

Review

Autumn Leaves is a priceless work of art. It promises to take you deep into places of the human soul, especially our heartfelt desires and fears. As a reader of this story, I can say I was there, because Stefan Vucak presented it so well that it became a part of my existence. Though he already has his main character, I felt like I was the main character because his experiences revealed our universal vulnerability as we seek to live in perfect bliss.

Linda Diane Wattley

Books by Stefan Vučak

General Fiction:

Cry of Eagles

All the Evils

Towers of Darkness

Strike for Honor

Proportional Response

Legitimate Power

Autumn Leaves

Science Fiction:

Fulfillment

Lifeliners

Shadow Gods Saga:

In the Shadow of Death

Against the Gods of Shadow

A Whisper from Shadow

Shadow Masters

Immortal in Shadow

Walking in Shadow

With Shadow and Thunder

Through the Valley of Shadow

Guardians of Shadow

Non-Fiction:

Writing Tips for Authors

Contact at:

www.stefanvucak.com

AUTUMN LEAVES

By

Stefan Vučak



ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

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.

Stefan Vučak ©2019
ISBN-10: 0-6485528-1-0
ISBN-13: 978-0-6485528-1-9

Dedication

To Claudia...when the leaves begin to fall

Acknowledgments

To Charlotte Raby for additional proofreading and insightful suggestions.

<https://charlotteraby.wordpress.com/>

Cover art by Laura Shinn.

<http://laurashinn.yolasite.com>

Chapter One

With only a mild jolt, the Boeing 737 touched down and the pilot immediately engaged reverse thrust, which pushed Dural against the seat. On some flights, the pilots came in with wings rocking and landed with a jarring crunch. Hardly the most pleasant way to end a journey. After two days attending the Australian Clinical Psychology Association symposium in Sydney, he was glad to be home. Two papers on meditative treatment of stress-related neurosis by prominent guests from Harvard's Medical School generated robust discussion between the traditional conservative attendees and the more progressive camp. Dural liked the underlying theories advocated by the papers, although not entirely original, but lack of clinical evidence on their effectiveness provided free ammunition for detractors. He would discuss the papers with his two partners on the efficacy of applying the techniques to their own patients.

He glanced at the black Rado on his right wrist: 18:47. By the time he got home, it would be close to eight. He could have stayed in Sydney overnight networking with fellow psychologists dissecting the presented articles, shared a drink or two, and taken a morning flight to Melbourne. That would have meant losing half a day by the time he got back. Anyway, he had two patients scheduled for tomorrow morning.

A more compelling reason to be home was getting Lenora's welcoming embrace and Daniela swarming all over him, demanding that he tell her *everything*. His precocious seven-year-old would not give him a moment's peace until he did. She would not be interested in the conference proceedings, considering it dull grownup stuff, insisting instead that he tell her about Darling

Harbor, the Opera House, and Sydney's other attractions, hinting darkly that it was high time he took her there. With all that waiting for him, drinks with colleagues didn't stand a chance.

When he received the conference invitation, he considered submitting an article that explained aspects of irrational aggression and road rage exhibited by drivers in high density environments, which he published in the latest edition of the *Australian Medical Journal*, but thought it too radical for the stuffy traditionalists who still thought that Freud, B.F. Skinner, and William James had discovered and defined everything to do with psychology. On reflection, he should have presented it and watched the sparks fly. That would definitely have been a reason to stay behind and chew the cud with his colleagues.

The 737 pulled into the QANTAS domestic terminal, and coach passengers behind him scrambled to retrieve bags from overhead lockers, jostling for positions in the narrow aisle. Dural could never figure out the reason for the rush, as no one could exit for at least five minutes. He toyed with the idea of writing a paper on compulsive behavior in aircraft, trains, and buses that buried individual personality traits in a group environment. The coming Australian Society for Psychological Medicine symposium should receive it favorably, but that was not until August.

When the air bridge finally connected and the flight attendant opened the door, Dural slowly stood and retrieved his carryon and garment bag. Seated in the business class part of the cabin, he avoided the impatient crush of economy passengers. Flights would cost him and his partners a little less if they flew coach, but the extra comfort and convenience were worth the expense. Anyway, it was all tax deductible. With only a carryon, he was also spared the mind-numbing wait at the luggage carousel, potentially half as long as the flight itself, especially after an international haul.

Outside, a fresh breeze stirred his hair and Dural frowned at its keen bite. Melbourne in May did have an occasional pleasant

AUTUMN LEAVES

break, and they've had a long, warm summer, but the days now were unmistakably shorter and cooler. Leaves were turning various shades of yellow, brown, and red, littering the sidewalks and nature strips. Except for the eucalyptus. They remained green year round; dumping leaves and bark over the summer months, but were now settled in for the approaching winter.

He wrinkled his nose at the pervasive stink of petrol coming from buses and cabs streaming past the terminals, and tugged his right earlobe in irritation. Across the busy thoroughfare, the Parkroyal hotel blazed with light against the imposing parking lot complex that serviced short-term visitors. A city shuttle bus rumbled past him as he made his way toward the taxicab rank. An attendant waved his arm, steering cabs into a queue for waiting passengers eager to be out of there. The noise of cars, blaring horns, an occasional thunder of a departing aircraft, the lingering whiff of avgas, were familiar sights and sounds for Dural. Sydney may be more touristy, and it pained him to admit it, its climate milder, but he was Melbourne born and settled into his lifestyle. He had a devoted wife he loved, a doting daughter, a successful practice, and a promising career. What else could he want?

Get rid of your mortgage, dummy!

Another five years or so, he told himself.

A cab pulled to the curb and the attendant pointed at him toward it. Dural dumped his carryon and garment bag onto the back seat and settled himself in.

"Where to?" the cabby demanded.

"Nine Trinion Street, Prahran," Dural told him as he buckled in.

"That's off High Street, right?"

"Right."

The cabby grunted and pulled the car into the traffic.

