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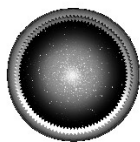
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LIFELINERS

By

Stefan Vučak



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Dedication

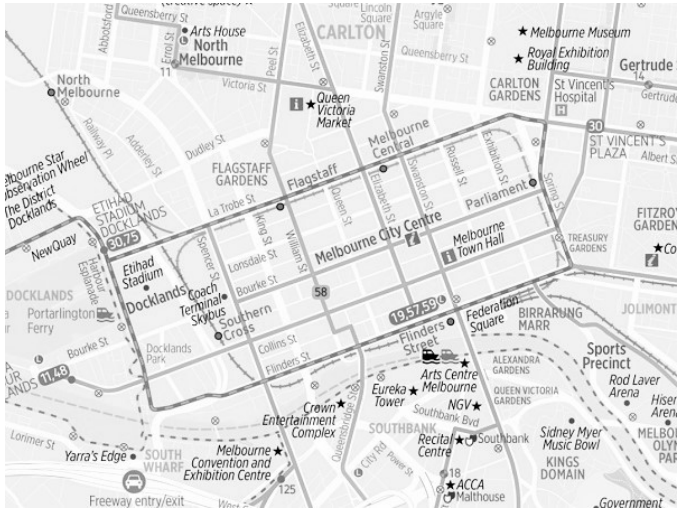
To Gloria ... with a life full of promise

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Chapter One

Dawn burst over Melbourne's jagged skyline, bathing the city's towers with gauzy golden light, and the stars fled. Lit from within, the cluster of skyscrapers made an enchanting contrast against the strips of low painted clouds. Cars meandered along St. Kilda Road, mostly heading toward the city, their red taillights sharp and the noise of engines a muffled hum. Overhead, Nash could see several skycars making their way to landing pads built on roofs of taller buildings.

He took two deep breaths to steady himself after running up the steps to the top landing of the Shrine of Remembrance, the huge stone war memorial with its towering colonnades looming before him. He turned and gazed at the city's sprawl spread before him. This early the air still had a crisp bite and his skin tingled after a brisk four-kilometer run through the Kings Domain Park. Everything felt fresh and new. Colors were bright and hard, and sounds seemed to carry forever. Later, as the sun burned its way through a layer of shredded clouds, the air would become heavy and hot, another typical summer's day.

Nash preferred to do his running in the morning before the city fully wakened, before the streets filled with indifferent, self-absorbed pedestrians oblivious to those around them, hurrying to reach their particular destination. Rivers of people clogging the city's arteries, life flowing endlessly. He often speculated at the purpose of it all, and was still to find a satisfactory answer. It could not be simply a blind march to merely further procreation, although it sometimes seemed that way.

A dark change was sweeping the world and he feared that he and others like him might not survive it. Humans as a species would not die easily.

Standing there, gazing at the city stirring from slumber, he wondered if the people down there really knew what was happening around them, or even cared? He suspected that most did

not, and wouldn't, until prodded into action, turned into a mindless tide in a futile attempt to stem the change whose ripples were already being felt. He had not felt them personally, but riots, protests and demands for action were becoming more frequent and vehement, leaving the silent majority puzzled and concerned, uncertain of a future they did not fully understand, but feared it nonetheless. That uncertainty generated dread, something easily fanned into flaming waves of retaliation, since no one really knew what other action to take, especially the government. What action they had already taken was disturbing enough.

Seeing the painted clouds, the flowing red and orange streamers could be portents of things to come.

But it did not have to be.

He shook his head to dispel the angels of death. Tomorrow was a blank page still to be written...perhaps in blood.

Sweaty T-shirt cool against his skin, he exhaled softly, then ambled down the steps to the broad walkway that lead to the memorial, past the large metal bowl holding the eternal flame, and picked up his pace as he made his way across the grassed slope toward the sidewalk. The pervading stink of an occasional petrol engine exhaust made him wrinkle his nose with distaste. Two trams clanged their bells as they passed each other. A tall girl dressed in navy shorts and a blue singlet, long ponytail swaying from side to side, nodded to him in passing, then she was gone, leaving a trace of lavender in the air, her padded footfalls fading behind him.

He had seen her a number of times and pondered who she was, what she did to fill her life. Did she also question what it was all about, the strife, the struggle, the emptiness, the shallow texture of living that swept everything before it in a singular pursuit to survive, to continue? Perhaps she did, although it was unlikely he would ever find out, short of stopping her and asking. The image made him smile.

What if he did stop her and asked? She would probably think he was nuts, hitting on her, and she could be right.

He crossed the busy Domain Road and slowed to a walk as

he approached Bromby Street and his apartment block. Cleared through a link with his Personal Identification Device, the entrance lock clicked and he pushed in the heavy glass door. The security guard at his round console station gave him a brief wave and returned to reading his book. As Nash walked toward the elevators, he heard a car whisper by. These days, in cities at least, most were electric, which over the last six years had largely removed the perpetual blanket of brown smog that used to cover them. There were still plenty of petrol guzzlers around, but increased registration charges and insurance premiums were seeing them slowly weeded out. Much to the lament and angst of their owners.

After a shower, he climbed into a business suit and knotted his tie. Tuesday mornings were always hectic, reserved for Telstra sob sessions where he got to hear how his project managers were running things. Yesterday, he held an in-depth recap with his PMs of all work done to date. Fair was fair. On Fridays, Telstra held status dissections with PMs from both sides. As an IBM program manager, he didn't have to attend, and did not. He had enough progress meetings already.

He thought about dropping into his office before going to Telstra and decided against it. Snoden would probably waylay him in the corridor—the man was always there by 7:30, a high pressure achiever type—and Nash did not want to have a mini status session with the IBM program director, especially since a formal management one was going to be held tomorrow anyway. He *could* have done the Telstra meeting over the holoview wall virtual presence link in the comfort of his apartment, but some things required personal attendance. Besides, a clear, warm morning deserved appreciation from the outside.

He told Sally to play a selection of Brahms' chamber melodies, and the housekeeping computer flooded the apartment with full surround music as he prepared a light breakfast of mixed vegetable juice and home-made muesli with dried fruit, having bought the ingredients at the renovated Victoria Market, the stuff from supermarkets still containing a lot of sugar and salt. After years

of pressure from the Australian Medical Association, the Food & Nutrition lobby and other organizations, Canberra finally imposed a sugar tax, refusing to bow to the powerful sugar industry group.

Usually, breakfast featured sliced tomato and capsicum, red or green. He alternated. This morning, he figured a shot of NutriBullet juice would be enough. Getting things sorted out around the table, he occasionally glanced at the holoview wall display showing the usual news staple: shootings, car wrecks, a hurricane building off Queensland, and latest political antics, local and international. Those were always good for a chuckle or two. He sometimes wondered why he bothered to watch, but like a junkie, he could not turn away from his morning news fix. Besides, he liked to eavesdrop on the more morbid side of human behavior. What did that say about him? Better not go there, he told himself.

As the news clips washed over him, he took an occasional sip of juice and his thoughts drifted to having something more substantial than just a smoothy, but his body did not crave being stuffed with bacon and eggs. Even as children, he and his twin brother Mark never ate much red meat, preferring vegetables and fruit, shunning takeaway snacks, which set them apart from other kids and got them talked about amid snickers. These days, Nash didn't see Mark all that much, his brother's work keeping him busy in Canberra. They kept in touch with emails and cell-phone/holoview calls, and Mark visited a few times, but Nash missed the sober talks they used to have while studying at Melbourne University.

His sister Natalie, three years younger, had a precocious six-year-old daughter who wound both uncles around her little finger with giggling ease. Adriana was a demanding handful, but when Sandra and Kevin suddenly came along as a boy/girl package, she had to adjust, no longer the focus of the family. From what Nash could tell when he visited their tastefully renovated North Melbourne terrace house, they were a happy bunch, and Shaun Mills a good husband.

Shaun had a quiet, strong-willed personality and was a good

listener when they talked. An IT manager at the National Australia Bank, his revelations into the inner workings of international banking—his own area of expertise—made Nash sit up and blink. Shaun often said that all the major banks wanted to concentrate their business on the corporate sector. That's where the money was. Retail business was a drag, having to maintain branch networks to support small business and mom and dad customers. They had to put up with it, though, as there was no way to get around government legislation.

Nat could eat anything and burned it off without any problems, much to the dismay and envy of her friends struggling with waistlines, and she had never taken a shine to meat either. Even now, married, she kept her fine, trim figure. Nash and Mark were also slim, both 181cm, muscular without being bulgy, light brown hair, black eyes, and always full of energy. The whole Bannon brood had a happy and carefree childhood, but when the boys turned thirteen, something happened that shattered their carefree, innocent lives. A secret only the boys and their parents knew. A secret he fervently could not reveal to anyone, one that had grown into a terrible, weary burden.

Glass of juice half way to his mouth, he paused and stared at the holoview.

“Last night, Senator Holt Ryner, leader of the Australian Greens, with support of all Senate crossbench members, vowed to block legislation by the federal government to introduce its controversial Personal Identification Device tracking feature, which according to Ryner is designed to further erode individual freedoms under the tired old argument to broaden protection and safety for all citizens, but in reality is a blatant violation of human rights and would only serve to promote unwarranted monitoring of the population at large. The opposition leader, Macey Gardner, remains noncommittal, saying the Labor Party will make its decision once it sees the legislation. Introduction of a tracking feature does have merit, he claims, provided individuals are able to deactivate the function at will. Governments do not have a mandate to monitor an individual's movements and activities in the name of national security. Law enforcement agencies already had adequate mechanisms to safeguard people, he added.”

Nash frowned. The coverage troubled him on several fronts. Not the enhanced PID tracking function *per se*, but its application to monitor lifeliners, which he suspected was its real purpose. If the authorities wanted to find someone, they can track a person's smartphone even when switched off, and *everybody* carried a cell. Admittedly, that only provided location of the phone, but most of the time, it's a safe bet that locating the cell will also locate the person carrying it. However, tracking a person's PID would be a sure thing every time, and would reveal much more than merely his location. Besides, there were enough face recognition cameras plastered all over the place, the images used by authorities to build vast surveillance databases. Another public safety measure.

The announcement may have come from the Liberal Party, but everybody knew their far-right Australian Conservatives partner engineered the policy. It takes eighty-two seats in the federal parliament's 160-seat Lower House to form a one-seat majority government. The government of the day having to provide the Speaker of the House who usually does not vote unless there is a tie. At the 2030 election, not able to form government in their own right even with the support of their traditional allies, the Liberal National Party—who absorbed the Nationals and Country Liberals parties years back—the Coalition was six seats short and left with a bitter-sweet choice: embrace the Conservatives or sit on the opposition benches. They figured sleeping with the enemy they knew was better than allowing the Labor Party to rule, but that pragmatic decision came at a steep price. Although a strong leader, the Prime Minister had hamstrung herself with single-issue interests of her coalition partners who sidetracked much of the government's legislative agenda. The Labor Party cynically announced that they would never stoop so low as to embrace the crossbench members or the Conservatives' ten seats for the chance to govern. The pragmatic federal parliamentary wing might entertain the idea, but the Labor National Executive would run them out of the party first.

