

## Review

*All My Sunsets* is a story of a man who sets out to recreate his future. While this is fiction, it also contains an inspirational message that asks two questions. What would you do if you knew you had only a few weeks to live? What would you do if you suddenly discovered that there is a reset button you can use to start afresh? The novel is cleverly plotted, beautifully written, and entertaining.

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# **ALL MY SUNSETS**

By

**Stefan Vučak**



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Note:

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and events are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real persons, places, or events is coincidental.

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## **Dedication**

*To Kristian Peraica ... for a future yet to be written*

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## Chapter One

Andrew Payne was dying and knew it. What was worse—if there could be anything worse—he did it to himself. Too much sun, surf...and girls.

To kick off at twenty-five, though, was a bit rich. If only he could turn back time.

Shait.

He did not hurt much, unless he thought about it, which he preferred not to, or the thing ravaging his body. They still had him on checkpoint inhibitors, but gave up on interleukin-2. The stuff made him ache all over, induced drowsiness, and he was tired all the time. Too far gone, they figured.

At least he was not in ICU with tubes stuck in him, monitors blinking, tracing wiggly lines—one stared at him now beside his left bedside cabinet—and having to smell the pervasive antiseptic stink in the air, which would have sent him over the edge. They had done all they could, and would continue until all the yellow lines in the monitor flatlined. On the other cabinet, an electronic alarm clock stared at him. Numerals glowing pale amber, it said: 12:25 pm. Above it in smaller font, it announced, March 4, 2022. Like any of it mattered.

Whatever they gave him for pain left his mind clear, enabling him to think. Perhaps not such a crash hot idea, all things considered. There were moments, feeling weary and dejected, when he longed for stupor until it all ended. He was too full of life for that, not prepared to give up just yet despite the odds stacked against him.

He did not fear death, although he did at first. Now, they had become acquainted, friends almost. It came to collect all of them

eventually. What he considered unfair, death had come to claim him before he started serious work on his to-do list. Not that he ever prepared one, but it still was not fair. He had gotten over that resentment, wondering how the moment would actually feel when he got to see the naked face of eternity. Would he feel anything? Would there be an after?

Bright sunshine streamed into his private room through gauzy white curtains, making the colors sharp and vibrant. He turned his head and gazed absently through the wide window at rooftops and tall buildings surrounding the Institute. He longed to be out there, walk the crowded streets, listen to the sounds of rushing cars and hurrying pedestrians just one more time, knowing it could not be.

The monitor gave a soft beep, which he ignored. The nurses on his watch did not pay it much attention either. Besides, the repeater at their station would alert them if something needed doing. Like zipping him into a body bag, he mused sardonically.

A drip tube inside his left elbow fed him drugs and a saline solution to keep him hydrated. Efficient nurses wearing starched uniforms and mechanical smiles changed the bottle when the liquid ran down. He had a pitcher of water and orange juice beside him—he alternated with pineapple, apple, and a tropical mix—but procedure called for a drip. A damnable nuisance at night when he rolled over and the catheter tugged painfully at his arm.

The door opened and the attractive little Despina walked in pushing the lunchtime meal wagon, as he called it. His eyes followed her as she smiled brightly, adding to the sunshine in the room. Short black hair framed a pretty round face, bold blue eyes, and a mouth that laughed easily. She told him once the nurses were running a pool on how long he would last, but she confided that she thought he would pull through. It was all a load of poop and both of them knew it, but the grim game had to be played to its inevitable end.

“Afternoon, Mr. Payne,” she announced cheerfully. “How are



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we today?”

“Andrew,” he told her, which she ignored every time. Don’t get involved, was the order of the day. Maintain a friendly, but impartial outlook and survive. Getting emotionally involved with a patient meant whiplash of the heart, tears, and trauma. “We are doing good,” he told her.

“Outstanding. Do you want anything? Any pain?”

“The pain is okay, but I could use fifty more years out there,” he said tilting his head at the window.

She laughed and patted his shoulder. “Hang in there. It’s not over yet.”

With a bit of help, he sat up. Despina pushed an extra pillow behind his back, then swung a broad wooden tray across his lap. She laid out the plates and glanced at the drip and monitor.

“Need to go to the bathroom or anything first?”

He shook his head. “I’m fine, thanks.”

Those chores at least, he could still do without help. And when he could not? Despina would be there, and she would tuck him in afterward. Better her than the stern-faced Mrs. Courtney who had his graveyard shift. The old matron projected doom and end of days by her mere presence. If she ever smiled, her face would crack and fall off.

“Buzz if you need anything.” Despina pushed the meal cart toward the door, fluttered her fingers at him, and strode out.

Images of them stretched out on a hot beach soaking in the rays filled a pleasant moment of reflection as he gazed at the frugal, unappetizing meal that would not have filled a magpie. Sun and surf is what got you here, he reminded himself. Anyway, Despina probably had a bronzed hunk to stretch out with. He used to be a hunk himself...when he lived life without cares. Now, skin and bone, and not much of that either.

He sniffed at the anemic slice of roast beef swimming in pale gravy, and frowned. Baby peas and a dollop of mash completed the menu. The yoghurt and mixed fruit containers looked more

inviting, so he started on the fruit. His appetite had taken a dive, which he figured was not a good sign. He spooned the fruit and chewed slowly.