Once they hit Tullamarine Freeway, the drive toward the city's glowing spires became smooth. A stream of oncoming

headlights made Dural squint. Although past seven and the afternoon rush over, there were still a lot of cars on the road. The Victorian state government said the planned widening of the airport end of the freeway would start in October this year, which would ease the morning and evening crush, but it meant three years of annoying inconvenience by the time all the work was completed in late 2018. If it was done by then. He and most Melbourneans could never figure out why the government hadn't put in three lanes both ways when they originally built the freeway. Didn't they have planners to project population growth and the corresponding need for infrastructure to cope with that growth? Judging by after the effect construction going on everywhere, apparently not. Another inexplicable phenomena, he mused.

Imbedded in a river of cars making their way downtown, he allowed himself a small smile, anticipating his arrival home. Daniela would still be up, refusing to go to bed until she saw Daddy, and there was nothing Lenora could do about it. His daughter was a force of nature and there was no changing her, not that he wanted to. What he and Lenora wanted was another child, but two miscarriages before she had Daniela made that a forlorn prospect. According to the doctors, Lenora was lucky to have had Dan. As it was, their daughter was born three weeks premature. Two subsequent miscarriages convinced her she was unlikely to have other children. This was hard to take at first for both of them, but as Daniela blossomed into a lively girl full of energy and bubbling spirits, Lenora told him she did not want to risk another failed pregnancy and the emotional trauma that went with it. He understood and reconciled himself to the inevitable, enjoying what they had. His training as a psychologist helped both of them cope with the disappointment, but he knew Lenora secretly fretted at not being able to have more children, fearing she had somehow failed him. The underlying neurosis exhibited itself in random fits of temper. He tried to make it up to her by loving her unreservedly, content to share Daniela with her.

AUTUMN LEAVES

The cab took the off-ramp to Kings Way, the city towers glowing jewels on his left, and entered the tree-lined Queens Road. A left at High Street, a few blocks later another left into Trinion Street, and he was there. Tall light poles lit mature trees on both sides of the road with a yellow glow. This was relatively an old part of town with lots of small plots and narrow, double-story brick and weatherboard houses, with a sprinkling of trendy dwellings put up by well-to-do investors and owners.

Dural and Lenora had only been married two years, and Daniela due in three months, they needed to upgrade from a small cottage they were renting in South Melbourne. Even though Lenora held a good job, the consultancy with his two partners was just getting established and they were not awash with cash. Perhaps in two years or so, he and Lenora agreed.

His parents were visiting one Saturday, and a chance Internet scan of real estate opportunities in the inner city ended with his father urging Lenora and Dural into making a bid to the agent the owners could not refuse. Although reluctant to load himself with a substantial debt, Dural recognized that such opportunities, when they came, needed to be snapped up. It was 2009 at the height of the Global Financial Crisis. A loan from his old man clinched the deal. The previous owners acquired the old house as an investment, figuring the real estate bubble would keep growing, and splurged to turn it into something modern. The sudden credit squeeze and an overvalued mortgage left them exposed, forcing them to sell at a substantial loss.

It cost another eighteen thousand to finish the renovations, but the outlay had been worth it. An upcoming clinical psychologist, and Lenora a junior systems analyst at ANZ, the bank did not hesitate to extend them a bridging loan. They wanted a fixed rate, but his old man told him to hold out for a variable rate. Interest rates were going down and he could lock in a fixed rate once the economic indicators started to turn. Although on a stable financial footing, Dural did not want to overextend himself.

Nevertheless, he insisted that he would service the loan, Lenora's income acting as a buffer. In 2010 when the rates showed signs of climbing, He renegotiated his loan to a fixed rate, which the bank undoubtedly regretted now.

He paid the driver and watched the cab's red taillights dwindle down the street. The wind sighed among the branches, making them whisper like rushing surf. Dead leaves swirled around his feet as he opened the small side gate and made his way toward the front entrance guarded by two heavy solid wood door panels. He walked up the three terracotta-tiled steps of the small portico and blinked when the motion-sensor overhead light snapped on. Before he could insert the key into the lock, the door flew open and a small bundle of irrepressible energy dressed in thick pink flannel pajamas slammed against him. He grunted from the impact, dropped his carryon and garment bag, and embraced the little girl.

"Daddy! Daddy! You're home!" Daniela cried out with a beaming smile, clutching him fiercely. After a moment, she glanced behind her. "Mommy! Daddy's here."

Lenora, tall, strikingly handsome and composed, appeared from the brightly lit lounge. Wearing tight fitting blue trousers, black sweater rolled up against a long throat, her glistening black hair cascading over her left breast, she gave her daughter an amused smile.

"I sure hope it's Daddy, sugar buns. I would hate to see you hugging a stranger like that," she remarked in a husky contralto.

Daniela laughed merrily and winked at Dural. "Mommy is only kidding. I knew it was you right away." She lifted her arms, which meant he had to pick her up.

"Uh, you're getting too heavy for this," he complained as he lifted her.

"Aw, you're just saying that."

"No strangers in the house while I was away?" he asked teasingly as he cradled her against him.

AUTUMN LEAVES

“No one else was here, Daddy,” Daniela assured him, then looked suddenly serious. “Unless you count Mrs. Parker across the street. She came about a half hour ago.”

“Demanding sugar again?”

Dan shook her head, which set her two ponytails dancing. “She brought us some walnut cookies. They were very good. Weren’t they, Mommy?”

“They sure were, darling.”

Mrs. Parker was an elderly lady who lived alone these days, her husband having passed away last year. She was one of those golden creatures who became loving and caring as she became old, and the entire street adored her. She was forever going around borrowing flour, sugar, and stuff from everybody, returning the favor with gifts of cakes and cookies. Dural had done odd jobs for her, fixing things around the house, as did some of his other neighbors. She was also a gossip and loved to regale everyone’s secrets and goings on. Old and wrinkled, she was nevertheless full of energy and always about somewhere.