The upcoming general election will prove interesting on many fronts.

To Nash, it did not really matter which party held government. The declaration to track PIDs was nothing less than another step in the escalating war against lifeliners, despite a major UN statement and numerous court rulings in many countries that guaranteed their rights.

In March 2027—it took three years for them to make the announcement—the full session of the UN General Assembly finally reaffirmed that Article 2 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 applied with equal force to lifeliners, which stated, *‘Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status’.*

Unfortunately, the announcement had little effect on world opinion from an organization that had for a long time lost much of its credibility as a global policeman, the main reason for creating it. Tired of propping it up with more than a quarter of its annual budget, meaningful action too often blocked by a veto from one of the permanent Security Council members, in 2022 the U.S. dropped its contribution to a paltry five billion, which it maintained ever since. This left the bureaucratic rump with humanitarian, health, and economic programs, and the Security Council a gentleman’s club, although everybody pretended it still had relevance.

Another problem was that many governments questioned the validity of the Declaration, asserting that lifeliners were not human, notwithstanding overwhelming scientific evidence to the contrary, which opened the door to witch hunts, vigilante activists, and general unrest, with people not really comprehending what was going on, but not liking the growing social dislocation. When the U.S., seen as a bastion of freedom and human rights, opened internment camps and set up secret laboratories to conduct experiments on lifeliners, it was not hard to understand why the more extreme regimes carried out what amounted to open pogroms. Muslim radicals labeled them agents of Satan, and the Vatican was fence sitting, still to release a positional papal bull,

which only fueled confusion among the faithful. Everybody else pretended the problem did not even exist, hoping to wake tomorrow to a saner world.

For Nash, the problem was personal and manifestly real. Since their emergence, he wondered whether lifeliners had achieved any meaningful recognition and acceptance under laws seldom enforced. Current events pointed to a gloomy future.

“Politicians! Assholes, all of them,” he muttered. “Rats!”

“Voters have savaged Labor for its lack of a coherent policy on lifeliners, the latest Morgan Poll showing the Opposition slipping an additional three points behind the Liberal-led coalition, 32 to 48. Some in the Labor Caucus are questioning Mr. Gardner’s leadership, troubled by this slip in confidence and the effect it could have on the October election.

“The Prime Minister, Atarah Readman, dismissed concerns raised by Senator Ryner, saying that provision of a tracking function is merely a by-product of an integrated PID system already in place as outlined by Neil Travers, Minister for the Department of Human Services, and has nothing to do with invading personal privacy, access subject to strict legislation. Asked if the federal government recognized lifeliners having the same rights and privileges as ordinary citizens, the Prime Minister failed to provide a coherent response, saying that emergence of lifeliners represented a major social challenge facing governments around the world, and Australia needed to deal with the issue responsibly for the welfare of all its citizens, which suggests that the Coalition government, particularly its Australian Conservatives partner, does not consider lifeliners to be citizens, something the Prime Minister nimbly sidestepped.

“Much to public consternation, the police have released without charge several People First Party far-right extremists arrested during a march in Canberra last Sunday where they demanded that all lifeliners be interned permanently, sterilized and their citizenship revoked. The march coincided with picketing of the Lifeliner Party headquarters in Carlton Place, Melbourne, and the firebombing of Sydney’s North Shore Lifeliner Help Center. Outraged civil liberty groups are urging the federal Director of Public Prosecutions to intervene and indict the perpetrators.

“In Berlin, a twenty-two-year-old man, allegedly a lifeliner, was badly beaten by three neo-Nazis as he walked out of a popular nightclub. Police

arrested the assailants and the victim was taken to a hospital with non-life-threatening injuries."

Nash ground his teeth in disgust, alarmed at the growing trend of lifeliner persecutions and apparent unwillingness by politicians of all persuasions to address the matter. Forceful sterilization was already carried out by some totalitarian regimes and, according to rumors, even in the United States and Europe. The suggestion that Australia should adopt such a vile practice as a solution was particularly disturbing. Didn't governments realize that simply entertaining this option could tear democracies apart? After an uneasy truce over the last five years, civil unrest was growing and extremists were becoming more vocal, emboldened by lack of firm action from lawmakers and the courts. Instead of addressing the lifeliner issue in a meaningful way, the government appeared more interested in milking the politics angle.

Last Wednesday night, a gang of four youths attacked a seventeen-year-old teenager outside the Flinders Street train station, claiming he was a lifeliner. The kid lost an eye, suffered a broken arm and numerous lacerations. By the time the dobers arrived, the youths had fled...and nobody saw a thing. What was worse, tests showed the kid wasn't even a lifeliner. Disturbingly, such incidents were becoming more common everywhere. Reaction to such attacks was natural and predictable. Lifeliner teenagers tended to group for mutual protection, which inevitably led to clashes and vandalism, creating a vicious cycle that defied sanity.

New Zealanders seemed to have escaped this cancerous madness, accepting lifeliners without fear or prejudice. When lifeliners emerged, they were simply another group in the multicultural mix. Sociologists talked learnedly about seamless integration of indigenous Maori and Asians into the social fabric, but a clear explanation why the country was so stable eluded them. If their cousins across the Tasman could make the adjustment without violence, Nash wondered why Aussies, who had an even more diverse population mix, couldn't do the same. The Kiwis were just different, he decided.

"Last night, the Senate failed to pass the controversial Superannuation

amendment bill for the second time, giving the government a double dissolution trigger for an early election. Given the current polling numbers, it is doubtful the Prime Minister would risk facing the voters before she had to. The bill is intended to change how the Consumer Price Index is calculated, which would have helped recipients of government benefits, including pensioners. Commentators have criticized Labor's failure to support a worthwhile social initiative.

"In partnership with Blue Origin, an aerospace company set up by Jeff Bezos, chairman of Amazon, SpaceX successfully launched a third unmanned supply mission from their Texas Boca Chica facility aimed at the northern rim of Peary crater, close to the Lunar north pole. SpaceX claims that its manned mission in August will finally establish a semi-permanent Moon base. Elon Musk, the founder of Space Exploration Technologies Corp. stated that private industry can operate profitably in space without reliance on a bureaucracy-hampered government."

That's what he should do...emigrate to the Moon, Nash told himself.

"Sally..."

"Yes, Nash?" the house computer queried in pleasant contralto.

"Switch off...just a moment."

"Last night, Beijing announced that the final phase of its withdrawal from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea will be completed by June this year after its occupation of the rogue state in 2020 following the U.S. bombing of the Mansu-dae Assembly Hall in Pyongyang, which killed Kim Jong-un and most of the Supreme People's Assembly, effectively neutralizing the nuclear threat to the region and the free world. The attack was ordered by the former President Donald Trump after North Korea launched an advanced ballistic missile armed with a thermonuclear warhead that detonated at an altitude of 200 kilometers off the Oregon coast. The White House Press Secretary said that President Elliott Mackay welcomed the announcement and looked forward to the upcoming meeting with the Chinese president Cheng Hung in May, to discuss normalization of the Korean peninsula and a common approach to resolve the lifeliner problem. You can see a special ABC Four Corners coverage of events leading to the U.S. strike and analysis of its impact next Monday at 8:30 pm.

"You are watching ABC Breakfast on Tuesday, January 20, 2032.

Recapping our other headlines...Prime Minister Atarab Readman continues to push for a referendum to extend the federal term for both Houses to a fixed four years—”

Not interested in other headlines, he told Sally to kill the holoview, took a glass carafe of freshly brewed coffee to the balcony table and pulled back a wooden chair. South Korea won't mind seeing the Chinese withdraw from the peninsula, and neither will the North Koreans. The United States had left only a token force in ROK after a popular pullout in 2026, which freed badly needed billions to repair a fractured U.S. deficit. The pullout didn't catch anyone by surprise, especially when in 2023 the U.S. reduced its NATO role to observer status, part of a layered policy to untangle itself from its role as the global policeman whom nobody really wanted. Understandably, the Europeans were not overly impressed, having to shoulder their own defense budget for a change, which left American voters unmoved. It takes troops to hold conquered ground, but Russia wasn't the red menace of old. Awash with natural resources, economy growing steadily, they did not have a tactical or strategic reason to contemplate invading NATO countries, particularly after Turkey pulled out of the alliance in 2021 and aligned itself with Russia, which gave it unrestricted access into the Mediterranean.

Nash gazed absently at the broad St. Kilda Road thoroughfare three floors down and sipped the fragrant brew, not paying any real attention to the building traffic noise and pedestrians striding purposefully to catch a tram into the city and vanish in one of its towers, the day absorbed with work. Tomorrow, everyone would wearily repeat it all again. Endless days of seemingly endless labor. It did not surprise him that many teenagers found the prospect of such a life repellent. Repellent or not, that was the price society demanded for the benefits and privileges it delivered.

Delivered for some, he reminded himself.

Nevertheless, the social contract had many holes through which people could fall, where life on the edges was cold and dark. Nash had never experienced the harsher side of life, although he had seen it revealed in the bleak, vacant faces of the

unemployed sleeping in streets and alleyways, their jobs taken over by robots or AI systems. As automation increased in absence of political will to integrate technology with people's needs, it was a social dilemma seemingly beyond resolution.

What did *he* want out of the social contract? To leave something behind other than memories did not seem to be enough.

He shook his head and sighed. Instead of shedding pheromones of gloom, he should be perky and elated, having secured another date with Cariana—a proper date. A Latin derivative for *beloved*, he could not think of a more perfect name. It was also a constellation in the southern sky. Fitting, he thought. The date tonight would be at the exclusive Box Seafood restaurant in Collins Street. An expensive outing, but worth it to glow in her sunny disposition and enjoy lively conversation. This would be their first night-out date and he pictured her corn colored hair piled high or left to flow across one shoulder. Her oval face appeared before him: large almond eyes, small mouth and pert nose, high cheekbones, she was enchanting. Nash liked her uninhibited personality ready to challenge established dogma and what she termed his cube opinions. When she laughed, she showed even teeth and a dimpled left cheek. A devastating woman and he had willingly placed himself in striking range of her charms. Living alone had its good points, but there were also enough reasons for him to want a permanent companion and partner. A conundrum he hoped she would help him resolve, which implied that he *wanted* a major change in his life. Was he ready for another relationship? However, knowing what Cariana wanted, and women in general, was a game of contradictions.