*You won't have to wait long, Death.*

He finished the yoghurt and eyed the peas. He really should have his intake of veggies. In the end, he pushed back the plate and leaned back. He'd had enough. Enough of everything. Getting moody was not resolving his current predicament, but he felt he earned another moment to feel a little sorry for himself. Since he was in the mood for it, he might as well go all the way. Rant, rage, and shout at the unfairness of it all. He had a great life before the fates turned their backs on him. A promising career and a girl who adored him. All gone with one visit to a doctor to check an itch on his forearm.

His eyes strayed to the window. Silence echoed his gaze. It could not drown out the torrent of noise in his head, or the images it made. Images of his yesterdays and the dreams of his tomorrows. Forlorn images of what might have been. He tried to suppress them, shut them out, but still they came. After a few minutes, they faded. They always did if he waited long enough.

Andrew sighed and shrugged. His tomorrows might be gone, but he had today. The fates had not taken that from him. He glanced at his laptop and a stack of medical books beside the alarm clock, tempted to do more research. What was the point? He was already an expert on what was eating his insides. Knowing more would not change anything. Perhaps not, but an interesting article he read in the current edition of the *American Journal of Medicine* had prompted him to dig deeper. It offered a slender string of hope...or another delusion. He had nothing to lose either way.

Francis came in and cleared the dishes, piling them onto the cart. Andrew nodded to him as he pushed it out without a word. He knew the orderly. In the ten days he'd been here, they hardly exchanged a dozen words. He did not mind, not in a particularly

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talkative mood himself. With Despina, he could chat all day, but she had other patients who needed her sunshine.

Too bad they had not met when the sun still shone on him. Then he would not have found Adriana. Other images, pleasant and warm, made him smile wistfully.

The door opened and the formidable Dr. Gail Dalton strode in. Over the last eleven months, he came to know her well. Her conservative gray business jacket and black trousers hid a caring professional who, like the nurses, had learned early not to get emotionally involved. Although older, he would not have minded going out with her. Another shattered fantasy.

About 165cm, long copper hair that fell half-way down her back when not piled up in a bun, delicate oval face with a flawless complexion, and brown eyes that cut like a scalpel anything they happened to focus on.

She shut the door with a backward shove of her wrist, dragged a visitor chair closer to the bed, and sat down.

“How are you feeling today, Andrew?”

“Not too bad. My appetite is shot. Probably all the drugs you’ve been feeding me,” he added lightly. Another lie, but what the hell.

She cleared her throat and clasped her hands in her lap, clearly uncomfortable. Every time she cleared her throat, it meant bad news. Well, how bad could it get? For a fleeting moment, he was tempted to make this tough for her, but he was past such foolishness.

“How long?” he asked softly.

This was not going to be a revelation anyway. He had known for three months the seeds of time running out for him had turned into a torrent.

“I will continue the checkpoint inhibitors treatment, but the prognosis is not favorable. Your Stage IV polypoid melanoma has metastasized through all your organs, and they are slowly shutting down. The combination of drugs you are taking has

slowed the progression, but has not stopped it.”

“I wish you would stop feeding me those things, Doc. They’re making me feel like crap.”

“I really cannot do that, but I can reduce the dosage.”

“Well, that would be something.” He braced himself. “How long do I have?” he asked again.

“Three weeks. Perhaps four. The pain threshold will peak in about eight days, then fall off rapidly.”

He grinned without humor. “The old body deciding to settle its affairs?”

“We’ll make you as comfortable as possible,” she told him, her voice distant and clinical.

Don’t get involved. He could almost hear her thoughts.

“It’s okay, Dr. Dalton. I should have been dead months ago, but you wouldn’t let me.” He raised a hand to forestall her protest. “In that time, I came to learn quite a bit about melanomas. Wish I paid more attention before I got it. Never mind, it’s done.”

Her eyes strayed to the pile of books she gave him. “You *have* learned a lot. You should have studied medicine.” Her mouth twitched in a faint smile, which made her face radiant. Then it firmed and the protective façade snapped back into place. “I am sorry, Andrew. The Institute did everything it could.”

“I know, and I appreciate it. Four weeks doesn’t give us much time to beat this thing, but I want to try something. It is probably a doomed hope, but better than nothing.”

“What have you found?”

“I came across an intriguing article in the *American Journal of Medicine*. Have you heard of Broca Genetics?”

Her mouth pursed in a frown. “As a matter of fact, I have. A recent Silicon Valley startup researching the application of macrophages against various cancers. What about them?”

Andrew leaned forward. “From what I’ve read, macrophages are white blood cell types produced by the immune system to

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engulf and digest cellular bodies, foreign substances, microbes, cancer cells, and anything else that doesn't have the type of surface proteins specific to a healthy cell."

"Accurate enough. Your point being?"

"Macrophages have two states, the cell-repair and eat-me mode. In their cell-repair state, they can promote tumor angiogenesis and suppression of antitumor immune cells. In their eat-me mode, they directly attack tumor cells and induce T-cells to recognize and combat them.

"It says that programmed cell removal is a process of macrophage-mediated immunosurveillance by which cancer cells are recognized and removed. The problem is, cancer cells block the macrophage eat-me receptor used to clear apoptotic cells and turn the macrophage into its cell-repair state, at the same time inducing the phages to suppress the body's immune response and helps tumor cells metastasize."

"That is quite correct, although macrophage functionality is not yet fully understood," Dr. Dalton remarked. "You must also know that all efforts to extract macrophages from someone, switch them to their tumor-kill state and reintroduce them to fight cancers have failed, as the tumor immediately switched them back to their cell-promoting state."