He planted a kiss on Daniela’s rosy cheek and squeezed his daughter until she squealed and beat her tiny fists against his chest.

“Stop it, Daddy! You know how I hate it.”

He winced and eased off. “Sorry, I forgot. It’s just that I’ve missed you so much.”

“Next time, not too hard.”

“Deal.”

They exchanged a high five to seal the bargain.

Lenora walked toward him, wrapped her arms around both of them, and her eyes shone as she looked at him.

“Welcome home, stranger,” she said and gave him a brief kiss. When she leaned back, he stroked her smooth face and pushed away a lock of wayward hair. She always threatened to cut it short, and Dural would not have minded, but she knew he liked it long and never went through with it. However, she often told

him he would quickly reconsider if he had to wash and care for it.

“Glad to *be* home,” he murmured.

“Carry me inside, Daddy,” Daniela demanded. “You guys can smooch later.”

Lenora ruffled her daughter’s bangs and laughed as Dural walked into the house.

“Did you bring me anything? A cat? I’ve been wanting one for *ages!*”

Dural chuckled. The two women in his life both wanted a fluffy, purring creature padding around the house, provided the other did all the caring and cleaning up.

“I’ll get you one, if you’re prepared to take care of it, *and* it stays outside.”

“How can I have a cat if I cannot cuddle it?”

“You’ll like cuddling it while it’s still a little ball of mischief, but that will quickly wear off once it grows up. Like you, cats don’t like to be squeezed.”

She thought about it and shrugged. It was an argument she knew she could not win.

“How was Sydney, Daddy? Did you get to do some sightseeing? When are we going there? You *promised!* Tell it all.”

He sat on the soft couch and cradled Daniela on his lap. The muted 60” LED TV was showing news on the ABC channel. Under the TV stand lay tucked a DVD player and surround system box. On either side, magazines, professional periodicals—his and Lenora’s—and all sorts of books that covered a range of their tastes filled ceiling-high bookcases. She was into Harry Potter and that kind of stuff, which he detested, disliking all forms of fantasy and magic. His idea of fun books were science fiction, contemporary political thrillers, naval warfare, among others, but nothing on terrorism. Too morbid and gruesome. Apart from fiction, he collected old texts on psychiatry, ethics and philosophy. Among the volumes was a hardback on clinical psychology

AUTUMN LEAVES

that bore his name. He also dabbled at writing short science fiction stories, self-published on Amazon. The slim anthology sold well and had some good reviews. If his professional work went belly up, he figured he could always turn his hand to writing novels for a living. His inner self snorted at the absurd idea. On his left, a formal dining table, liquor cabinet and wine cooler filled the rest of the lounge that opened into the kitchen space. Against the wall, polished stairs led to bedrooms and a bathroom for Daniela's exclusive use. Dural and Lenora shared an en-suite.

Lenora walked to the cabinet and poured two fingers of bourbon, no ice. She handed him the tumbler and placed her hands on her hips.

"You'll see Daddy at breakfast, Dan. Right now, it's time for bed, young lady."

Daniela pouted and looked at Dural. "She always makes me go to bed early, like I'm a kid. My friend Penny is allowed to stay up until nine!"

"Bed," Lenora declared. "And Penny is a year older than you."

"I want a story first," Daniela pleaded. "You've just *got* to, Daddy."

Dural smiled and slid a hand down her hair. If he had to, he had to. She would eventually outgrow this phase when she started to read seriously on her own. She already had a nice collection of books in her room and liked to read paperbacks and e-books, but a story from her daddy was still the tops.

"A short one, little grub, if it's okay with your Mom," he told her.

"I wouldn't mind a story either," Lenora said with a grin.

"Fine, then." He took a sip of smooth whiskey and placed the tumbler on the coffee table.

Daniela beamed at him and nestled her head against his chest, her small arms wound firmly around him, her eyes glowing with anticipation as she looked at him. Lenora smiled indulgently

and sat beside him.

“Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess. She lived in a grand castle and had servants to fulfill her every wish. She had everything, but she was lonely. She could not understand why she could not have friends like other girls. She had a gorgeous garden full of bright flowers to walk in, but she was lonely.”

“What happened then, Daddy?”

“One day, her father declared that she must marry. The idea did not appeal to her, but she had no choice. The young men who came to court her up to now were all stuck up and acted important. She did not like any of them. She told her father that she would marry, but he must allow any young man to seek her hand. Even a commoner. The king was properly scandalized, but the queen approved. In the end, a proclamation was posted on the main gate and messengers were sent throughout the kingdom inviting suitors for her hand.”

“What then, Daddy? What then?”

Dural glanced at Lenora. She gave him a fleeting nod filled with approval. She occasionally read Daniela stories, but the little imp preferred a story from her daddy.

“Well, after one month, the princess had seen all the noble sons across the kingdom, and she didn’t like any of them. This outraged most of the young bloods, but the princess would not be swayed. One day, a tall youth walked through the main gate garbed in ragged, torn clothing. At first, the guards would not let him in, but he pointed at the declaration that said anyone was free to seek the hand of the princess. They laughed at him and allowed him through. When he walked into the reception hall, the attending lords and ladies tittered at his bedraggled appearance. As the handsome youth strode confidently toward the throne, something about him stirred the princess to look at him more closely. When he demanded her hand, the king asked what

AUTUMN LEAVES

he could offer his daughter, apart from toiling in the field, hardship and hunger, a life she was not accustomed to. The youth turned and gazed at the princess. Then he said, I offer her love, respect, and joy in her life, simple as it might be.”

Daniela blinked at him. “Wow. What did the king say?”