She held a PhD in genetics and worked at The Alfred Hospital on a cooperative project with the CSIRO. She told him—must have been on their first lunch date—that she had an apartment in St. Kilda Road and did not socialize much, her research keeping her busy. He could relate to that. His own work often kept him chained to a desk for long hours. From their first encounter, Nash sensed a mutual attraction, but he still knew very little about

her as a person. She had a page in Wikipedia, but apart from listing her academic record, publications, and professional credits, she was somewhat of a mystery, one he intended to resolve. Still, at twenty-eight, she had a broad footprint of achievements.

They met two weeks ago, also a Tuesday, at Southbank's La Asiago, an eatery Nash favored, being close to IBM. He had come out of a tough meeting with his six project managers and needed to stretch his legs and get some fresh air. It was always the same thing: budgets, resources, and schedules. He didn't have much sympathy for any of his people. After all, they were the ones who set up their program of work, including project estimates and KPIs, admittedly after some hard negotiation with Telstra and strategic massaging by Nash. They would just have to tough it out, but he made it clear he would not swallow costs or schedule overruns, unless caused by changes in client requirements. In that case, he told them to get a signed contract variation.

Clients everywhere loved to make changes to signed-off requirements, hoping IBM would absorb costs and schedule creeps with a veiled promise of future business, and Telstra were experts at this game. As far as Nash was concerned, any change regardless how innocently small affected a project. A few little things could and were regularly absorbed, but there were limits and all had to be properly costed and documented. A friendly business-based client relationship generated future revenues, not by taking on add-on freebies that might have unforeseen consequences. He had to fire one of his PMs before the others realized he wasn't fooling. Nash would be the one having to explain to IBM management why his program of work had blown out, which would cut into the corporate profit margin. He made sure his PMs never put him into that position. That made him a hardnosed bastard, but also earned him rueful admiration from IBM and Telstra.

He didn't push his project managers, provided they did their job. When he wore his business hat, everything they did counted. He admonished in private and fought with management for whatever they needed. After work, they shared an occasional beer

or a glass of wine, but even then, he was the program manager, not a friend or drinking buddy. He wanted to be their friend, but if he crossed that line, he could no longer remain their boss.

Coffee cup in hand, memories chased each other as he remembered vividly walking out of the IBM building into a hot, but not oppressively so, day. A cooling breeze came off the Yarra River as he strode along the riverside promenade filled with restaurants and shops and people enjoying their lunch break. An occasional jogger—some girls wore very little, which only added to the interesting scenery—weaved through the throng. He could never figure out, and no one was able to explain to him, why girls could wear skimpy shorts, while guys had to saddle themselves with knee-length jobs. One of life's inexplicable fashion mysteries.

A tourist barge left a frothy trail in its wake as it made its way downriver toward the harbor. Kayaks and multi-scul boats played the brown waters. The Yarra still came in for its share of low jokes about being a sewer. Even though it looked dirty, it really was quite clean and had a healthy ecology. Across the river, the city's jagged skyline reached into a hard, clear blue sky. A Virgin Air skycar drifted almost silently toward a landing pad next to the Aquarium. The airspace above the city was full of them. He looked up, feeling good soaking in the UVs.

He spotted her sitting alone at a small square table in the open part of La Asiago along the promenade and the world faded around him. Dressed in cream slacks and gray business jacket, flaxen hair spilling across her left shoulder, time stopped and he stared at this captivating woman alone in her shell, surrounded by chattering people, yet unreachable. He traced the lines of her delicate face, the fall of her hair, and a small frown creasing her forehead that made her perfect.

You don't want to become involved again, old son!

Probably not, but he could not see any harm in an interesting lunchtime diversion compared to the alternative of a lonely bench beside the river, warm sunshine notwithstanding. It might do him good to seek out some distracting company and wash out

the unpleasant taste of his IBM meeting.

With the exterior section of the restaurant packed and no empty seats, he took a deep breath and weaved between the tables toward her. If she didn't like his approach, she could always tell him to buzz off. It had happened before. Some women just didn't want to be bothered. Peace.

"I don't mean to intrude, but you seem to have the only spare seat. May I?"

She glanced around, gave him an appraising look with eyes that cut and probed, and finally nodded.

"There are tables inside," she said softly, her clear voice sending an unexpected tingle down his spine. What the hell was going on? He reminded himself that this was just lunch—diverting as it might be—not a romantic encounter.

"Yes, but it's not the same thing, and it's too cold and crowded in there," he declared as he pulled back a chair.

Her eyebrows rose. "You prefer your own company?"

"Depends on the company," he said and eased himself down. "I never take chances I don't have to."

"You're taking a chance now, aren't you?"

"Sometimes you have to." He glanced at two David Jones store shopping bags beside her, and she smiled.

"I took advantage of a nice day to pick up a few things before returning to The Alfred," she explained.

"You're a doctor?"

The babble of voices around them created a shield of intimacy and a sense that time had stopped. Even the crowd strolling along the promenade faded from his view.

"Geneticist."

"Fascinating line of work," he said, genuinely interested.

When the waiter arrived, he ordered spiced ravioli and gnoc-chi and half a bottle of red Chianti. Shortly afterward, her spaghetti marinara arrived. Looking at her speculatively, he lifted the bottle. She frowned and brushed back a stray lock of golden hair.

"Is this your standard gambit when picking up women?"

She had slim, delicate fingers with a subdued red nail polish

that complemented without being gaudy. He imagined fondling those hands, running his fingers over her smooth skin. Could he be getting infatuated with a woman he just met? No, this was merely an interesting meeting with someone attractive and sophisticated. Still, she had a magnetism he could feel and his soul reached out to her, warning bells clanging in his head. He clamped a lid on them, prepared to enjoy this moment.

“I don’t do casual pickups.”

She inclined her head in disbelief. “And I am...”

“A fortuitous and pleasant accident. No spare tables, remember? Besides, you looked so lonely...”

She lifted a finger. “Don’t push it.”

He grinned at her. “A peace offering, then. A glass of wine?”

“I shouldn’t—”

“It’s a very light Italian red. Won’t do anything to spoil your day.”

She bit her lower lip, then slid her glass toward him. “Only a little.”

“Great.”

He poured both of them half a glass. She lowered her fork and took a cautious sip. Her eyebrows arched and she nodded.

“Interesting flavor.”

“Glad you like it. By the way, I’m Nash Bannon.”

“Cariana Lambert, and I still think this is a pickup routine.”

Nash winced. “Now I’m hurt. I really—”

Just then, the waiter brought a bowl of steaming ravioli and gnocchi, cutting off whatever he was about to say. Nash thanked him, picked up his fork, stabbed one of the gnocchi and popped it into his mouth. It was nice and chewy the way he liked it and he relished the tangy mushroom sauce.

Cariana watched him with an amused expression. “That won’t do much for your waistline,” she remarked dryly.

“It’s my carbs day,” he explained between bites. “I usually have a mixed salad and fruit juice, but that is not always enough to keep me fueled and beat off the sharks at work.”

She glanced at her bowl. “I know what you mean. Seeing you

relishing your gnocchi eases my own guilt for being weak.” She dabbed her lips with a napkin and took another sip of wine. “And what fills your days, Mr. Bannon?”

“Nash. I do systems integration for IBM.”

“Weren’t they taken over by Facebook?”

“They certainly were. IBM culture was getting stale and needed an infusion of new methodology and ideas. I have doubts that it worked, but they run some cutting edge projects.”

“And what are you working on right now?”

“I’m currently managing a major Telstra network program where everybody is giving me a hard time.”

“Poor you.”

“Your sympathy is appreciated.”

She turned serious. “I did not mean to tease you, and I do understand, finding myself in a similar position. Doing research would be fun if it weren’t for the oversight protocols, although necessary.” She finished the last of her marinara and gathered her bags. “Thank you for the wine...Nash.”

Dismayed to see her about to leave, his mind raced. He could not let it end like this. “I enjoyed meeting you and I would enjoy it even more if we could do this again, taking more time.”

Now what the hell made him say that! This was supposed to be a simple lunch without sticky romantic overtones.

She stood and laughed. “Are you always this forthright?”

“I don’t go out much, and meeting someone like you is rare,” he said quickly and rose, figuring his pickup line could use some updating. “What do you say?”

Frowning prettily, her eyes searching for something and apparently finding it, she dug into her purse and held out a business card. With a nod, she made her way out and disappeared into the crowd ambling along the promenade, leaving behind her a fresh spring fragrance. Bemused, he sat down and studied the card, his gnocchi momentarily forgotten. Despite inner red flags, he found that he really wanted to see her again. If it led to something substantial, so be it. Going over her face in his mind, he picked up his fork and dug into the ravioli.

Except for one vivid time two years ago, and the memories still burned, he never had a serious relationship with a woman, the longest lasting three months. It began as a chance meeting, shallow with no expectations from either of them, which quickly progressed into something more serious. Open and vulnerable, he allowed himself to love her unreservedly...until that fateful night when they took her from him. Some of the light went out of his life then.

Sally...

Afterward, his job kept him consumed. Before that, university studies left little room for lasting encounters. At thirty-two, he had done well to be a senior program manager and strategic consultant groomed by IBM for higher things. They were a demanding taskmaster and rewarded top performance. The alternative was turning himself into just another body shop contractor. Nash liked the organization's passion and megaprojects they handled, but disliked intensely the stifling procedures and endless reporting requirements that in his view only added unnecessary overheads. Overheads in cost, manpower and time—deadly for any project. One of the things he did to get himself noticed was streamlining the lifecycle process in his program of work that eliminated what he saw as bureaucratic redundancy, which incidentally saved Telstra two-and-a-half million dollars and shaved the delivery schedule by nine months. He encountered a lot of opposition from older entrenched managers when he proposed to apply those changes across all programs, but a vigorous discussion with a visiting Senior VP for Software Solutions from New York saw his procedures implemented across IBM worldwide and earned him promotion and a hefty bonus.

Professional success came at a price. He lacked personal fulfillment, someone to share his life with, be his companion and confidant. Someone with whom he could live out his hopes and dreams and overcome disappointments. He wondered if Cariana could be that someone. Could he really share *everything* with her? Being what he was, could he do that with anyone?

* * *

As the tram stopped, Nash pursed his lips when he saw the standing room only crush inside. The double doors sighed open and he stepped in, those inside reluctantly making way for new passengers clambering onboard.

“Stepped on,” his PID vocalized to him as he grabbed a polished steel stanchion for support.

The doors closed and with a clang from the bell, the tram lurched forward. The passengers around him were the usual mix of office workers and students from RMIT and Melbourne University, most of them engaged in animated conversation or voice texting, absorbed in their smartphones that had become a virtual PID extension. A starched executive type in a dark gray pinstripe suit, having snagged a seat when he got on, stared intently at his tablet. Nash admired the man’s misguided dedication. Didn’t he have a life other than being an office slave?