Andrew raised a finger. "True, but this is where Broca Genetics comes in. Most researchers have pursued the development of a macrophage cytokine-secreting backpack which is supposed to prevent cancer cells switching off the eat-me receptor. Once the tumor cells are eliminated, the macrophage switches to its normal cell-repair state. According to the article I read, what Broca have done is tailor a macrophage for a specific cancer without the need to create a cytokine backpack. I want to try that treatment."

Dr. Dalton rubbed her chin, a characteristic gesture when concentrating.

"For that to work, in addition to blood, to tailor a macrophage for your condition, Broca would need a live tissue sample of your

cancer.”

“Fine. Another biopsy isn’t a problem.”

“That would not be necessary. We have sufficient cultures.”

“Yes, I imagine you do.”

“Mind you, Broca’s research, although promising, is highly experimental. Even if they were willing to do something for you, I doubt they could do it in the time available.”

“You’re probably right. Still, they claim an eighty-three percent remission rate in test primates.”

“Primates, yes, but they are at least two years from conducting even preliminary human trials. I cannot sanction such treatment, especially one that might very well kill you.”

“Kill me, Doc? I’m already dead. Besides, I don’t have two years. Even if the treatment fails, it will give Broca and the Institute valuable clinical data.”

“I don’t know if the Institute’s ethics committee would permit this.”

“I will sign a liability waiver to protect you, the Institute, and Broca from any punitive litigation. I have nothing to lose.”

“You could lose your four weeks.”

He snorted. “Wow, some risk when compared to the possibility of even partial remission? How about it?”

Her eyebrows came together in a deep frown. “Ordinarily, this would be against my better judgment, but as you pointed out, your condition is terminal and I am ethically bound to help you if at all possible.” She stood, hesitated and nodded. “Let me make some calls.”

When the door closed after her, he pumped his right fist.

“Yes!”

*You are not getting me yet, Death.*

He was not fooling himself. His chances were thread-thin that Broca would be able to develop something within the time he had left and the treatment to work. However thin, it was still a chance. Satisfied, he wriggled farther down under the blankets,

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slid a hand behind his head, and allowed himself to sink into memories, for there were damn few tomorrows.

A year ago, life was bright and full of promise.

\* \* \*

For Andrew, 2021 started hot and continued through February. He clearly remembered that sunny day when he stepped out of the ANZ Collins Place tower elevator and gazed, nonplussed, at the lunchtime crowd packing the huge covered plaza that straddled the other tower. At the lower ground level, all the dining tables were filled. Popular, with a variety of restaurants and a fast takeaway food court, the plaza was always packed...and noisy. He wondered how people could hear themselves talk. Probably tuned out everything around them. That's how he did it.

He strode toward the broad sidewalk and squinted. Bright sunshine beat down from a pale blue sky, the air thick. Cars streamed along the broad boulevard, tooting horns at daring individuals running across the tram tracks. A green Yarra Trams monster clanked its bell and hissed up Collins Street toward the state parliament buildings at end of the street. Tall maple and plane trees lined both sides. Sparrows perched on branches, twittering at people below. Enterprising pigeons pecked at crumbs and scraps on the sidewalk, unfazed by hurrying pedestrians around them.

He liked summer, and February most of all. He liked the hot, dry days despite the stifling oven winds that sometimes came from the central deserts. The winds were part of the package that came with living in Melbourne. Nothing to get excited about, although they were a diverting topic of conversation. Solution; ramp up the air-conditioning when they hit and ride it out.

Dressed formally in a pale blue shirt, dark orange tie and navy trousers—he had to look professional as one of FutureTech's

bright analyst-programmers—he walked across the plaza toward the sidewalk. He did not mind the dress code. Things generally did not get him worked up. Maintain an even strain, go with the flow, was the order of the day. He carried little worries like everybody else—rent, bills, running a car—but life was generally easy.

He missed surfing. A real bummer. That too came with the package of a full-time job. He turned right and strode briskly up the street.

*Memory memo to self: Call Mark and Orwell.*

Saturday was only two days away and they might be interested in an outing somewhere along the Great Ocean Road.

Unbroken sea all the way to Antarctica, the water would be cold, but a light wetsuit would take care of that problem. Besides, none was married and could afford the time. The more he thought about it, the idea of running some waves, ogling sunbathing girls, and being contemplated himself—at 174cm, square jaw, dark hazel eyes, he looked mature, and knew the girls liked him and his equally bronzed friends—it beat the hell of spending the weekend in his one-bedroom Richmond apartment. There was shopping to do, washing and general cleaning up, but he could do that on Friday evening.

He scratched an itch on his left forearm and glanced at the black Rado on his right wrist: 12:52. Plenty of time to make his one o'clock appointment. He had a Motorola smartphone in his pocket that told time very well, but he had become attached to his Rado, a duty-free thing he purchased at LA airport two years ago before the COVID-19 panic shut down the world.

The 2020 lockdowns did not affect him all that much, as he was able to work from home on most days, glad to have a job as a new graduate. If he had not worked for FutureTech during his university summer breaks, he would probably have been twiddling his thumbs.

The media spewed out a lot of conflicting information about



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the coronavirus, and he often wondered if the news presenters knew what they were talking about. In his view, they were part of the problem with their 24/7 coverage. Wasn't anything else going on in the world? What he resented was confinement to his apartment, unable to see family and friends, or go out. Pandemic or not, he wasn't a criminal to be locked up. Perhaps the authorities did know what they were doing, but he had his suspicions. There had to be other ways to control the spread without turning the country into a prison.

The world was slowly climbing out of the economic hole it dug for itself, the struggle likely to take years before things returned to normal, whatever that meant. What concerned him was the ease with which governments savagely curtailed people's rights and freedoms, and were slow to return them. In places, they were not returned. Freedom or protecting societies from themselves, a thorny conundrum.