“Before he could say anything, the princess stood up and slowly walked toward the youth. She stopped before him and looked deeply into his eyes. Can you be my prince, she asked him in a soft voice. He said, close your eyes, kiss me, and wish me to be your prince. If you wish strongly enough, I will be your prince. The princess looked at him, then slowly closed her eyes and kissed him. When she opened them, she gasped in surprise. She did not see a poor boy, but a splendid prince in fine garments adorned with gold and jewels. From that moment, she knew she would never be alone again and they lived happily ever after.”

Daniela sighed softly, her eyes large and dreamy. “That was a lovely story, Daddy. One day, I’ll also have a prince asking for my hand.”

“I am sure you will.”

Dural kissed the top of her head. “Off to bed now. Want me to take you?”

“I want Mommy to do it. She tucks me in just right.”

As Lenora carried her upstairs, Daniela peered over her mother’s shoulder and fluttered her fingers at him. He waved back, smiled, and sat down. He picked up the tumbler and took a sip. A pleasant warmth spread through his belly and he gave a contented exhale.

He glanced at the TV, picked up the remote and switched it off. Lenora came down, sat beside him and rested her head on his shoulder. Her hair smelled faintly of lilacs and he longed to run his fingers through it.

“That *was* a nice story,” she mused. “If I close my eyes and kiss you, will you turn into a prince?”

“Only one way to find out,” he said with a grin.

She closed her eyes and he brought his mouth over her rosy lips. Their tongues danced around each other in delicious abandon as he gathered her into his arms, not wanting the moment to stop. Regrettably, it had to, but only as an interlude to a promise of more.

Lenora looked at him and smiled. “My prince...”

He cupped her face between his hands. “And you will always be my princess.”

She laughed and straightened her sweater. “You’re a hopeless romantic, Dural Sinclair, and I love you for it. How was the conference?”

“If it weren’t tax deductible, I wouldn’t have gone,” he admitted and took a sip. “It was not a total loss, though. Two Americans presented interesting papers on neurosis treatment I found stimulating. I’ll have to discuss them with Leonard and Gerard tomorrow. There is stuff in them we might be able to use. It could also be a useful topic at the Research Center. Apart from that, not much excitement.”

“No romping around Kings Cross?”

He snorted at the idea of carousing through Sydney’s premier drug and red light district. “The only romping I want to do is with you. What about your work?”

He kept himself fit through a regimen of running, workouts and an occasional game at the Albert Park Golf Club, alone or with Leonard. Gerard wasn’t much into the game, although he did have a bash at it—which it actually was—for exercise. Dural’s work demanded a lot of chair polishing and he hated the idea of turning into a stomach sagging slob. If Lenora could make the effort, so could he. They shared a run around the Kings Domain Park and the Albert Park Lake—when mutual work commitments permitted. All of them regularly went for leisurely weekend walks through the Botanic Gardens. It gave Daniela an opportunity to run free, climb trees, roll in the grass, and feed ducks beside the Ornamental Lake. Modern suburbia didn’t do kids any

AUTUMN LEAVES

favors. Sometimes they strolled along the St. Kilda Beach where Dan enjoyed chasing gulls, to their squawking annoyance.

At thirty-five, Lenora was still trim. The years may have matured her and softened some of the curves, but she had not allowed herself to spread. She laughed easily and her dark complexion—heritage from her Maori father—had fascinated him from their first encounter in November 2005 at Melbourne Airport. Her classical looks came from her English-born mother. The memory of that chance meeting still vivid as though it happened yesterday.

He recalled as she loaded her handbag and small travel bag into a gray security tray, she dropped her purse. He had not even noticed her until then. Long black hair cascading down her back, she was just another woman in a queue. He picked up the purse and touched her elbow.

“Excuse me...” His words failed him when she turned. Her deep violet eyes regarded him with detached curiosity, then widened when she saw the purse in his hand. Her generous mouth opened in a warm smile that highlighted perfectly white teeth. Apart from lipstick and eyeshadow, she did not appear to wear makeup, but it was hard to tell what women put on their faces these days. Not strikingly beautiful, high cheekbones, he could not look away from her clean features.

He cleared his throat and held out the purse. “You dropped this,” he said with a grin.

“Thank you. I would have been lost without it,” she replied in a husky voice.

When she cleared the security portal, travel bag rolling behind her, she walked quickly down the long corridor toward her boarding gate, leaving Dural staring after her, totally bemused. He felt an unaccountable connection with her, someone he wanted to know better, but it looked like it was not meant to be. When the speaker announced his boarding call, he was surprised to see her hand her pass to an attendant and enter the air bridge

for the same flight he was taking. His next surprise was far more pleasant when he found his seat and saw her in the center seat next to him.

Perhaps it was meant to be after all.

“Good morning...again,” he ventured.

She returned an amused smile. “Small world.”

“Since we’re going to be sharing it for the next hour or so, I’m Dural Sinclair.”

Her eyebrows arched. “*Doctor Sinclair?*”

He chuckled. “I did not realize my notoriety had preceded me.”

“I saw your book displayed at the Collins Street Dymocks store. I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I am not in need of your services.”

HarperCollins released his *Psychology in the Modern World* two weeks ago, and it already generated a stir among his colleagues, not altogether favorably received by the older and stuffier members of the learned community. As Clark Gable told Scarlet at end of *Gone with the Wind*, he didn’t give a damn. His research was solid and his book dealt with modern issues, unfettered by prevailing dogma. Being controversial would also boost sales, as such works were not considered a mainstream attraction.

“In that case, I would rather just talk. If you don’t mind, that is.”

The aircraft pushed back and the dreary safety presentation droned in the background. Dural tightened his safety belt. He wanted to cross his legs, but that was impossible in the narrow space between seats. It was only a short flight, he told himself.

Lenora gave him a surreptitious glance, which showed at least mild interest. “I don’t mind, and I don’t have anything else to do. Who knows? A psychologist might come in handy after all. By the way, I’m Lenora.”

At 179cm, without carrying any love handles, pale brown hair combed straight back, eyes dark gray, Dural knew he looked

AUTUMN LEAVES

good. He took in her casual wear, which suggested she was not on a business trip.