Past the Arts Center, the tram slowed as it approached the Federation Square stop. It chimed its bell madly, probably at people scrambling across the tracks to catch one of the trams going up St. Kilda Road. The doors snapped open and there was a rush to get out, those outside barely containing their impatience to board. Nash could not understand this frenzied eagerness. There was always another tram, especially during the rush period, but getting this one seemed to constitute a small moral victory. There were a few empty seats now, but he preferred to stand.

A skinny little girl, perhaps twelve, short light brown hair almost blond, in rats, hopped in and grabbed the stanchion below his hand. She wore dirty green corduroy slacks torn at the knees, red sandals, and a stained violet short-sleeved shirt. Her round face might have been cute if it had a wash. She lifted her head and large, impenetrable dark eyes momentarily locked with his. Nash figured her to be a street kid, running away from whatever demons haunted her days, her trust in fellow human beings forever shattered. There weren’t many of them around as dobers—that’s what a lot of people called the cops these days—usually

hauled them in on sight. By the look of her, she could use a good bath and several solid meals. Sad to see children in such a state, but it wasn't any of his business and he couldn't do anything for her.

The tram surged forward and clattered across tracks running along Flinders Street. He felt a warm touch as the kid slid her hand up the stanchion, thinking nothing of it. He used the same technique when he jammed. He wasn't sure why they called it jamming and nobody had taken time to explain it to him. The idea was to touch a donor without being obvious and allow the life-force, as he called it, to seep into him. Feeling the energy suffuse through him was akin to having pulsing waves of pins and needles ripple through his body, but extremely pleasurable. However, not so pleasurable that it could become an addiction. It was simply something his body craved as any other food...almost. He usually did it in a crowded tram either in the morning or when going home, the press of people disguising the accidental touch.

He didn't *have* to feed regularly, as ordinary food sustained him adequately enough, but a period of strenuous physical or mental exertion, or when feeling unwell, which was very rare, triggered an impulse deep in his belly that demanded fulfillment. He often went for a week without jamming, but when the impulse came, he could not ignore it. As little boys, he and his brother Mark would ride the trams practicing the touch, learning how much to take before the donor became disturbed. Drain too much and the donor could faint, which would cause unwelcomed attention, something to be avoided at all cost. In extreme circumstances, a lifeliner could kill when all the life-force drained out of the victim, but he suspected that this was just street talk, as he never heard of that happening. The idea was to take a little from two or three donors until he was fully charged. His initial attempts were clumsy affairs that almost got him caught more than once. Nash remembered the scolding they received from their mother after one escapade, accompanied by stimulation with a large wooden spoon, when one of their donors fainted. Still, it was a good game they played. Those were happy, innocent times,

and seemingly such a long time ago. Little innocence left in the world these days.

Could this little child just into puberty when the ability first manifested itself, be one? Nash felt a faint tingling sensation race up his arm. No, surely not. Masking his surprise, he glanced down, but the girl appeared to stare vacantly at shop fronts along Swanston Street without realizing whom she was touching. That recognition takes time and practice to develop. He allowed her to feed for a few more seconds, then pulled away his hand.

She was a lifeliner!

It would explain her bedraggled appearance. Like other runaways, she may have fled from home when her parents found out what she was and threatened to hand her over to the authorities as the law required. Regrettably, realizing they had a lifeliner child, some couples who initially chose to keep this hidden could not handle the daunting prospect of a lifetime of secrecy suddenly thrust on them. A curtain of secrecy from family, friends, and most importantly the government, which they could never break. The trauma left shattered lives in its wake, particularly for the child concerned who could not really comprehend what was happening or why.

Nash knew intimately what it was to be a lifeliner.

He remembered as though it were happening now, one evening after dinner, Dad talked to him and Mark about lifeliners. At fourteen, they were experiencing the numerous signs of puberty, and not sure how to deal with them, especially the hunger deep in their belly that occasionally overcame them. Expecting the usual embarrassing father/son talk about girls, Nash glanced at Mark, figuring how to save their father from making a fool of himself. They were familiar with the facts of life, but the facts of life Dad laid out left them sober and more than a little frightened. He knew his parents suspected for a long time that their boys were lifeliners, but their sister Natalie wasn't, which created yet another awkward problem. Nash recalled a set of medical tests two years earlier he and Mark had at a clinic in East Melbourne when they turned twelve. Afterward, Mom and Dad were very

quiet for about a week, giving the boys an occasional odd look, but they never stopped caring for them. It wasn't until Dad's talk that they learned the reason for those tests, and their parents' wariness.

There he was, a boy of fourteen, his future bright, only to find the world to be a much darker and sinister place than he believed. Something they only saw in holoview news reports had suddenly become very real.

One thing Dad could not tell them was why they had to jam. The drive clearly satisfied some unknown physiological need, but despite many learned papers on the subject, no one really knew or understood the need. When the urge came, he had a few days to give into it. It was simple as that.

What Nash found infinitely comforting, his parents kept loving their odd boys as though nothing had changed, and never played favorites. They were breaking the law by not reporting them, but Dad was wise not to have done so.

For the little girl beside him, that appeared not have been the case. Was there a way he could help her?

When the tram stopped at the Bourke Street pedestrian mall, he reached for the girl's wrist. It was an atavistic impulse, as he had no real idea what he was going to do or say to her. He just wanted to let her know that he was someone who knew and understood what she was going through. Her head jerked and she looked at him in astonishment, small mouth open, even teeth white against her smudged face, the expression immediately turning into panic.

"Hey! What's with you? Let go!"

Her reaction caused heads to turn. Someone bumped his shoulder on the way out and Nash lost his grip. The girl jerked back her hand, jumped out and disappeared into the crowd. Staring after her, he wondered who she was, knowing it was unlikely he would ever see her again. A leaf fluttering in the wind.

He tried to figure out why he reached out to her, but a clear reason eluded him. He sighed, shook his head and tried to forget it, knowing he couldn't.

The tram slowly clanked forward.

* * *

At seven o'clock sharp, Nash linked with the apartment's security system and waited. He hadn't done the dating thing in a while and wished the little butterflies of anxiety would stop fluttering about. After all, it is not as though this was their *first* date! Still, in a way it was. They were going out, which had not happened before. The other times they met were merely lunchtime encounters. Diverting, but not intimate, and he desperately sought to make a good impression. If this evening turned into a flop, it would be strike one and out. Something about her captivated him, stirred feelings he had not experienced for some time...since Sally. Feelings deeper than mere physical attraction.

After two years, it was time to put the past behind him.

He heard muffled footsteps and exhaled fully as the lock clicked. Cariana stood there; hair piled high, dense violet dress hugging her knees, shoulders bare, black pumps adorning shapely legs. She smiled faintly at his goggling expression. Her red lips glowed and a touch of blue shadow extenuated her dark eyes, complemented by rose pearl earrings and matching necklace.

She tilted her head slightly. "I expect to be admired, but you are ogling, Mr. Bannon."

He grinned broadly and spread his hands. "I couldn't help it. You look lovely."

"Thank you. You don't look bad yourself."

Wearing a tailored cream silk shirt open at the collar, navy dark worsted slacks and Gucci loafers, he thought himself presentable. He liked wearing casual gear, but it had to be elegant.

"It'll do. Shall we?"

She stepped out, closed the door behind her, and they made their way to the elevator in thoughtful silence. Very conscious of her standing beside him, Nash linked his PID with the elevator and waited. After a minute, there was a soft *ting* and the polished steel double doors opened. He extended his arm and waited for

her to get in.

“This apartment... nice location,” he remarked as the elevator dropped.

“It’s within easy walking distance from The Alfred and close to the city by tram. When I need to stretch my legs or go for a run, Fawkner Park is right behind me. I have a house in Woodend I use as my weekend retreat. I only live here during the week.”

“How... I mean—”

“How can I afford two places? Actually, I can’t. Not on my salary, and the body corporate fees are a drain.”

“I dodged that one by setting myself up as a limited liability company,” he told her. “As a freelance consultant, I work from home a lot, which makes most of my apartment costs tax deductible.”

“Ah, wish I could do that.”

“You can. Form a company or trust and sell your apartment to it, then lease the apartment.”

She searched his face. “I can do that?”

“Definitely. I’d recommend getting professional advice, though. It’s a tricky area of law as the Taxation Office may look on it as a tax dodge, which it is in a way.”

“Mmm, something to consider, thanks. What about you? Didn’t IBM mind you going freelance? I would have thought that would be a career stopper.”

He shook his head. “Not really. Going freelance saves them a lot of administrative overheads. Being a contractor can be risky, but the kind of work I do gives me a measure of employment security and pays far better. You were telling me how you got your apartment.”

“My father did well after the 2023 crash and got me the apartment as an investment. The house in Woodend is mortgaged. I really should get rid of it, but it’s quiet and allows me to readjust and clear my head.”

“Funny you should say that, about the crash. In 2022, my old man also had a feeling from financial indicators he was collecting that things were about to melt down,” Nash said.

The elevator sighed to a stop and the doors opened. He escorted Cariana through the thick glass main entrance and they were immediately assaulted by noises of evening traffic, clanging trams, and strolling pedestrians. Still high in the sky, the sun no longer burned, making the evening pleasantly warm. When they slid into the waiting fully autonomous driverless taxi, it surged away from the curb and eased into St. Kilda Road traffic. Under the toughened plastic bubble that served as roof and windows, they had an excellent view of their surrounds.

“He told everybody the world is due for a crunch. Not from the U.S. this time, but the highly leveraged Chinese shadow banking system. Nobody believed him. He sold his shares portfolio and two investment properties, much to everybody’s consternation, and converted his retirement superannuation into cash.”

“My dad did the same thing!” Cariana said brightly and flashed him a dimpled smile.

“Then it hit, two days after my birthday, would you believe it?”

It hit, all right—February 2023. Worried about their exposure, the shadow banks started calling in loans from overextended municipality and provincial leaders. Although the People’s Bank of China held over five trillion dollars in currency reserves, it could not prevent the tsunami of foreclosures that swept through the economy, which sent the yuan plummeting and dragged down the world’s stock exchanges with it.

Australia avoided a major economic shock when the Labor government of the day withdrew \$160 billion from the Future Fund to pay down some of its debt liability, which in turn reduced the interest repayments burden and improved the budget fiscal position. Initially intended as a guarantee to meet superannuation payouts for federal public servants, the Future Fund expanded its role to support national infrastructure projects, health, education, and disability care, but with over \$280 billion in reserves, the government did not see any significant economic or political fallout by making that withdrawal. Given the circumstances, it was a risk worth taking. In a rare moment of bipartisan

cooperation, the Coalition opposition approved the move despite considerable negative commentary from chair pundits.

“I was only twenty-three at the time and working on my MBA—”

“Where did you do your bachelor’s?”

“Melbourne University. Since IBM sponsored my MBA, I figured, why not go for it? It didn’t harm my career. Anyway, as you know, the Australian property market was also due for another correction and took a major hit. A lot of apartments suddenly came on the market from owners who had leveraged themselves into bankruptcy, and property managers found themselves holding assets they could not offload. Cash rich, my old man raked it in, picking up prime stocks that had lost more than half their value.