Ah, to hell with it. Right now, it was hot and sunny and his life bright.

He spotted the grimy, almost black stone façade of the narrow building and pushed open the heavy wood door. Usually, a boutique, jeweler, or takeaway joint would occupy the ground floor space, but most buildings in upper Collins Street housed well-heeled doctors, lawyers, and dentists. A business address in the Paris end proclaimed to everyone that you have beaten the system and joined the successful elite. It also allowed you to immediately double or triple your service fees. Someone had to pay for that Southbank condo, the BMW or Merc.

He walked into the cool foyer and headed for the single elevator. He pressed the request triangle and it turned white. The display above it showed it was coming down and he turned to face it. The steel door opened and he stepped in. He tapped the fourth-floor button and clasped his hands behind his back. A habit he picked up serving with the Melbourne University Regiment Army Reserves while studying at the RMIT University.

When he got his honors degree in November 2019, majoring in virtual design and programming, he was commissioned a first lieutenant, and promptly resigned. Playing soldier had been a youthful fantasy and he had some fun along the way, but the novelty quickly faded into a dull grind of boring procedures. The few fun times he went out on field exercises and got to shoot off weapons and throw grenades did not make up for the numbing close-order drills and chores an officer candidate had to put up with.

In case of war, the federal government was welcome to recall him.

The elevator door slid away. He turned left along a brightly lit corridor and stopped before a frosted glass door that had First Teeth engraved in gold letters. He opened the door and stopped before the reception desk. A young Asian girl he had not seen before looked up from her computer and smiled brightly.

“May I help you?”

“Andrew Payne to see Dr. Teller.”

The girl checked her computer and nodded. “The doctor will be with you in a moment.”

He took one of the visitor chairs and leaned back. An LED TV stuck to the wall silently showed the ABC news, the words displayed in subtitles. Everything around him was new, modern, and smelled faintly of anesthetic. A coffeemaker and sundries stood on a corner table beside the water urn. Given the fees, First Teeth did well for itself.

A side door opened and a young woman nodded at him. Her white lab coat enhanced the short platinum hair, deep olive eyes, oval face, and high cheekbones. Her small mouth showed even, perfect teeth. Figuring where she worked, he was not surprised. Quite tall, about 164cm, slim, her confident stance and frank gaze made him stare. She was a fantasy unlike anyone he had gone out with. Her air of maturity hung around her like a protective blanket. Friendly, but don't touch, it said.

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“Mr. Payne?”

He stood up. “That’s right.”

“I am Dr. Teller. Please come in,” she said and stepped aside.

His usual dentist was Dr. Hendrix, but he was on leave. That is what the receptionist said when he made his appointment. He was fussy about who handled his teeth, but a hole in his lower molar had to be treated before it bored its way deeper and he would be up for a root canal job.

Striding past her, he could not believe she was a fully qualified dentist. The title Doctor always cracked him up. They only had a bachelor honors degree, yet dentists were allowed to call themselves Doctor. One of life’s inexplicable phenomena.

Teller led him to a compact treatment room fitted with all the latest support gadgets and a recliner seat comfortable enough to sleep on. A ceiling TV showed something from Channel 10. Beside the seat stood a short girl in a green protective gown. He could not see her face behind the white mask.

“Sit down. Mr. Payne,” Teller told him pleasantly in a subtle contralto, and leaned to peer at the computer.

Andrew made himself comfortable and the attendant tied a bib around his neck. Teller looked down at him.

“We’ll get an x-ray first to check the extent of enamel penetration. Are you in any pain?”

“No, but my tongue keeps straying to the hole.”

“A common reaction,” she assured him.

She swung a portable x-ray head toward his cheek and made him bite down on a film slide. The thing done, she checked the computer.

“You’re lucky we caught this early. It won’t take a minute to fill. Your other teeth look good.”

“I try to take care of them.”

She slipped on her mask and gloves, and dabbed a cotton finger soaked with an anesthetic against both sides of his molar. He

hated needles, but First Teeth did not use them for simple repairs, something he appreciated.

It only took a few minutes to drill out the cavity, fill, and seal it with a laser, just as Teller promised. He rinsed his mouth and the assistant removed the bib. His tongue slipped over the filled tooth, liking the smooth surface.

“Thanks, Doc.”

She nodded. “You’re welcome.”

He searched her face and made the plunge. The worst thing she could do was say no.

“Look, I haven’t had lunch yet. How about we have one together? If you’re free, that is.”

She laughed with genuine mirth. “Is this your standard pickup line, Mr. Payne?”

“No, it isn’t,” he told her seriously, drawn by her captivating eyes. “I really would like to have lunch with you.”

He could see the assistant smiling behind her mask.

Teller bit her lower lip. “Mmm. Settle your bill at reception and I’ll see you in a minute.”

Searing heat surged through his body and he broke into a wide grin.

“Deal!”

They took the elevator down and Andrew opened the ground floor door for her. Teller stepped out and gasped.

“Wow. It’s hot.”

Dressed in dark gray trousers and white shirt, she looked regal.

“Since we’re lunching, I would like to call you something else than Dr. Teller.”

She smiled. “Adriana,” she said and frowned. “Would you mind if we go somewhere close? Collins Place, perhaps? I don’t have much time. Patients.”

“Collins Place works for me, and it’s just down the street.”

“I often go there,” she said. “You?”

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“I work at the ANZ tower, and the food court provides good meals.”