“Visiting in Sydney?”

“My brother. We’re both from Wellington, New Zealand, and came here to further our careers. His as an electrical engineer, and mine in IT.”

“Programmer...analyst?”

“Programmer at ANZ, but I expect that to change in January to senior programmer.” Her violet eyes sparkled. “I don’t have to ask what you do.”

“Nothing as exciting as being a computer programmer.”

“Block,” she retorted with a chuckle, and he grinned, enchanted by her easy manner and lack of awkwardness.

“Any other relatives in Sydney?”

She shook her head. “My parents are still in Wellington, as is my sister and her husband. She’s threatening to move to Auckland. Better job prospects there, and she’s right. Wellington may be the capital, but it’s really a very small city. She’ll never do it, though, what with parents and friends in Wellington. And you?”

He shrugged. “I run a practice with two partners near The Alfred Hospital. All of us also consult at the Monash Alfred Psychiatry Research Center, which is next door to the hospital. I have a small apartment in South Yarra. My old man runs an accountancy firm and my mom is his bookkeeper.”

Lenora smiled. “Funny you should say that. My mom does the same thing for Dad. He’s a mechanical engineer and owns an auto repair shop with two partners.”

Dural glanced at her hands, no ring. She fascinated him. Charming, clearly sophisticated, unpretentious, she was easy to talk with. At twenty-eight, with university studies and a new practice establishing itself keeping him very busy, he hadn’t had many opportunities to form a stable relationship. His two affairs never really developed. His fault mostly. He simply could not devote the attention a relationship required, and casual romps did not

interest him.

“And why are you going to Sydney?” she asked.

“I’m attending the Australian Society for Psychological Medicine conference.”

“Sounds dull.”

“Might not be. Before you ask, my book will be a topic of discussion. Vigorous discussion, I might add,” he said dryly, and she laughed. “It promises to be a lively two days.”

“Your partners, also psychologists?”

He nodded. “In various branches of psychology. We all studied at Monash University. Leonard is the oldest and got his PhD first. His parents are quite well off, and he picked up a lot of knowledge from them about running a business. He urged Gerard and me to open our own practice, something I was not initially too keen on. I had enough on my hands settling in as a junior researcher at the Psychiatry Center. Leonard told us that our professional careers would get a boost if people saw a business logo on our correspondence. Besides, we would make more money that way. I couldn’t fault him there. Working at a public hospital wasn’t exactly a large six figure job. His father loaned us an accountant and a secretary to get us going, and took out a lease for us in a building on St. Kilda Road not far from The Alfred complex. Rosalyn, our secretary, is still with us.”

She pursed her lips and nodded. “You and your partners did well in such a short time.”

“That still remains to be seen. We’ve only been in business for a year.”

When the flight attendants rolled the drinks carts along the aisle, Dural and Lenora declined coffee or tea and kept talking. Before he realized it, the copilot announced they were landing. He had never enjoyed a better flight. What now? She would return to Melbourne and resume her life, and he would resume his. Did he want to leave it at that?

The Airbus A330 squatted down at Mascot and began rolling

AUTUMN LEAVES

toward the QANTAS domestic terminal. He turned to Lenora and searched her eyes.

“I would like to resume our conversation when we’re both back in Melbourne,” he said softly and waited, unaccountably anxious. He knew he was experiencing a normal physiological response to an attractive woman, but his training did not help him cope with the emotional reaction.

She smiled faintly, dug out her purse, and offered him a business card. “Call me.”

Five months after they met, Lenora and Dural married in March 2006.

Memories still chasing each other, he took her hand in his and squeezed.

“I got a surprise yesterday, Du,” Lenora gushed, her eyes bright. “Woodrow Grant himself called me to his office. I don’t usually chat with the Senior Manager for Treasury Projects, and I thought he wanted an update on my work to upgrade the short term bills settlement system. It’s about three weeks behind schedule, but that’s not my fault,” she pointed out with a raised index finger and arched eyebrows.

“It’s always the project leader’s fault,” Dural pointed out gently.

“You can be such a block sometimes, you know,” she mused and fisted him lightly on the shoulder.

“About Woody...”

“I thought he would dress me down, but he never mentioned the project or the schedule slippage. In fact, he congratulated me and my team for our work. What he said next floored me. The Program Manager would give me the official letter, he said, but Woody wanted to offer his personal endorsement on my promotion as project manager. I could have kissed him! I waited three years for this and I finally got it.”

Dural stroked her arm and pecked her cheek. “I’m thrilled for you, Len. ANZ was just slow recognizing talent.”

“Better believe it, buster,” she purred contentedly. “There is another upside to this; an immediate raise in salary to \$115K.”

“Say, that’s great. I am proud of you. Really.”

“Thanks. Despite all those talks by Human Resources about equal opportunity, it’s just talk. Women today have to struggle for recognition just as hard as ever, even when everybody sees we’re better than some men.”

Dural tossed back the last of his whiskey. “Fifteen years into the twenty-first century, but many things still have a long way to go.” He heaved himself up. “I need a shower.”

“Will you tell *me* a story before going to bed?” she murmured, eyes sparkling.

“Any lullaby you want, hon,” he told her softly.

“You’re good with kids, Du, and Dan worships you. Leonard says the same thing. You know that his little Chris is sweet on her?”

“Len! They’re just kids, for heaven’s sake.”

“Kids grow up to be young people, you know.”

“She’s only seven. By the time she gets interested in such things, Chris will probably be married already.”

She laughed. “You *are* a block, Du. Anyway, the staff at Wesley College also told me how kids there like you.”

He was brushing off Lenora’s remarks as frivolous, but he admitted that he clicked with kids. A high level of empathy, he told himself. Something that also made him good at his job as a psychologist.

“How about a nightcap before we turn in?” he remarked as he led Lenora toward the stairs.

“You don’t want anything to eat?”

“Not hungry. Not for food anyway.” He grinned at her.