“He bought a rundown place in South Yarra on the other side of Fawkner Park. Tore it down and built himself an ultra-modern double-story house. Probably worth a couple of million at least right now. He still had some spare cash and one evening, he shows up at my Prahran studio pad with a bulky envelope. You can imagine my surprise when I found myself owner of a two-bedroom St. Kilda Road apartment.”

“Where?”

“Just after Bromby Street at 401. At first, I didn’t know what to do with all that space.”

She grinned at him. “I’m sure you managed. It looks like we both had sharp parents.”

The cab slowed as it neared the Arts Center bottleneck. Although heavy, the traffic had moved reasonably well. Harsh booming came from a car behind them, the driver oblivious to the crashing decibels.

Turning her head, Cariana looked at him. “A downtown rendezvous?”

“A seafood place in Collins Street.”

Her eyes sparkled. “I love seafood.”

“I thought you would.”

“But...”

"I had an alternate in case you didn't."

She laughed, a merry, carefree sound, and her left cheek dimpled. "Do you plan everything?"

"Everything."

"Mmm."

"Don't worry. Meeting you wasn't planned. As I said, it was a fortuitous and pleasant accident."

She searched his face. "Your exact words."

"I have an eidetic memory, which is very useful, but it can be a nuisance."

"In what way? I imagine something like that would give you a tremendous advantage."

"It does and helped me get my MBA at twenty-four. Acquiring knowledge and information does not automatically translate into understanding."

"That's a useful insight," she said soberly. "Do you remember everything you see and experience?"

The cab stopped at the Swanston Street intersection and waited for the lights to change.

"Pretty much. I have an excellent infantile memory. Clutter, mostly."

"Do you remember your dreams?"

"I do, and some are journeys into really weird stuff. A mind bender's paradise. You must have a good memory yourself."

"Why do you say that?"

"Getting a PhD in a specialty like genetics requires a lot of information. You worked at the Monash Medical Center for two years after getting your degree and you spent the last two at The Alfred Hospital, which means you also got your PhD at twenty-four. That takes smarts."

"You've been checking up on me?" she demanded accusingly, but her eyes shone.

"Your Wikipedia page."

She snorted. "CSIRO did that despite my objections."

"It's an impressive record. If you don't mind me asking, how did you and CSIRO get together?"

“They’re running a federal project on lifeliners.”

A cold ripple ran down Nash’s spine. Another clandestine eradication scheme? Seeing what was happening around the world, it was easy being suspicious.

“I haven’t heard. Interesting.”

“My thesis on gene switches must have caught somebody’s attention and I was seconded.”

The cab dropped them off at the Swanston Street mall. Nash authorized his PID to pay the transaction, then slid out, walked to the other side and opened the door for Cariana. She nodded and stepped out. They strolled slowly up the street, the mall filled with pedestrians taking advantage of a warm evening. Traffic was forbidden all the way to Bourke Street, opening the city center. When initially proposed some ten years ago, businesses ran a protest campaign, saying the move would stifle the center. As it turned out, it energized the street. The shops and restaurants thrived.

After taking a right at Collins Street, it was a few meters to the Box Seafood Restaurant next to the Regent Theater. Small groups clustered on the sidewalk waiting to get in. A driverless tram clattered across the Swanston Street tracks. Bell clanking, it sped up the slope toward Parliament.

Inside the restaurant, a pleasant young woman wearing a white blouse and red skirt escorted them to a corner table past others already occupied by guests. An intimate buzz of conversation filled the narrow room. She waited for them to sit, handed them a menu and lit a candle in a blue glass jar.

Looking around, Cariana pursed her lips and lifted an eyebrow. “Not bad. Kind of rustic.”

“It doesn’t have the flashy look of Realto’s Vue de Monde, a place I hope to take you next time, but the Box serves some of the finest seafood in town,” Nash explained, taking a breadstick out of a tall glass.

She lifted her eyes from the menu and gave him a sidewise glance. “You’ve been here before?”

“A few times.” Seeing her frown as she wrestled with the array

of selections, he put his hand on the menu and pushed it down. Her large eyes probed him. "Unless you are fixated on something special, let's make this easy and go for a hot platter."

She turned the menu page and gasped. "I couldn't possibly eat all that!"

"Have only what you want."

"Well..." She pouted, glanced at the menu, then looked up. "Okay, but I'll probably end up with indigestion."

"No fear. Besides, seafood is supposed to be good for you." Nash lifted his arm and raised a finger. A moment later, their hostess arrived.

"You want to order?" she inquired warmly.

"A hot platter for both of us."

"Excellent choice. Something to drink first?"

Nash looked at Cariana. "Do you fancy anything in particular?"

"I'm not much into wines—"

"Leave it to me, then," he said and turned to their hostess. "We'll start with Jonsz Cuvee, and for the meal, a bottle of Artus chardonnay."

"Very good. Anything on the side?"

"A mixed salad with Italian dressing."

She nodded, collected the menus and ambled off.

Nash sat back and crunched on the breadstick.

"I like a man who takes charge," Cariana said with a whimsical grin, and brushed back a wayward lock of hair. "What if I don't want Jonsz Cuvee, whatever that is?"

"It's a Tasmanian sparkling wine," Nash said confidently. "Better than some French champagnes. Often, you're just paying for the name, pretending you're enjoying the sour brew. Try it. If you don't like it, we'll get something else."

Cariana laughed. "You're a cube," she declared and he relaxed.

He took a risk ordering the wine without consulting her, but it seemed to have paid off. He wasn't a wine connoisseur, but he had sampled enough of them to know what he liked.

"Tell me about your research, if you don't mind talking shop,"

he asked.

“As a scientist, there is nothing more exciting than unravelling the lifeliner genome switches.”

“I thought they had the lifeliner genome mapped out.”

“The genome, but not the noncoding parts, which some dag early on in the DNA saga named junk, a term I hate. About three percent of DNA controls how protein-coding genes work, and protein synthesis is everything. Some noncoding parts produce regulatory RNA, among other things, but there are regions that at first didn’t seem to be doing anything. They turned out to be the real treasure in the genome study, a switchboard that regulates every function. Researchers around the world are scrambling to identify gene switches that have been turned on or off in lifeliners. Not only turned on, but understand why.”

“You believe they are a new species? *Homo renata*?”

Cariana fondled her cloth napkin and absently began to fold it.

“Some are calling them that, newborns I mean. Not a new species, but definitely a step in adaptive evolution.” She leaned forward, her eyes alive with excitement, clearly passionate about the subject. “What is worse, we may have done this to ourselves, causing those switches to turn on. You know that birthrates have been falling steadily for decades in every advanced Western country, and it is accelerating. In places like Japan, Germany, France and the U.S., it is negative, which means growing male and female sterility, while in non-urban areas of less developed countries there is no measurable decline. The social implications of that are daunting. Before you raise the point, I am aware of the correlation between lifeliner emergence and high density cities. Technology and industrialization has given us our modern standard of living, but that lifestyle appears to be slowly killing us. I am oversimplifying, of course, as there are other factors to be considered.”

“You are saying that lifeliners are nature’s defense mechanism to preserve the species in our highly artificial environment?”

“It’s an ongoing debate. Analyzing the incidence of diabetes,

obesity, asthma, and food allergies with countries where they are most prevalent, it was found that those same countries also have falling birthrates, infertility, and the highest population of lifeliners.”

“That would imply lifeliners are a mutation caused by social and environmental dynamics.”

Cariana shrugged, working on her napkin. “The weight of evidence seems to support that hypothesis. What we don’t know is why emergence of lifeliners mirrors sterility in the general population.”

“I would have thought the answer was obvious. One species dies to make room for another.”

“If it were only that simple. One thing we do know. The process seems to be accelerating.”

Their hostess arrived rolling an ice bucket. She filled their glasses with white bubbly, smiled, and sauntered off. Nash picked up his glass and waited for Cariana to do the same. Grinning at each other, they clicked them.

“To enchanting company,” he said with feeling.

Cariana nodded, took a sip and raised an eyebrow. “This is good. Delicate and not overly dry.”

Nash took a sip and put down his glass. “I am glad you like it.”

She regarded him over the rim of her glass. “You seem well informed about lifeliners.”

“I’ve studied,” he said truthfully, a rueful grin hovering at the corner of his mouth.

“And clearly not happy with what you found.”

“What do you think? Scratch the veneer of civilization, man is still very much a savage. I think Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man* was right when he said, ‘*Our nature is a sharp accuser, but a helpless friend!*’ All our philosophical writings on morality and ethics urges people to be cooperative and selfless, but our behavior is an antithesis. We have become so competitive, selfish, and aggressive, that life has become all but unbearable for some, which cannot be explained in terms of evolutionary genetic bias alone.

Man has a thinking mind able to override his primitive inner self, but we choose to be cruel to one another.”

The repressive laws enacted prior to 2027 effectively made lifeliners second-class citizens. It took the 2029 Curtis Sands case for the High Court to strike them down. In America, influenced by far-right evangelical groups, the Administration simply ignored the courts, which polarized the country and caused widespread civil unrest. Control of both Houses by the Republicans avoided a full blown constitutional crisis, for now. Sooner or later, there would be a reckoning.

Her face turned hard. “No one can excuse what has been done to lifeliners, but social consciousness is changing.”

She was saying the words, but her rigid posture told him something else.

“I don’t believe that and neither do you. There is still active discrimination and persecution. They are human beings like everyone else.”

“They’re not and you know it!” she retorted hotly.

Her vehemence startled him, forcing him to look at her in new light. As a geneticist, she could not possibly have that view. He accepted her drive and commitment to break the lifeliner genome, but locked in a lab, such commitment can easily shut out the ugliness of history and, potentially, ugliness that might still come. Were lifeliners for her merely subjects of objective study? What happened in her life to make her hold such a clouded view? He did not want to open that door, not right now, reluctant to spoil their evening, but her outburst shook him. If she really believed what she said, he could never reveal himself to her, which would be intolerable, and an end to any relationship he hoped to have.

“Perhaps.”

“I cannot expect you to know,” she said stiffly and took a sip of wine.

He folded his arms over the table and leaned forward. “I want to. Humor me. What makes them different?”

She brushed back a strand of hair to collect herself. “Apart

from their ability to tap into someone's bioelectromagnetic field to draw energy? Don't ask me why they do that. It doesn't appear to be a survival trait...what's the matter?"

"Something just occurred to me, and I'm surprised I haven't thought of it before. Do you know if lifeliners can also discharge energy?"

Since the first officially recognized existence of a lifeliner reported in the July 18, 2024 Paris *Le Monde* daily—they didn't call them that then. A wit in the September 13, 2025 issue of *The New York Times* coined the phrase—no one had suggested this obvious possibility.