“You work for the bank?”

“I’m an analyst-programmer for FutureTech, a virtual reality games developer. It’s a U.S. company based in Mountain View, Silicon Valley, and their Melbourne office runs the Australasian region.”

“They must be doing well to afford an office there.”

“Virtual reality is the future in games, and I have ideas for other applications. I’m just getting started there, and I’m reluctant to push on them just yet.” He glanced at her. “I haven’t seen you at First Teeth before.”

“I graduated last year and this is my first real job. I’ve been working for them as a dental assistant, then a technician while doing my degree.”

“I wondered how you managed to land a job with them. Most of the dentists there are past it.”

She laughed. “They’re choosy whom they take on, but Dr. Hendrix has been my family’s dentist for years. When I told him I was studying to be one, he became my mentor.”

“I like Hendrix,” he told her. “He’s been looking after me for a while. Some people make you feel warm just by their presence, and he is one of them. Must be a great asset in your profession.” He gave her a searching look. “You have that quality yourself.”

Adriana’s eyes probed him, and he felt his personality being peeled back, revealing the layers beneath. Normally, he shied away from such scrutiny, but he found he did not mind it from her. He wanted to peel away her layers as well to see what lay there.

“How long have you been working for FutureTech?”

“It is also my first full-time job. I started last February just before the pandemic kicked off, but during my final two years at RMIT, I had work experience training with them, and as a casual during the summer breaks. I’m glad I did that, as it opened my

eyes to how real business does things. Universities don't really prepare students for the job market and what the commercial world wants. The work experience program is the best thing they could have done.

"I thought myself an expert in VR design, but university projects are a far cry from real-world applications. FutureTech taught me a lot, but I also gave them a lot. When I started with them, they sponsored my MBA at RMIT. I guess they see me as a prospective manager. If I keep my nose clean and work my butt off, I expect to graduate this November."

"You have done well, Andrew."

"It's a pain, all the study. It cramps my social life."

She chuckled. "Ah, the sacrifices we make."

"If only you knew," he told her.

When they reached Collins Pace, he took her to the lower level and headed for Peroni's. Not quite upmarket, but he had eaten there before. Its quiet atmosphere and subdued lighting was more satisfying than the gregarious, noisy ambiance of the open court outside. He normally booked, but it was well after 1:30 and the attendant got them a back corner table.

Adriana ordered a mineral water with her lamb cutlets and stir-fry vegetables. He got himself a dark light ale with his veal medallions, also with stir-fry veggies.

She looked around the full venue and nodded in appreciation. "I eat here often, but I have never been to Peroni's."

"Lots of interesting nooks and crannies in the plaza. It's a warren. You just have to look."

"What else occupies your days when you're not a VR analyst?" she asked lightly, a glint of overhead lighting making her eyes sparkle.

"My two friends and I love surfing and being on a beach. Nice things to see there," he told her seriously, and she cracked a broad smile.

"I don't doubt it. And you took in all the sights."

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He shrugged. "That's what it's for. Regrettably, when we started university, we were forced to sacrifice many of our extra-curricular activities. If we wanted to pass, that is."

"How you must have suffered."

"We did, but we're not letting this summer go to waste. As a matter of fact, I'll be arranging an outing with them for this Saturday." He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Would you like to come with me?"

She waved a hand. "Afraid not. I have things to do."

"Teller... May I ask where that comes from? Swiss, maybe?"

"Swedish. My father's parents came to Australia in 1956. Dad was born here, and Mom is Greek. What about you?"

"My mom is English. Came over with her parents and brother in 1992. My dad's parents are Americans. His old man was stationed in Queensland. After the war, he went back to San Francisco to pick up his wife and they settled in Sydney. A few years later, they moved to Melbourne, and never stopped complaining about our cold weather."

Adriana grinned. "Sydney *is* much warmer."

"It is, but when Dad was born, that was it. Everybody stayed here."

"Your father's parents still alive?"

"Both were killed in a car accident last October. A speeding idiot ran a red light and T-boned them at an intersection."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Andrew."

He shrugged. "I liked them a lot. They must have liked me, for they left me their South Yarra house. I'll be moving in at end of the month. That's when the lease on my Richmond pad expires. It will take me a bit longer getting to work, but having a place of my own will make up for it. Renting is giving money away."

"Anybody else in the family?"

"Just my sister Belana. She's almost eighteen and in her first year at Melbourne Uni."

The attendant brought their drinks and meals, and both concentrated on food for a while, making an occasional comment how good it was. Very conscious of Adriana's presence, he took pains to note her mannerisms and simply enjoyed being with her. She was different from any girl he dated. He sensed a depth he wanted to explore, afraid he might not see her again, until he needed another tooth fixed, and he wanted to see her again badly. To feel such a connection at first sight was new territory for him, and he felt a tremor of uncertainty at the prospect of possible long-term commitment. He liked girls, liked going out, liked the fun he had with them, but it was with strict understanding that it was just a bit of fun. They had not wanted it any other way either. That is how it had been so far.

The situation he found himself in with Adriana was somewhat bemusing. With her, he could not slip into his comfortable, tried one-night stand routine. This left him unnerved and puzzled as he tried to sort out his feelings, but also excited. It was not the prospect of making a conquest, but a genuine desire to become close with another person. There was undeniable physical attraction, but he found that this time, he wanted much more. He faced his twenty-fourth birthday in a couple of months, and recognized that life had started to become serious at many levels. Was he ready to take such an important step with her?

Looking at her, he wasn't sure.

Stupid!

