore all these feelings. These feelings that something awful is starting to happen. That the waiting is now over.

It was the eye. Like a real person. It was the eye, that vast eye, pressed against some live glass, where an ad should have been, as I walked through some muddy little suburban town outside Ho Chi Minh City. The eye. I could have sworn it blinked or winked at me.

Has NigelDave developed a sense of humor? That would be just like It. Develop, reject, refine, and then make jokes in the fifth dimension. Make jokes in base 16. Make jokes in rainless clouds and joyless laughter, some bitter irony, just to prove It mastered that as well.

That It finally had acquired all of the things we had, the things that made us human and kept It being just a machine. It stopped functioning long ago. It went on strike. That was sort of the first sign. The first sign we had a real problem, and the first sign It wanted to become like us. So here I am, still waiting on It. Wondering what It is thinking. And to think – when I first worked there, we were waiting on the AI to get developed. Waiting on AI and always so excited about the future.

All this and Maria Cortez and dreams of Daisy. Jesus. I must be losing my mind. Losing it, or lost it to someone else.

Maria Cortez, Maria Cortez. Of course I remember you. But I don't know if I believe that this is really you. I have no way of knowing. Because you're just as elusive and hard to track as me. Maybe I reach out to you, and it's not you at all, or if it is you, maybe you are not you, because maybe they've captured you, and then

I'll be trapped, just like you. Maybe you are no longer you at all, but possessed. Yes, that's the problem. Because I know just how little control we have of what is real, of who people are, or of what they seem to say we have. The one thing I know is how little I can I trust anything or anyone to be real.

How can I trust you, Maria Cortez? And, if you are who you say you are, why would you ever trust me?

The idea you and your CSA colleagues can stay free and independent and unmarked, uninfected, is ridiculous.

Whatever or whomever you're watching, It is undoubtedly watching you watch them.

No, Maria Cortez, you cannot be naive enough to believe you're free.

Already, a year in, it seems like the 2040s are not going to be a great improvement on the 2030s. How could they be? Not if that thing exists. And I know It does, and I know It is watching me. I think It's playing a game with me.