“Randy old goat.”

“We could open that bottle of ice wine we have stashed in the cooler. Ice wine and champagne... a great combination. What do you say?”

AUTUMN LEAVES

“We were saving that bottle for my dad’s birthday,” she protested.

“We’ll get him another one.”

“You haven’t forgotten to book the flights?” she demanded sternly.

“All done,” he assured her. His secretary was cool, charming, and very efficient.

She gave him a speculative glance. “I sometimes wonder about you and Rosalyn. All those late hours at the office...I’ve seen how she looks at you sometimes.”

“I like it when you show your horns, doll,” he said, vastly amused, and patted her shoulder. “It tells me I’m not over the hill.”

“Yet. Seriously, Du. I don’t want to disappoint Dad because you stuffed up our flight to Wellington.”

“I told you. It’s all done.”

“You know, we could visit my parents more often if we lived in Brisbane. Lots of opportunities for psychologists among all those neurotic geriatric retirees on the Gold Coast and Surfers Paradise.”

“But not many opportunities for a newly minted project manager,” he pointed out reasonably. “All major corporations are either in Sydney or here in Melbourne, and that’s where the good jobs are. Something you know very well, and the reason you came here.”

She gave a characteristic sniff of disapproval. “Let’s move to Sydney, then. I’ll be able to see Edmond more often.”

Dural sighed. He and Len had walked this ground before and the rocks were showing. New Zealand was picturesque and touristy, but high paying jobs were not lying around for the picking. He knew she missed her parents, her sister Judith, and old friends, but her desire to be closer to them was a nostalgic fantasy. She understood all that, but it did not stop her dreaming

about it. Should he treat her fixation as she were one of his patients? The job should not be too difficult. She was organized and very methodical in everything she did, and logical. She had to be to succeed as a project manager. On reflection, a person can be logical and still unreasonable. However, that did not diminish the validity of her emotional desire.

“Len, Daniela is at an important stage of her development and getting comfortable with the idea of spending every day at school. And she’s developing friends. Do you want to relocate and start somewhere as an analyst again just when you got your big break at ANZ? I could set up a new practice somewhere else, that’s true, but the plain fact is that I don’t want to. We’re doing great here, hon, both of us. Anyway, we jet off to Wellington every few months to see your parents and sister. Melbourne or Sydney, there isn’t much difference in distance,” he said and tugged at his ear. There might not be much difference in distance, but this was not about distance.

Lenora paused on the steps and lifted her hands in surrender. “You’re right, and I’m being silly.”

“You’re not being silly, and I’m not insensitive. We just have to look at this from all angles. Talk about it later?”

“You still want to take that trip to the Kimberleys in December?” she asked, sidestepping the issue. “I’ll have to confirm my leave application.”

She knew he loved to travel and see more of Australia, so did she, but not overseas, unless it was to New Zealand. So far, she had not shown any interest in Europe or America. The unpalatable truth he could not avoid, touring around Australia was often more expensive than taking an overseas trip. What stopped them adventuring more was getting time off work. Daniela was not a problem, not in second grade.

“Definitely. I have never been in that part of the country, and what I’ve seen on TV has me intrigued. We’ll be able to visit Broome along the way and Dan will go nuts feeding the dolphins.

AUTUMN LEAVES

Now, how about that ice wine?"

She frowned and bit her lower lip, then grinned. "I'll get the glasses."

He hooted with delight and hurried to the cooler.

In bed after a very quick shower, bottles safely in an ice bucket on the side cabinet, Dural lifted his champagne flute in a salute.

"To us."

"To us," Lenora agreed solemnly and clicked her glass against his, the crystal ringing with lingering purity.

After a third glass, the bubbly was having an effect on both of them.

"You're right. Pink champagne and ice wine is a very nice combination," she declared and took a hefty swallow.

"Last night in Sydney as I strolled along Darling Harbor," he mused absently, "the city bright all around me, you know what I wanted most? I wanted you beside me, Len. I wanted your hand in mine. I wanted to feel you against me. Most of all, I wanted to hear your enchanting voice." He turned his head and looked deep into her eyes. "Did I tell you that you have a most magical voice and it has me bewitched?"

"You did, my prince, but I don't mind hearing it again," she murmured.

Something changed in her eyes and she reached for his glass. She placed it next to hers on the side cabinet and faced him. Without saying anything, she grasped the flimsy nightie and pulled it over her head. Her full breasts swelled as she arched her back. He placed his hands over them and massaged the nipples. She groaned, leaned over him and crushed her mouth against his.

* * *

With electronic certainty, the alarm went off at 6:45. Dural grunted, fumbled for the cutoff switch, and rolled onto his back.

Light from the street oozed between the drapes, dispelling the darker shadows. He particularly disliked Wednesdays. The last weekend was fading in the memory tube, and the coming weekend was still two full days away—three if he wanted to include today.

Getting out of a warm, cozy bed, that was the trouble. Downstairs would be nice and toasty, the automatic heating system making things comfortable for the frail human occupants.

Not bothering to open his eyes, he listened to the soft patter of rain against the window pane. A rumble of thunder rolled ponderously somewhere in the east and faded into a muted grumble. Lightning momentarily set the shadows dancing, followed by a sharp, crashing protest. The east side of Melbourne always got the worst of the prevailing westerly weather flows. Being a natural heat sink, warm air from kilometers of concrete, brick, and road disrupted the normal airflow. The western suburbs would see heavy clouds overhead with a promise of rain, only to have them roll by and dump in the east. The eastern suburbs got more rain, but they also suffered from flash flooding and high winds. Despite these negatives, people still flocked east, considering inhabitants in the western part of the city blue collar migrant trash. It was not true, of course, but old English snobbery still held sway with many multi-generational families.

Lenora shifted beside him and mumbled something. He leaned over her and nibbled her ear. She sniffed and shifted her head.