Cariana looked thoughtful. "You mean, feed energy into a biological system? I haven't seen any papers on it. What function would such an ability fulfill?" She picked up her glass and took a long pull. "An evolutionary change must have some long term survival value. It wouldn't be much use as a defense mechanism. Too energy costly. An interesting concept, though."

"It was just a thought. Anyway, you were telling me why lifeliners are different," he prompted.

"Energy management," she said promptly. "Humans metabolize twenty amino acids, of which eight cannot be manufactured by the body. They are called essential amino acids naturally enough and must be obtained externally from food, but I suppose you knew that."

"Actually, I did."

"Cube! Then you also know that amino acids are used to synthesize proteins and act as oxidizers that generate energy in cells. The genetic changes that created lifeliners gave them the ability to manufacture two of those essential amino acids, leucine and valine. Very interesting that is too. In normal humans, the liver has lost the complex enzyme pathway to synthesize pyruvate into leucine and valine. Somewhere along our evolutionary path, nature figured it was easier to obtain these amino acids through food than make them."

"And how is that significant?"

She arched her eyebrows. "You mean, you don't know?"

“Cariana...”

She flashed him a smile. “Sorry, I couldn’t help it.” Noting his scrutiny, she frowned. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I like the sound of your voice,” he said gently, fascinated by her enthusiasm and vitality, allowing himself to be smothered by her personality.

He wondered what his previous girlfriends would think if they saw him right now, eyes dreamy and vacant. They probably wouldn’t believe it. The hardboiled Nash Bannon gone all soft and gooey? Cariana had touched some hidden part he thought was locked, immune to rejection, hurt, and loss. Apart from obvious physical attraction, Cariana had some extra quality that made him want to connect with her on a more intimate and personal level. He hoped she shared that connection in some small way.

Her almond eyes did not avoid his scrutiny. “And you’re nice when you’re not teasing.”

“You were telling me about those amino acids,” he said, not wishing to be sidetracked, which could happen easily if he allowed it. “I really am interested.”

“Okay, but I still think you were teasing.” From a very attractive woman, she turned into a serious scientist, her napkin forgotten. “Remember what I said about energy management? Well, these two amino acids play a crucial role. Among other things, leucine directly stimulates muscle protein synthesis and slows degradation of tissue, which makes lifeliners stronger and gives them more stamina. It decreases food intake and body weight, making them slimmer. Valine has a stimulant effect and is needed for muscle metabolism, tissue repair, prevents tissue breakdown, and is an energy source during physical activity. It is important for optimum operation of the nervous system, cognitive functions, and regulation of the immune system. I wouldn’t be surprised if they have longer lifespans, but that is yet to be proven. Lifeliners are also incredibly resistant to disease.”

Nash stared at her. It was true. He and Mark had never been really ill. They both caught an occasional sniffle, but it only lasted

a day or two at most. The few lifeliners he knew were also robustly healthy.

He took a sip of wine. "That's it? All that because lifeliners can break down pyruvate?"

"No, that's not it. Lifeliners are able to synthesize vitamin C. Unlike primates, which includes humans, almost all vertebrates can produce their own vitamin C. We still have the gene, but somewhere along the line, it was switched off."

Nash raised an eyebrow. "That's a new one for me. Given our low fruit and vegetable diet, I can see how this could be useful."

"Look at our modern diseases: general lassitude, neurological dysfunction, defects in blood vessels, and loss of bone integrity. They all point to a poor intake of vitamin C. Lifeliners also have more brain mass. On the order of five percent, especially the prefrontal lobe and the hippocampus, which helps explain their eidetic memory...like yours. This is significant, as those parts of the brain control all higher functions such as planning, judgment, emotional expression, creativity, and comprehension. Lifeliners have larger livers that can store more carbs and they are able to expel excess sugar from food rather than converting it to fatty deposits. These are major evolutionary changes from a regimen of fat accumulation when food was scarce."

"Energy management," he murmured, fascinated by her explanation. Such a profound impact from a seemingly small change in the body's biochemistry. All the research he had done missed those connections.

"Exactly! Evolution has given lifeliners immunity against our Western lifestyle where food is cheap and abundant, and part of my job is to find the genes responsible."

"When you do find them, what then?"

Before Cariana could answer, their hostess walked up carrying a large tray piled high with steaming seafood, the enticing smell making Nash rub his hands in anticipation.

"Now we're cooking!" he hooted.

Cariana rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"I shall bring the Artus chardonnay directly," the hostess said

with a grin.

Staring at the loaded tray, Cariana winced. “You have to be kidding me. No normal person could possibly eat all that.”

“Forget what’s normal. Just dig in.”

Mouth set in concentration, she filled her plate with shell crab, scallops, king prawns and two spring rolls. Nash helped himself to some oysters, a half lobster, calamari and scallops. Their hostess filled fresh glasses with icy chardonnay and left them to it. Silence reigned for a few minutes as food occupied their attention.

Cariana dipped her fingers into a bowl of lemon water, wiped them on her napkin, and sighed with satisfaction.

“This is wonderful.” She took a sip of wine and nodded. “So is the chardonnay.”

“It’s not bad,” Nash agreed and waved at the loaded tray. “Don’t give up now.”

“I won’t, but I have to let things settle down first. You haven’t told me much about yourself.”

“You mean, talking about my work doesn’t exactly cut it?”

“I have enough problems—”

“Without listening to mine.”

“Cube! I didn’t mean—”

“Never mind. I know. Nothing much to tell really. Mark and I—he is my twin brother—raised the usual hell boys do while keeping our parents from finding out what we were up to.”

“Is he in Melbourne?”

“Canberra, working as a weapons procurement consultant for the Defense Department.”

“That’s a pretty responsible position.”

“For someone so young? It is. He worked at the South Australian naval shipyards for a couple of years streamlining tendering procedures, which enabled the government to undercut a French and American bid for coastal patrol boats Indonesia were interested in. That got him moved to Canberra.”

“He also has an eidetic memory?”

“He does.”

“Must have been hard on your parents, coping with twins, I mean.”

“We didn’t make it easy for them,” Nash admitted. “I remember how we used to pretend that we were the other twin. It raised hell at home and school, but Mom could almost always tell us apart. Dad was easy to fool. I don’t know about our sister Natalie, she is a geophysicist at BHP. I think she could work out who was who, but never said, preferring to enjoy the confusion. Being older, Mark and I gave her a hard time sometimes.”

“Boys!” Cariana sighed in exasperation. “I had an older brother—”

“Had?”

Her eyes changed and something terrible flashed in their depths.

“He and his wife were killed by a drunk lifeliner a year ago running a red light.” She chewed her lower lip. “He pleaded momentary mental incapacity, lost his license for two years and got off with a twelve-month jail sentence.”

Nash sat back, uncertain how to handle this. He reached for her hand and squeezed.

“That sucks.”

She brushed back a lock of stray hair. “One of life’s bad deals. Anyway, what I wanted to say, my brother was just as mean. And your parents?”

“Dad is an exec at QANTAS and Mom is a graphic designer with a home office.”

“Talented family.”

“Genes,” Nash quipped, and Cariana laughed.

“*Touché.*” She picked up another spring roll and nibbled at it. Eyeing the tray, she began filling her plate.

Pleased to see her enjoying herself, Nash did the same.

After a time, she patted her stomach, exhaled loudly and leaned back.

“That’s it. I’m done.”

“There is still that crab, king prawns and a lobster tail.”

“Help yourself. I don’t think I’ll eat anything for a week.”

“Until breakfast tomorrow. Seafood doesn’t stick to the ribs.”

“The seafood might not, but all those sauces...”

“The sacrifices we make...” Nash agreed and topped up their glasses.

She looked at him speculatively. “Never married or anything?”

“There has been an occasional ‘anything’, but nothing really serious. Not recently anyway.”

Right now, he did not want to rake over Sally’s scabs. Part of the problem with casual dating lay with him, of course. He never enjoyed dancing, going to discos or rowdy gatherings, which clearly made him an outsider. The stylized gyrating and waving of arms were to him absurd and primitive expressions of ritualized courtship. He genuinely could not understand the fun in it.

Perhaps he was a cube as Cariana suggested.

He looked deep into her eyes. “It might not be too late, though.”

She grinned mischievously and took a sip. “I still think you were picking me up when we first met.”

“At the La Asiago? I told you, an accident.”

“Mmm.”

He pointed a finger at her. “Any room left in there for dessert?”

“Not a chance.” Regarding him, she worried her lower lip. “Why the interest in lifeliners?”

He shrugged. “Pure curiosity. They *are* the most significant thing that has happened to the human race, which by the way could turn our society on its head, and in some ways, it already has, but I’m not fixated on them. I am fascinated by lots of other things.”

“Such as?”

“Oh, politics, sociology, economics, cosmology, the looming water wars.”

“Water wars?”

“India is building canals to join all its major river systems, channeling water into its parched central plains. This is already

causing major problems in Bangladesh. In the meantime, China has started to syphon water from Tibet, which incidentally is the source of all the rivers running into India. Picture it. Two nuclear powers facing each other off over water, with prickly Pakistan ready to start lobbing nukes at both. Meanwhile, Egypt and Sudan are facing a crisis as countries upstream of the Nile are draining more water from the White and Blue Nile and Lake Victoria. With growing populations and increased industrialization in the region, the need for a secure water supply has become a strategic consideration.”

“Worth going to war over,” Cariana murmured.

“Mexico is experiencing severe shortages as the United States holds more water upstream of the Colorado River for its own use. It is not in a position to do much militarily, but there are other ways to get attention.”

“Terrorism?”

“Blowing up Hoover Dam would get them attention. Given the American administration’s protectionist policies, it might happen. There are other places around the world where one country controls a water source needed by its neighbor, and all of them are potential flash points.” He lifted a bread stick from the tall glass and nibbled. “I’m also interested in the history and application of PIDs.”

Cariana took a stick herself and crunched on it. “I would have thought it was pretty much clear cut. Developed by DARPA—”

“The U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. I know.”

“You would. Cube. As I was saying, developed in early 2020s for the U.S. military as neural interfaces with ship, aircraft and smart weapons systems, it did not take the American administration long to realize the potential for civilian applications. I remember watching the August 2025 UN General Assembly session, which passed a resolution to implement a constantly variable encryption key, unique to every individual, that prevented monitoring and hacking of personal data.”

“Not without some reluctance from the U.S., China, and Russia,” Nash added. “To name a few. They claimed that withholding the master key would reduce the capacity of their intelligence and law enforcement agencies to protect their citizens. Developers maintain the personal key could be broken by a quantum computer, but not within a timeframe to make the information useful.”

“Yet they signed up for it.”