This was just lunch, and he should not make too much out of it. His inner self jeered at him for being a coward. If she did not want to see him, his surfing weekend would be without her. There were other shells on the beach.

The thing was, he wanted this particular shell.

He downed the last of his ale, and Adriana dabbed her lips with a napkin.

"I enjoyed that, Andrew, and our little chat. Time I got back to the practice."



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“There is a lot more about me I haven’t said,” he told her. “To find out, you will need another lunch or two, or a dinner.”

Her eyes lost some of their brightness and she turned thoughtful.

“I am not sure I want to get involved with someone right now. My last boyfriend turned out to be one of those old-fashioned dominant types who thinks a woman should mind smelly babies and look after the house. His parents were polite but distant. I wasn’t a Polish girl, and that was a black mark against me to start with.”

“Am I coming on too strong?”

“A little, but I don’t mind too much. You’re not afraid to express your feelings, and I appreciate that. Right now, though, I have my job and a routine that keeps me occupied. It’s enough.”

He fingered the beer glass for a moment, then looked at her.

“You have some very special qualities, Adriana, and that makes me nervous, because I have never met anyone like you. Now that I have, I would very much like to know you better...if you will let me.” Silence lingered between them for several long seconds.

“What did you have in mind?” she asked.

“Lunch tomorrow?” he queried hopefully.

“You don’t waste much time, do you?”

“Circling the wagons to stave off any possible competition.”

She laughed. “You’re a dupe. Let me think about it, okay?”

It was not what he wanted to hear, but it also wasn’t rejection.

\* \* \*

“I keep wanting to scratch it,” Andrew declared, frustrated and concerned. It was only a mole, and he had dozens all over his back. Just thinking about it made his forearm itch.

Dr. Ananankos pursed his lips. “Any bleeding?”

His deep voice calm, measured and reassuring, put Andrew at

ease. Bushy hair almost all white, black eyes that missed nothing, a bulbous nose with a large wart on the right side, jowls sagging, the doc was definitely not a poster GP. What made his patients come back, and Andrew was a regular from his university days, was loads of empathy. His mere presence and kindly demeanor dispelled anxiety.

“No. I’m not scratching that hard.”

“Any dermis under your fingernails when you do scratch?”

“Sometimes.”

“How long have you had it?”

“It appeared as a small mole last October.”

Ananankos grunted as he pushed back his chair and rummaged through a desk drawer. He held up what looked like a large jeweler’s loupe attached to a thick handle.

“Pull up your sleeve.”

Andrew did and rested his arm on the desk.

The doc absently brushed back a wad of hair and leaned forward. He switched on the instrument and positioned it over the black mole. The examination lasted about a minute, with Ananankos making an occasional sigh, which did nothing for Andrew’s disposition.

“Take off your shirt and stand up.”

Puzzled, Andrew bit his lower lip and complied, not liking the doctor’s frown.

He flinched slightly when the cold instrument touched his back. Ananankos took his time sliding the thing across his back. He sat down and shook his head.

Andrew buttoned his shirt and hung his tie around the collar.

“You have quite a collection of moles on your back,” Ananankos declared sonorously. “Clear evidence of UV damage, but nothing of any concern. I would advise you to take greater care of your skin, though. Use lots of sunblock.”

“I *am* using it,” Andrew said unconvincingly.

The thing was, he had not been very diligent when it came to

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sun protection. The best blockers made him look like a white ceiling or left him smelling of cheap aftershave. Neither went down well with the girls.

“Try harder,” Ananankos told him firmly. “I’m concerned about the mole on your forearm. There are irregularities I don’t like. I would recommend removal and a pathology examination. I can do the biopsy now if you like.” He smiled. “It will stop the itching.”

Andrew grinned back. “In that case, let’s do it.”

It did not take long. Ananankos jabbed him with an anesthetic, which made him wince, and carved out a substantial slab of tissue around the mole. It took two sutures to close the incision. He wiped excess blood and stuck a wide waterproof pad on the wound, sat back, and glanced at the computer.

“Come in on Tuesday at eleven. That’s February 16. The results should be in by then. Next Friday at four, I’ll take out the sutures. *Don’t* remove the protective pad before then, okay?” he said and held out an appointment card.

“Got it.” Andrew was tempted to skip this part, but he had to know. “The mole...What do you think it is?”

“Hard to say. There is some discoloration not consistent with a normal mole, and the growth is irregular. It could be nothing, but we’ll know for sure on Tuesday. I wouldn’t worry too much about it.”

Whenever someone told Andrew not to worry about something, that’s when he started to worry.

“If the test comes back positive?”

“If it is melanoma, the report will tell us what kind, which will dictate the type of treatment. There are lots of tools in our bag these days to beat these things, but like I said, don’t worry about it for now.”

Andrew stood, tucked in his shirt, and extended his hand. “Thanks, Doc. I’ll see you on Tuesday,” he said as they shook hands. He strode toward the door, then stopped and turned. “I

planned to do some surfing tomorrow. I suppose that's out now?"

Ananankos wagged his index finger. "Definitely, and anything else that might cause the protective pad to come off. Especially in the first three or four days."

"Got it. Thanks again."

Shait.

*Memory memo to self: Give Mark and Orwell the grim news.*

Outside the clinic, he squinted at the steel sky and glanced at his watch: 12:56. He muttered a pithy word and hurried up Exhibition Street. Collins was only a block up, but he would still be late for his one o'clock lunch date with Adriana. He called her yesterday and she agreed to go out. He dug out his cellphone, scrolled down the Contacts list, and pressed the ring icon.