“Wasn’t last night enough?” she muttered, her voice muffled by the pillow.

Dural allowed himself a broad smile. They never got around to finishing the champagne, having started something more interesting, and definitely more satisfying. A combination of things that made the evening memorable. Mere coupling released sexual tension, but never touched the soul. Their tender, slow lovemak-

AUTUMN LEAVES

ing last night definitely touched both their souls. That's what being a man and wife was all about, the touching and merging of souls.

"Just reminding you, hon, that it's time to get up," he told her softly.

"I don't want to get up. I have a meeting with the Treasury team at ten, and they'll blame me for the schedule slippage and the cost overrun, forgetting it's their own fault for insisting on that extra functionality. I *told* them it would delay the rollout, and I got emails to prove it, not that it'll do any good."

"Deal with it, Ms. Project Manager. That's why you're getting the big bucks now."

"You're a lot of help," she growled and turned over.

An intense flash lit the bedroom, followed almost immediately by a hideous crash.

"That was close," Dural observed.

He heard a patter of small footfalls and knew what was coming. The bedroom door slowly opened and Daniela stood there, a battered Cabbage Patch doll pressed against her chest.

"What's the matter, little grub?" he asked, knowing very well what bothered her. He'd been through these impromptu bedroom incursions before.

"I was frightened by the thunder," she said, looking dejected, eyes downcast.

"It's just clouds talking to each other. They can't hurt you."

"I know, but still..."

"Come here," he said and waved her in.

She broke into a sunny smile that made her glow, and she ran toward the bed. Arms stretched out, she flung herself onto the thick doona and scrambled toward him. He made room for her in the middle and she crawled in, clutching the doona to her chin. She tucked the doll next to her and rearranged its raggedy curls.

"Much better, isn't it, Madam Bisque?" she said and looked

up. "It's cold in my room, Daddy. Do I have to go to school today? I would rather stay at home."

Dural knew how she felt. He would rather stay at home too.

"School, I'm afraid. And your mother and I have to go to work."

Lenora sat up and brushed down Daniela's disheveled hair. "You'll be with your friends, sugar buns. Much better than being all alone here."

Daniela crunched her nose. "I suppose. Whose turn to take me to school today?"

Lenora hooked a thumb at Dural. "Your father will take you. I did it for the last two days."

Fair was fair, he admitted. The early and middle grade Wesley College private school was a couple of blocks down St. Kilda Road from his practice, and next to The Alfred Hospital complex. The College also provided daycare facilities, as it was not always convenient for parents to pick up their children by 4 pm when classes ended. That sometimes made for a long day for the kids, but Daniela had adjusted well, having attended preschool there when she turned four.

Lenora had a year off work when Daniela was born, and ANZ HR did not bat an eyelid. The government paid for the first eighteen weeks, and she took an additional six weeks as long service leave. The last six months were unpaid. Dural then took six months to look after their daughter, neither of them relishing the idea of having a full-time babysitter during this critical period, or putting her into a toddler center. He did some part-time work for the practice, but his focus was on Dan. After a year-and-a-half when she was able to walk and started to talk, they enrolled her in the Alfred Childcare Center. As a consultant at the Monash Alfred Psychiatry Research Center, the admission formalities were largely waived.

Taking Daniela to school was not a big chore. They would ride a tram down High Street to St. Kilda Road and walk a block

AUTUMN LEAVES

to the College. He and Lenora never took a car to work. Apart from the expense to park it somewhere, both preferred to avoid the morning and afternoon traffic crush and retain their sanity. Trams were crowded enough. Weather permitting, Dural sometimes walked to his practice or the Center for extra exercise. Getting the Prahran house had turned out to be one of their better investments.

He also had a rental property in the seaside Nelson Bay, some sixty kilometers north of Newcastle in NSW. A deal his old man talked him into. At first, Dural protested. He did not wish to burden himself with a second mortgage, but his father took pains to explain the raw facts of real estate business to him. By 2012, the Australian economy had largely shrugged off the effects of the Global Financial Crisis and business everywhere was picking up, including the real estate market.

In partnership with two university buddies, his father operated a management accounting firm that specialized in strategic consulting and bailing out troubled enterprises. Farah, Dural's mom, also an accountant, ran the office, kept the books, and paid the bills. Fairway Consulting did very well, allowing his father to build up a nice share portfolio and acquire a newly built residence in Nelson Bay. After a holiday visit, his old man pushing sixty, the Sinclairs fell in love with the charming place and snapped up the property even before the house was finished.

When the economic upturn became noticeable, his father took him by the arm to his lounge when Dural and Lenora visited once, and convinced him to invest in Nelson Bay. It was an undiscovered resort destination bound to expand quickly. When it did become trendy, prices would soar, his dad said. Get in now when such properties were still relatively cheap. Dural would never lose on the deal, and holding property was always a winner. When your old man turns sixty-five in 2017, his father declared, he would sell his share in Fairway Consulting, pull up stumps, and relocate to Nelson Bay.

Dural bought a house near the beach. Growing rental income and negative gearing helped offset the drain on his liquidity. His father looked after the place and made sure the tenants did not cause trouble. So far, Dural never had any problems, only taking older couples who preferred a long-term tenancy. The way the economy was developing, he figured he would be debt free by 2020. In the meantime, his personal shares portfolio with Ord Minnett looked healthier every day.

Dural liked his mother, and had a live and let live relationship with his old man. His father always had a practical approach to life, a byproduct of having to deal with hard businessmen and sometimes creative accountants. He never understood why Dural took his PhD in something woolly like psychology, instead of practicing real medicine as a surgeon. Trying to explain to his dad that being a surgeon wasn't a good profile fit just didn't get through. After seeing how much money there was to be made in psychology, Colton Sinclair reluctantly capitulated. No matter how much parents think they're not molding their children, they never stop doing it.