“Too many economic and social advantages for them not to, and the networks are virtually secure. Predictably, though, civil liberty groups raised a ruckus about government Big Brother surveillance and control of people’s minds, but Americans welcomed the technology that eliminated most card based systems and made it easier to interact with growing social technology. It also gave rise to a raft of multiplier industries scrambling to build plugin neural interfaces into every imaginable product, which incidentally made Intel billions.”

“Talking to my fridge or stove is progress?”

“A point of view. PIDs don’t work in countries without total network coverage, but I give them another five years at most. The variable key made personal PIDs possible, but my worry is what governments the world over are doing to get around it. Including ours.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you see? In the past, NSA and organizations like it, routinely intercepted most data that traveled across the world’s communication networks. PIDs introduced an impenetrable wall, and it went against the grain. Thwarted by their inability to spy on their citizens and each other, they turned to subtler mechanisms to subvert an individual’s data security. You heard the announcement by Canberra to introduce a tracking feature?”

Cariana scrunched her nose. “I remember seeing something about it in the holoview.”

“A textbook example of a government attempting to circumvent our privacy. The classic being when in 2029 they allowed the

Australian Signals Directorate to record the content of all electronic communication, which implies they can break personal encryption keys. It's scary."

"You're into this security thing in a big way."

"Regardless of its unquestionable social benefits, I sometimes wondered whether PID technology should have remained purely a military application."

"I *can* see situations where tracking someone's PID could be useful," she countered.

"So can I, provided I control the function. It's indiscriminate access that worries me."

"Point taken," Cariana said. "Nobody thought the watchmaking industry would take such a hit, though."

She was right. With PIDs providing accurate time with a mental command, wristwatches were relegated to memory drawers. People continued to wear designer watches as fashion statements, and wall clocks had a niche market, but many prestige brands disappeared.

"Innovate or perish," Nash said.

Cariana shook her head. "You can be a hard man, Nash Bannon. Talking about politics, which way do you lean, if you don't mind saying?"

He shrugged. "I don't like Atarah Readman much. Disappointment really. When she became Prime Minister, I thought Australia finally found a strong leader with visionary policies to lead this country into a technological and social renaissance. Her failure to articulate the Liberal Party's position on lifeliners cost her seats at the 2030 election. Then she compounded her error by embracing the Australian Conservatives to form government, a poisonous union if there ever was one. I shouldn't be disillusioned, knowing how party machines operate, but I expected more character from her."

"You think the Coalition will lose in October?"

"They will unless Readman announces policies relevant to the current social climate, which is fast deteriorating, by the way. What about you? Do you follow any party?"

“Me? I’m interested in what’s going on, but like most of the ambivalent majority, I don’t pay much attention to the Canberra gaggle, although I realize I should. I’ve got more pressing issues to deal with.”

“That’s the problem, Cariana. The silent majority is permitting gradual degradation of ethical and responsible behavior from our politicians. I hate to say it, but if we’re not careful, we could end up controlled by the fanatical far right. By the time people realize what has happened, we’ll be in a virtual autocracy that will invariably lead to a messy civil war. Economies that never recovered from the 2023 crash, Italy, Spain and Greece, have already gone down that road, abandoning the euro and the European Union.”

“You have a wide-ranging mind.”

“I have a low boredom threshold.”

“And you eidetic memory helps you retain what you learn. Not only that, you can integrate what you learn.” She fiddled with her glass, studying him. “It must be terrible sometimes not being able to forget.”

Images and memories cascaded before him, vivid and real as the moment when they were implanted. Not all of them were clothed in light, and shadows lurked there.

“I learned early that I could not hide myself in the dark corridors of my mind and create other realities with happy endings that erased the truth. It forced me to become rational at a time when other boys still fantasized.”

“You never created imaginary worlds or lives?”

“Worlds and lives out of time. I have a powerful imagination and my dreams are particularly intense. Having an eidetic memory is a penetrating light that shines on everything I do and feel. That light does not allow room for self-deception or casting judgment.”

“You must be extremely well-adjusted.”

“It helps me cope with the demons.” Nash leaned forward and gazed into her magical eyes. “What fills your empty hours when you’re not consumed by work?”

“Consumed...an interesting way of putting it, and you’re

right. My work does consume me. It gives direction, a purpose and goals to strive for. However, I do have other interests.”

“Mind sharing?”

Her eyes glittered. “I love American classical poets: Eliot, Poe, Emerson, Dickinson, among others. I also indulge in origami.”

Nash inclined his head at the cloth napkin she’d been twisting into odd shapes. “I noticed.”

She flushed slightly, but did not look away.

“Do you ever write any poetry yourself?” he asked gently, sensitive to her feelings.

“I’ve written a few pieces.”

“I wouldn’t mind reading them sometime.”

“We’ll see.” Cariana smoothed down her skirt and sat up. “As much as I’d like to stay, and I do want to talk more—you’re a good listener—we should be leaving. I enjoyed myself immensely, Nash, but tomorrow is a working day.”

“And the fantasy must end,” he added with genuine regret, wishing this moment would never stop. He loved listening to her, loved the crisp sound of her lyrical voice, the energetic sparkle in her eyes, and the subconscious little mannerisms that combined to make a complex, vibrant personality. Could he build on what they shared tonight? Would she want to?

One step at a time, old son, but be careful what you’re getting into.

Outside, a warm dusk had fallen and the city blazed with light. Colors were sharp and the noises louder. Pedestrians crowded the sidewalks, ambling, hurrying, vanishing in the flowing streams of people. A full tram clanked down Collins Street and stopped past the Swanston Street intersection. Passengers spilled out and others pushed in, afraid to lose a slice of time out of their lives having to wait for another tram. Somewhere a police siren momentarily intruded into the ambient noise, their cars rarely seen in the city after drones were introduced as surveillance vehicles of choice. Nash wondered how a drone issued an infringement ticket to a driverless car. He thought about getting one, an electric Tesla Viper with a range of 1,200 kilometers that recharged in fifteen minutes. When they come down in price, he

told himself. Until then, he was content with his old level 3 Toyota Corolla hybrid.

Nash flagged down a taxi with his PID. Inside, he found himself in a cocoon of relative silence and peace. He turned to Cariana.

“Anything special lined up for tomorrow?”

“I’m monitoring four juveniles who are in puberty transition, which generates an obvious dilemma for me and other researchers. By the time the subject is identified as a lifeliner, most of the gene activity has already taken place.”

“Where do you get the kids?”

“Grade school volunteers. To avoid potential social stigma, they’re told it’s general genetic research, which it is,” she added. “Yesterday, we received some interesting data from a lab in the States and I need to compare the findings with my own experiments. Organic chemistry is complicated. I also need to look deeper into what you said—”

“About lifeliners able to infuse energy?”

“Somebody must have written something on it.”

He searched her face. “I want to see you again, Cariana.”

“Well, you haven’t been too obnoxious. Friday night? I cannot get away any earlier.”

“Lunch somewhere before then?”

She frowned and shook her head. “Afraid not. I’ll be at the CSIRO Parkville labs most of the week. That’s where we do all the human life sciences stuff.” Seeing his downcast expression, she laughed. “Don’t pine, Nash. We have time.”

“Was I that obvious?”

The touch of her smooth fingers against his cheek sent an electrifying tingle through his body. Right then, he had a powerful urge to send her a jolt of energy just to see if he could. It was an irrational impulse triggered by her presence and a need to draw her close to him, to join with him as two spirits, the feeling not at all sexual.

“Eager,” she said. “Many men want only one thing from a woman, but I think you are not one of them. I can tell, which

makes you special and I treasure that. You have a strange, captivating depth I want to explore, and you have given me enough to think about. Let's not rush it."

Traffic along St. Kilda Road flowed smoothly, the predominantly electric cars almost silent, and the drive enveloped them in comfortable, intimate calm. Cariana's fragrant perfume drifted around him and Nash wanted to bury his head in her golden hair and breathe deeply of it. He hoped it wasn't just an atavistic drive to possess her. Both had opened a window a little, allowing a glimpse into each other. It was enough for now.

The cab stopped outside The Fawkner Residences building and Nash escorted Cariana up the steps to the main entrance.

"Thank you for tonight," he whispered.

She smiled faintly. "Good night, Nash."

He took her hand and squeezed, taking his time over it, then leaned over her and gave her a peck on the cheek. She shivered and he let go. There will be other days and nights where more would be said and done.

She waited for the security system to open the glass doors and strode into the foyer. Nash watched her disappear into the elevator alcove, exhaled loudly and walked slowly down the steps, considering options for Friday night.

He climbed back into the waiting cab and gave its computer instructions. As the taxi pulled away from the curb, he turned and gazed at the flow of cars along the broad boulevard, allowing his mind to drift. Cab and car rental companies, supermarket chains and long distance freight haulers, were the first to adopt level 5 autonomous vehicles and trucks when they became commercially viable in the mid-2020s. The transition was brutal on owner operators who could not adjust, but the conversion also dramatically reduced the annual toll of injuries and human lives lost due to driver error. Progress always seemed to demand a social price.

After a refreshing shower, dressed in a purple silk kimono, he took a tumbler of Canadian Crown Royal whiskey to the balcony. Sipping the fine liquor, he listened thoughtfully to the haunting strands of Ravel's *Bolero* coming from the lounge, reflecting on

the evening's pleasant memories, recalling every moment, every detail, every line of Cariana's face, and nuance of her voice. He replayed it all like watching a holoview. He wanted to push back the darker shadows of their conversation, but there was nowhere to hide. If they were to go on, she would have to overcome her irrational hatred of lifeliners.

History had been harsh on lifeliners and, in his view, harsher on mankind in general. He firmly believed that civilized behavior was merely a veneer to keep the inner savage in check. Without laws and social institutions to enforce them, people would readily revert to sectarian tribalism. In many respects, mankind was still firmly entrenched in tribalism. Wasn't each country a socioeconomic tribe, proclaiming its sovereignty to others with trumpets and a flutter of flags, backed by guns, which effectively said 'no trespassing'? Threaten that sovereignty in any way and the tribe would vent its wrath on the aggressor.

And the perceived threat facing national tribes today? Lifeliners, of course.

Nash sighed and took another sip, hardly noticing cars whispering along St. Kilda Road.

Since the first 2024 reporting in France, treated as a curiosity by the scientific community, completely ignored by politicians and people in general, unease replaced complacency as documented reports of lifeliners started to appear all over the world. Predominantly from large integrated cities with complex infrastructures and sophisticated populations, which mostly meant Western type cities. With absence of widespread incidence in less developed countries, it did not take the learned community long to start connecting some of the dots, which in turn stirred political interest.