"First Teeth, Penny speaking. How can I help you?"

"This is Andrew Payne. I have a meeting with Dr. Teller outside the building at one, but I'm running a few minutes late. Can I ask if you could let her know?"

"Not a problem, Mr. Payne."

"Thanks."

"Bye."

Pedestrians crowded the sidewalk, some still wearing protective masks, and the street stank from car exhausts. He wondered how the maples along the central nature strip coped. He pushed the thought away...and his biopsy. Like the doc said, no need to get excited just yet. Wait for the facts, *then* get excited.

Adriana came out just as he approached the building. She spotted him and waited. Wearing a pale blue shirt, sleeves cut part way up the elbows, navy slacks, she had poise. Several men gave her a passing glance, as did some women. He saw that she did not appear to notice the attention, or accepted it as her due.

He stopped in front of her and smiled sheepishly. "Sorry to hold you up. A minor medical emergency. At least I hope it will be minor."

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“Emergency?”

He lifted his left arm. “I had a mole cut out. It’s been itchy for a while and I decided to have it checked.”

Her eyes lit with mischievous amusement. “That’s what comes from too much sun, surf, and other things.”

“Your sympathy is overwhelming.”

She chuckled and patted the wounded arm. “The doctor knows best.”

“You haven’t waited long?”

“Just finished up when Penny told me you were running late. Now, about lunch. There is a very nice Japanese restaurant at Collins Place, Heiwa Fun’iki. Means peaceful ambiance, or something like that.”

“You’ve been there before?”

“A few times. I booked us a table. My treat this time,” she added.

“Hey! I was asking *you* out.”

“My treat, or I’m walking back.”

“Fine, Japanese it is.”

They merged into the crowd heading down the street.

Strong, independent, and knows her mind. Andrew liked that. Most girls he dated until now were quite happy for him to take charge. Apparently not Adriana. He needed to be careful how he handled himself...if she gave him a chance to go out again.

At the plaza, they walked down broad steps to the lower ground level, threading between lunch goers, trying to ignore the ambient decibels.

A Japanese girl in a white shirt and black trousers bowed as they stepped into the bright atmosphere filled with inviting cooking smells. Most of the small square tables were full. Judging by the animated conversation and free laughter, the patrons were having a good time. After confirming the reservation, their hostess led them to a table beside a ceiling-high plate window with a view of the plaza, and handed them menus.

“Sencha tea, please,” Adriana told her.

“Same for me,” Andrew added.

The hostess smiled, bowed, and steered her way between tables to the order bench. There was no bar. It was not that kind of place. However, he did see several men drinking sake. He liked the rice liquor, especially when served hot, but this was a working day and he needed to keep a clear head. Sake did not have a strong taste and it fooled many who thought it was a soft drink.

His gaze lingered on Adriana’s face, taking in every curve and feature. She did not look away, scrutinizing him in turn. Definitely a woman of character, he decided, feeling sorry for her last boyfriend, letting her slip between his fingers.

After studying the menu, she looked up. “Dreamed up any new VR games?”

“My team and I are just finishing putting one together.”

“Blood, gore, cannons everywhere, slashing swords?”

“Ouch, but you’re right. Interactive action games are the rage, I’m afraid, and bring in the money. However, I am doing some coding at home to develop 3D rendering sets to make everything more lifelike. Computer animation these days is first rate, but no matter how well done, the characters still look like dolls, and the scenery is lackluster.”

“I know what you mean. I’ve seen clips on YouTube.”

He leaned forward, allowing his enthusiasm to bubble. “And it still costs anything up to two hundred thousand or more to develop a really good game. What I want to do with my rendering sets is produce characters and backgrounds first seen in *Avatar*, but without spending hundreds of millions James Cameron had to. Mine will be cheaper and better.” He saw her bemused look. “Computer animation doesn’t do anything for you, does it?”

“I don’t know anything about it,” she admitted, “but I am fascinated by your enthusiasm.”

Their hostess glided to the table and unloaded a large blue porcelain teapot and shallow cups. She poured for them, then

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dug out her tablet. “Ready to order?”

Adriana nodded. “I’ll have the Ebi Furai prawns and the pork Tonkatsu.”

“For me, the prawns as well, and the Tako Karaage,” Andrew told her.

The hostess nodded, picked up the menus, and strode off.

Adriana mixed brown sugar crystals into her tea and sipped. “This is good. Must be a fresh batch.”

Andrew tried his—no sugar—and nodded. “Not bad. If you don’t mind me asking, how do you spend your days?” he said, then raised a hand. “I know. Teeth and more teeth.”

“I’m afraid so. I’m glad I am spared some of the horrors one of my university colleagues puts up with. She works at a practice in North Melbourne not far from the Victoria Market. The things she tells me makes me shudder. Some of her patients come in with teeth that look like bombed-out buildings.”

He smiled, images of Berlin’s post-war skeletons jumping into mind.

“Some don’t brush or gargle, and the kids...” She shuddered, then grinned. “Since we’re about to eat, I better not go there.”

“First Teeth patients obviously take care of themselves,” he said.

“They do, and that’s good.” She took a sip of tea.

“Any other dentists in the family?”

“Just me.”

“Brother or sisters?”

“My parents wanted a larger family, but when I was born, Mom had problems and couldn’t have any more.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he said contritely.

“They adjusted, and their careers keep them busy. Dad is an electrical engineer with Graff Construction. They do a lot of high-rise stuff and factories. Mom is a financial advisor at AMP.”

“A lot of bloodletting there after the 2018 Royal Commission into banks and financial institutions.”