Colton was not obtuse, holding a degree in accountancy. Dural and his old man were simply on different life tracks, based on divergent experiences and education. Raised in different eras, the generation gap was sometimes difficult to bridge. Farah was more understanding, acting as a mediator when father and son clashed. Probably a byproduct of her Polish heritage. They lived in North Melbourne and Dural visited about once a month. Christmas and Easter lunches were mostly at their place, something of a tradition. However, he and Lenora had flown to Wellington on three occasions to celebrate with her family. Dural was not particularly religious, and neither was Colton, but as a Catholic, his mother was devout. She was not a regular churchgoer, holding the Vatican hierarchy morally corrupt. Dural did not argue with her there.

"Daddy, are we still going to Healesville on Saturday?" Daniela demanded absently, fondling her doll.

AUTUMN LEAVES

“If it is a nice day,” Dural temporized. “No use going if it’s cold or rainy. All the animals will be inside where it’s nice and warm.”

“Aw, Daddy, you’re teasing. Everybody knows that koalas and kangaroos don’t have houses. They all live outside. There are birds and things there too, and they’re all outside. Besides, last night, the weatherman said Saturday would be fine with a top of nineteen.”

Lenora cocked an eye at him, telling him he walked into that one.

He tended to forget sometimes how incredibly smart Dan turned out to be. Only seven and starting second grade, she had more brains than some fourth graders. Put her in an advanced school? He and Len discussed it, deciding to wait until end of the school year. They would ask Wesley College to give Dan tests to see if she could go straight to grade four. Daniela may be intellectually advanced, but Dural did not want to stress her emotional development by thrusting her among older students too quickly, not that he considered nine-year-olds a significant psychological threat.

He rubbed his daughter’s hair. “Healesville it is, then.”

“Wowsy!”

Dural cocked his head and listened. No rain, and the thunder had stopped, the weather front drifting farther east toward the mountains. He gritted his teeth and pulled back the doona.

“You can go back to bed for another half hour. Your mother and I have to get ready for work. We’ll call you at seven-thirty in time for breakfast.”

“Aw, can’t I stay here?”

“Bed,” Lenora said kindly and pointed at the open doorway.

Reconciled to the inevitable, Daniela sighed and looked at her doll. “See what I have to put up with, Madam Bisque? Kids got no rights in this house.”

She stood, padded across the bed and jumped onto the floorboards. With an absent wave, she walked out, the doll hanging at her side.

Dural glanced at his wife. “Does this mean we also have to get up?”

“Fraid so,” she said and stifled a yawn. “You want to use the bathroom first?”

“You get a few more winks while I have a quick shower and shave, and get breakfast started. You ladies seem to have so much more to do in the bathroom.”

She threw a pillow at him.

For once—well, it happened more than once—Daniela had washed, tidied her room by 7:30 and was helping Lenora make French toast. Her job was to keenly watch the frypan and turn over the browned bread when she figured the bottom side was done. Lenora was happy for her daughter to get the eggs ready and soak the toast, but not during the week. Removing runny egg out of a school uniform and getting Dan changed into a new one caused too much unnecessary excitement for everybody. Turning over toast was considered relatively safe. Dural and Lenora did not allow commercial cereals in the house, being mostly sugar and of dubious nutritional value, something both agreed on completely. Fruit chunks and natural yoghurt provided a far better side dish.

Breakfasts at the Sinclair residence were always rowdy affairs. Dural’s job was working the percolator and setting the dishes, and Lenora making sure Daniela’s small purple backpack with a koala motif had everything. After all that, she had to get ready herself to face another day at work. It presented a challenge, as everybody kept glancing at the wall clock, the microwave clock, the oven clock, and wrist watches. Dan considered all this rushing about very amusing. All the while, in the lounge TV, wearing his signature blue jacket, Michael Rowland and the effervescent Virginia Trioli pumped out the latest domestic and international

AUTUMN LEAVES

news on the ABC channel, to which Dural paid only passing attention, unless something of significance happened to be going on.

Lenora had to take a tram downtown to the ANZ tower in Collins Street, and always hurried her breakfast to be off by 8:00. Missing a tram on High Street was no big deal this time of morning, as they ran every few minutes. She gulped down the last of her coffee, snatched her slim leather briefcase, and gave Daniela a quick hug and kiss on the cheek. Some time ago, Dural told Lenora one morning that she would not have to hurry if she only started the breakfast rush ten minutes earlier. She agreed, but she was always pushing the departure time.

“Be good. I’ll see you tonight.”

Daniela squirmed, not really liking being pawed, having to put up with a ritual her parents considered important. She wasn’t a baby, she told her mom.

Dural pushed back his chair and got up. Lenora slid into his arms and he gave her a fleeting kiss on the mouth.

“Knock ’em dead at that meeting.”

“Ready to eat them,” she purred, eyes glowing. “You’ll be okay picking up Dan this afternoon?”

He nodded. “I’ll be fine.”

With a flutter of fingers, she headed for the door.

“Bye, Mommy!” Daniela shouted after her.

“Bye, sugar buns.”

With breakfast done and the dishwasher fed, last minute bathroom chores completed, Dural led his daughter toward High Street. The weather front had moved off and the sky had a deep, clear blue look that left the air fresh and invigorating. Still a little crisp, both warmed quickly as they walked toward the tram stop.

Cars whispered by and he waved to a couple of neighbors. Daniela held his hand firmly and skipped on the sidewalk, an irrepressible package of energy. When they reached the intersection, a tram clanked its bell and pulled out. A five minute wait for

the next one...

“Can we walk to school, Daddy? It’s only two blocks. Can we?”

It was a little farther than just two blocks, but the difference wasn’t worth making a federal case out of. Dural did not mind and nodded. The legs could use the exercise.

“Sure thing, little grub. Let’s do it.”

“Wowsy!”

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.

To learn more about Stefan, visit his:

Website: www.stefanvucak.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/StefanVucakAuthor

Twitter: [@stefanvucak](https://twitter.com/stefanvucak)



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?