Eminent universities such as Harvard and Oxford initiated research programs to study lifeliners and called for volunteers. This was pure research and at first, utterly innocent. In November 2026, an article in the *American Journal of Medicine* changed everything. Professor Richard Friedman at the Baltimore Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine produced the first definitive

profile on lifeliners. The damaging part of the paper were graphs of falling birthrates and growing sterility, correlated with geographical distributions of lifeliner emergence. The next day, *The Washington Post* headline read: *Lifeliners, doom of the human race!*

Not accurate or true, the article triggered very preventable public hysteria and demands for governments to act. To do what? Kill lifeliners on sight? The civilized West turned out not to be so civilized after all. Other parts of the world did not even pretend. It would take centuries, perhaps millennia, before lifeliners replaced *homo sapiens* as a species, but the specter of helplessness, that people's lives no longer mattered and they had no future, nature denying them children, worked at an emotional level that could not be reasoned with. Governments used that fear to push through punitive programs against lifeliners, which at the same time severely restricted personal rights and freedoms for everybody. Deliberately or incidentally, many Western countries were turning themselves into totalitarian regimes.

The problem was, how do you find a lifeliner?

In those early days, unless one revealed himself, it was impossible.

The new millennium heralded a dark horizon. Neighbor spied on neighbor and families disintegrated when a child was discovered to be a lifeliner after onset of puberty. Self-styled puritans hounded identified lifeliners. In 2026, following a vitriolic sermon by a Christian Brotherhood evangelist in Georgia, claiming that lifeliners were an abomination and walking evil, an outraged mob killed a fifteen-year-old girl following denunciation by an irate relative with a grievance against her family. Those responsible were charged with murder and convicted. However, the incident set a pattern of suspicion and retribution that spread to engulf the world.

Two months later the U.S. Congress passed the infamous Lifeliner Act, requiring registration of all lifeliners. Official identification documents such as Social Security and driver's license cards bore a prominent 'L', and PIDs broadcast lifeliner identities. Civil rights organizations mounted a joint action against the

government in the Supreme Court, citing the Act violated several articles of the Constitution. The government lost the case in a pivotal sitting of the full bench and the Act was struck down. Nevertheless, prevailing public opinion enabled the Administration and Congress to enact subtler punitive regulations. Lifeliners and parents of lifeliners who failed to identify themselves faced loss of employment, confiscation of property, indefinite incarceration, and active discrimination. Mounting a court challenge takes time and considerable financial resources, which individuals and most civil rights organizations did not have, and governments became bolstered.

Several European countries followed suit despite challenges to the European Court of Justice. Germany, France, Italy and Spain claimed that lifeliners were not human and therefore were outside the court's jurisdiction. It took the 2027 proclamation by the UN to settle the issue, but it was interesting to see the right-wing U.S. Republican government and protectionist Europe oppose recognition of lifeliners and voted against the declaration.

Australia was not immune to hysteria and paranoia, as the Curtis Sands case vividly demonstrated. At thirty-four, Sands was the Agriculture Minister in the Victorian Legislative Assembly and a rising Labor Party star, seen as a potential premier. In 2029, a routine DNA test revealed that Sands was a lifeliner. Following an internal party furrow and public backlash, he was forced to resign and expelled from the Party. He became an independent and took his case to the Victorian Supreme Court, citing wrongful dismissal and violation of his basic rights. After three months, the court delivered its landmark decision, viewed with interest around the world. Lifeliners were human beings under common law and enjoyed the same rights and privileges as any other person. The Victorian government appealed to the High Court and lost. All state and federal laws and regulations that limited lifeliner rights, including keeping lifeliner registers, were repealed. Sands refused reinstatement in the Labor Party, preferring to remain an independent, his career permanently blighted, and became an activist, supporter of the Lifeliner Help Center, and founder of the

Lifeline Party. Riding a wave of popular unrest, federal and state governments introduced new legislation to track and harass lifeliners. It also emboldened extremists, who physically molested and attacked anyone suspected of being a lifeliner.

Bolero's finale crescendo reverberating in his mind, Nash walked into the lounge. He told Sally to switch off the entertainment system, washed the tumbler, and sauntered into the bedroom. He slowly lowered himself to the floor and assumed the lotus position. Like a butterfly landing on a flower, he closed his eyes and allowed his spiritual awareness to expand and encompass his perception of the mind and self. Chi, his *sensei* said, embodied all the training in the physical side of Tai Chi, the Quan. Time flowed and he allowed himself to flow with it.

Totally relaxed and at peace, he went to bed. Comfortable under black satin sheets, sleep eluded him and he locked his fingers behind his head, Cariana's perfect face haunting him.

He wanted to run a finger along her soft cheek, brush her lips, and see her whimsical dimpled smile. She had a probing, incisive mind he wanted to explore. Debating her would be lively, challenging her views and beliefs. She would not give in easily, yielding only in the face of overwhelming and indisputable evidence. He would not want it any other way.

It took a while before he closed his eyes and warm darkness cradled him in its embrace.

About the Author

Stefan Vučak has written nine Shadow Gods Saga sci-fi novels, which includes *With Shadow and Thunder*, a 2002 EPPIE finalist, and six contemporary political drama books. He started writing science fiction while still in college, but didn't get published until 2001. His *Cry of Eagles* won the coveted 2011 Readers' Favorite silver medal award, and his *All the Evils* was the 2013 prestigious Eric Hoffer contest finalist and Readers' Favorite silver medal winner. *Strike for Honor* won the gold medal.

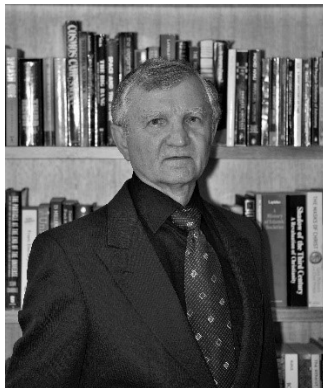
Stefan leveraged a successful career in the Information Technology industry, which took him to the Middle East working on cell-phone systems. He applied his IT discipline to create realistic storylines for his books. Writing has been a road of discovery, helping him broaden his horizons. He also spends time as an editor and book reviewer. Stefan lives in Melbourne, Australia.

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Shadow Gods books by Stefan Vučak

In the Shadow of Death

An extraterrestrial craft is discovered in an ancient Mayan pyramid and the knowledge throws Earth into social and political turmoil. As a new agent in the Diplomatic Branch, First Scout Terrlls-rr is tasked to destroy the craft before international tension throws Earth into open conflict.

Against the Gods of Shadow

Facing economic sabotage by Palean raiders, Pizgor pleads for help from the Serrll government. Second Scout Terrlls-rr is tasked to find the raider base and expose Palean's duplicity. Terr is forced to battle a Fleet ship that leaves them both badly damaged and leads Terr to confront forces that threaten to destabilize the Serrll itself.

A Whisper from Shadow

An extraterrestrial craft is discovered in an ancient Mayan pyramid and the knowledge throws Earth into social and political turmoil. As a new agent in the Diplomatic Branch, First Scout Terrlls-rr is tasked to destroy the craft before international tension throws Earth into open conflict.

Shadow Masters

With his mission on Earth completed, First Scout Terrlls-rr is returning home, only to be intercepted by an Orieli Technic Union survey ship. The encounter sends ripples of consternation throughout the Serrll Combine. In an attempt to establish a link between a raider network and the AUP Provisional Committee, Terr's cover is compromised. To extricate himself, he has to raise the hand of Death.

Immortal in Shadow

On his way to a prison planet, Tanard, a renegade Fleet officer, escapes and vows vengeance. He is recruited by an extremist Pa-lean group to raid Kaleen worlds. First Scout Terrlls-rr must find the secret base that is supporting him before the Wanderers rise up and unleash Death's wrath on the Serrll.

With Shadow and Thunder

2002 EPPIE finalist

The Orieli are caught in an interstellar war and now they are about to drag the Serrll Combine into it. Betrayed by his Wanderer brother Dharaklin, First Scout Terrlls-rr crashes to Earth in a sabotaged ship. He now has a whole world after the secrets he holds.

Through the Valley of Shadow

Bent on revenge, Terrlls-rr pursues his Anar'on brother to the fabled world of the Wanderers—and face judgment by the god of Death. On their frontier, the Serrll Combine is plunged into a savage encounter with a Kran invader, showing them a glimpse of a dark future.

Guardians of Shadow

Having destroyed a Kran invader, Terr, Teena and his brother Dharaklin, head for Orieli space where they will begin their cultural exchange mission. In a devastating Kran attack, Teena is taken and Terr seeks to rescue her. To win a war that threatens to consume the Orieli and the Serrll Combine, the fabled Wanderers must march against the Krans wielding the hand of Death.

Other books by Stefan Vučak

Cry of Eagles

2011 Readers' Favorite silver medal winner

Iran's nuclear capability represents a clear national threat to Israel, but the United States and Europe do nothing. A Mossad black ops team sabotages a refinery complex in Galveston, plants evidence that incriminates Iran, confident that an enraged America will strike back in retaliation. But the Mossad team makes one small mistake, which the FBI exploits to uncover the plot before America vents its wrath on Iran and plunges the world into political and economic turmoil. An award-winning thriller that will leave you at the edge of your seat.

All the Evils

2013 Eric Hoffer finalist

2013 Readers' Favorite silver medal winner

A researcher in the Secret Vatican Archives uncovers a papyrus that claims Jesus was John the Baptist's disciple and the second Messiah. To prevent the tractate from becoming public, the Vatican secret service engages an assassin to silence anyone who has knowledge of the papyrus. It is up to an FBI agent to unravel a series of murders and prevent the assassin from killing him.

Towers of Darkness

A Wyoming mineworker discovers a human hand bone embedded in a forty million year-old coal seam. An anthropologist, Larry Krafter is sent to recover the bone and unearths a human skull. Instead of receiving acclaim when he publishes his discovery, vested establishment interests seek to discredit him, using murder to do it.

Strike for Honor

2013 Readers' Favorite gold medal winner

In a joint exercise with the Korean navy, Admiral Pacino's son is one of the casualties from a North Korean missile strike. Enraged that the President is more interested in appeasing the North Koreans, forgetting the lost American lives, Pacino decides to make a statement by bombing military facilities in both Koreas. His court-martial puts American foreign policy under public scrutiny.

Proportional Response

2015 Readers' Favorite finalist

The Chinese populist faction, the Tuanpai, plan to trigger a global disaster that will devastate America. In the aftermath, the FBI identifies China as the culprit, but don't know if this was a rogue operation or a government plot. Fearful of American retaliation, China invites U.S. investigators to find that proof. Under a cloud of mutual suspicion, America readies itself for a military confrontation. A mind-bending expose of international politics!

Legitimate Power

2017 Book Excellence Awards finalist

What happens when a person living on the outskirts of Jerusalem digs up two ossuaries and finds a strange crystal the size of a smartphone able to repair itself when scratched and turns into a perfect mirror under laser light? When the crystal is put on the shadow gem market, suspecting that it is not natural, an American collector buys it, wanting to tap into its hidden potential. When the Israelis learn what it is, they want it back...as do the Chinese...as does the American government, which sets off a race to get it, no matter what the cost in shattered lives.