“There certainly was. It demonstrated unequivocally that corporate greed does not pay in the long run,” Adriana agreed. “The scandals have left the banks reeling. It will take them a long time to build trust again.”

Andrew sighed. “I don’t know. They’re monopolies, and most of their money comes from the corporate sector. The little people are an inconvenience they must put up with.”

Adriana raised her eyebrows. “My, aren’t we cynical, Mr. Payne.”

“You think I’m wrong?”

“Sadly, I have to agree with you, as does my mom. Despite the Commission’s findings, none of the recommendations are implemented yet, and the banks took advantage of that last year. With the pandemic raging, they cut back dividend payments, as did many large corporations, with tacit approval from Canberra. They needed to save money to survive,” she added, rolling her eyes. “What the government and banks ignored is that those dividends make up a substantial portion of pensioner and self-retirees’ earnings.”

He nodded. “It looks like both of us have a less than respectful attitude when it comes to the corporate sector.”

“Despite what Michael Douglas said in one of his movies, greed is not good.”

“You follow politics much?”

She crunched her nose. “With a very cynical attitude. You?”

“About the same. Every time I wake up, I’m hoping they haven’t screwed things up further.”

Their hostess showed up bearing two plates. She laid them down and nodded. “Enjoy.”

“Saved!” Andrew declared, eyeing the deep fried crumbed prawns.

“We did get diverted into gloomy territory, didn’t we,” Adriana said, and dipped a prawn into a side bowl of sweet chili sauce. She bit into it and sighed. “Yum.”



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“Not bad at all,” he agreed around a mouthful. “What else occupies that probing mind, Doctor?”

“Are you after my resume, Mr. Payne?”

“Just curious. You interest me.”

“Dupe. For your information, I like my mom’s cat Fluff, but I’m not keen having one of my own. What about you? Are you a pet lover?”

“My mom has a black tomcat who tolerates me. That’s as far as I go with pets. I live in a one-bedroom apartment in Richmond, which is no place to keep an animal, even if the landlord allowed them.”

“How do you get to work?”

“I catch a tram. It drops me off at Parliament and I have a short walk to Collins Place. Last year was a drag with all that social distancing, and I’m glad things are more normal now.” He looked at her. “What about you?”

“I live in Footscray and take a train. It stops at the Parliament underground and First Teeth is just around the corner.” Her eyes probed him. “No pets, but you must like something else instead.”

“Oh, I read most fiction. Go out with my friends. Sun and surf.” He glanced at his arm and smiled. “Perhaps not for a while. I’m an invalid for one week.”

“So, the Great Ocean Road outing is off tomorrow?”

“Until further notice. I don’t mind too much. My job keeps me pretty busy, and a quiet weekend might not be such a bad thing.”

“What else interests you?”

“I like classical music. Orchestral mostly. I’m not much into piano recitals and stuff.”

“Classical is okay, but it is not something I listen to a lot,” she said. “Which is odd, as I play a violin.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Interesting. I would like to hear you play sometime.”

“We shall see.”

They finished the prawns and were sipping tea when their hostess came to clean up and bring the mains. Andrew cut off a piece of octopus from his stick Karaage, dipped it into Worcestershire sauce, and chewed the tasty morsel. Adriana seemed to relish her pork Tonkatsu.

Conversation ebbed and flowed between them as they discovered each other, Andrew getting increasingly smitten with her. What she thought of him, he could not say. He hoped it was favorable.

She glanced at her watch. "Goodness! I've got to fly. I really enjoyed this. Thank you." She raised her arm and their hostess appeared, tablet in hand.

Adriana settled the bill and said, "Domo arigato."

The hostess beamed and bowed. "Enjoy your day."

They walked out and headed up the stairs to ground level. As Adriana was about to head across the plaza, he reached for her hand.

"I would like to go out with you again."

She appeared to think it over. "Perhaps," she said and strode briskly toward the sidewalk, swallowed by a wall of pedestrians.

For several long moments, he watched the space where she vanished, then shook his head and ambled toward the ANZ tower.

When he got to his bullpen cubicle, he turned on the powerful graphics computer and started Googling information about skin cancers and melanomas in particular. After an hour or so of intense reading, he knew much more about the subject than he really wanted. It was bad news whichever type someone got, with poor life expectancy beyond five years even if caught early. Melanomas were buggers whichever way he cut it.

His heart was not in his work the rest of the afternoon, his mind skipping from Adriana and a promise of seeing her again, and gloomy possibilities he did not want to dwell on.

## About the Author

Stefan Vučak has written eight Shadow Gods Saga sci-fi novels and six contemporary political drama books. 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. 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 Terrllss-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 Terrllss-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 Terrllss-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 Terrllss-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 Terrllss-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**

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 Terrllss-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, Terrllss-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 Reader's 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!

## **Lifeliners**

When everybody is against them, it is tough being a lifeliner, as Nash Bannon found out. Lifeliners are ordinary people...almost. They can draw energy from another person; they live longer and are smarter. Scientists claim that Western high-pressure living and growing sterility in developed countries has triggered the rise of lifeliners, and *homo sapiens* will be replaced by *homo renata* within ten generations. So, what's not to like about lifeliners?

## **Autumn Leaves**

Dural had it all: a loving wife, adorable daughter, and a successful practice as a psychologist – until fates conspired to take his daughter and wife from him. A near miss lightning strike left him changed in several profound ways. This helped him handle his patients, but did not fill a gaping hole left in his heart. A chance encounter and a possibility of new love gave him hope that tomorrow might be a better day.