

Ethereal - Chapter 1

In the calm before the storm, Cameron Gates looked at his watch to gauge how long he had before the outbreak of pandemonium. It was Friday afternoon and the pending bell would signal a headlong rush by his class of burgeoning star-gazers for the exits, their weekend pursuits already firmly taking control of their thoughts.

Gates was lecturer in Astrophysics at the Queensland University of Technology, and even though he sensed that his students were intrigued by his current subject matter, he knew that even the search for earth-like planets in other solar systems, was no match for the anticipation of what the weekend might hold for a group of young adults.

He saw that he had just a couple of minutes to give the students his instructions before the stampede, so raising his voice he addressed the class.

“Right team, can I have your attention please?”

He paused until the buzz of conversation ceased, and then he continued.

“It’s almost the weekend, but before next week I want you to research a red dwarf star in the constellation Libra. It’s called Gliese 581, and in particular, please focus on the possible discovery of an orbiting planet, Gliese 581g. We will discuss the significance of this discovery during next lecture. Thank you and have a good weekend.”

He saw that most of them managed to scribble down his instructions before the bell rang, facilitating a rush for the lecture room exits. As he watched them scattering in all directions, he thought that by now, after the first few weeks of the new Uni year, he had the core of his group. All of those who were going to fall away had done so by now and those that were left were the stayers.

They had been discussing the likelihood of life on other planets in the Milky Way, and the existence of the particular planet he had asked them to research had been the subject of conjecture, since Astronomers at Keck Observatory in Hawaii had announced its discovery in September of 2010. Subsequent data had thrown doubt on the discovery, but if it was proven correct it was a significant find, as the planet was placed in the “Goldilocks Zone”, orbiting its sun at a distance that was “not too hot, and not too cold” for liquid water to exist. Its orbit was thought to be similar to the distance of earth’s orbit around our sun. Hence the possibility that liquid water may be present on the planet and may sustain the building blocks of life, as it had on Earth millions of years ago, was a distinct possibility.

Not that anyone would be able to visit it any time soon. It was more than 20 light years from Earth and with current technology it would take approximately 300,000 years to travel there. But it was a subject that grabbed the imagination, and a good exercise to leave the class with, over the long weekend.

Cameron packed his books into his briefcase, and followed the students from the lecture room. He glanced at his watch again as he walked down the hallway toward the exit doors at the front of the building, and noted that he had about an hour to get to Nudgee College, which was on the north side of the city. He had arranged to pick up his son Zane, and take him to the sports store to buy new football boots for the start of the Rugby season that weekend. Zane was prepared to catch the bus down to the shopping centre and get them himself, but Cameron liked to be there on “special occasions”, such as the purchase of new footy boots for his son. They lived on the north side, in the suburb of Aspley and he had arranged to pick up his wife Sally, from her work at a law firm in the city on his way through. It would save her a train trip home that afternoon. He phoned her as he reached his car to let her know he was on his way, and that he would pick her up in front of her building in Eagle Street in about 10 minutes.

As they drove out of the city along Sandgate road to the college, they discussed their plans for the weekend.

“Will you be able to watch Zane play tomorrow Cam, or will you be stuck at one of the food stalls?”

Sally knew that he was tireless in his support for the school, and that as a consequence, he invariably got beverage or food stall duties at most major events.

“Not on your life,” Cameron replied, “I put my hand up to cook the steaks after the game so I’d be free for the main event, it’s not every day our son has his inaugural game in the first 15.”

Their son, Zane, had played rugby league as a youngster at primary school, but when he attended secondary school at the prestigious Nudgee College, the shift to rugby union was inevitable. Nudgee was seen as one of the major nurseries for future Rugby Stars, at both State and National levels.

“It is quite special, isn’t it?”

Sally said this as she reached across the console and placed her hand on Cameron’s thigh, however they both knew that she wasn’t entirely thrilled at the prospect of her only child mixing it with the best young players in the GPS competition.

“I hope he’ll be alright, he seems a bit young for the firsts; after all, he is only 15.”

Cameron continued to watch the road as he reassured her.

“He’ll be fine Sal, he’s a big boy for his age and as they say, *if you’re good enough, you’re old enough*, and our boy is certainly good enough. I reckon he could have played up there last year, toward the end of the season, he was really hitting his straps.”

Cameron said this with obvious pride; he had seen every game his son had played in the previous year, and, as a rugby player of some note in his youth, was suitably qualified to gauge his son’s abilities. Although Zane was considered young to play firsts, he was by no means the only one to do so at 15 years of age. He glanced across at his wife and added. “There will always be injury risks Sal, but believe me, Zane is big enough and smart enough to handle the firsts.”

As they arrived at the college, they spotted Zane near the main steps with his hand in the air. They pulled up in front and he opened the rear car door, saying his goodbyes to his friends on the steps as he did so.

“Here he is, hard running, crash tackling Zany- Boy Gates.”

Cameron ribbed his son, and then made a noise with his mouth like a crowd cheering.

Zane grinned as he threw his backpack into the back seat, and tumbled in after it. He leant through the bucket seats of the Calais and kissed his mother.

“Hi mum, who’s your boof-headed mate?”

He gave his father a playful punch to the shoulder, chiding him as he did so.

“I could have done this by myself you know Dad, it’s not the hardest thing to do, buying a pair of boots.”

“What? And deprive your old man of one of the joys in life? Come on mate.”

Cameron chuckled as he wheeled the car around and drove down to the gates of the school on Sandgate road, pulling up to the lights, planning to take Murphy to Chermside shopping centre.

He got a green arrow at the Zillmere road lights and proceeded across. They were still happily discussing the looming events of the weekend and therefore not prepared for what happened next.

Suddenly, as they reached the centre of the road, a concrete truck came hurtling down the side of a bus which was stationary at the lights, and careered through the red light at eighty kilometres per hour, smashing into their car as they were almost across the intersection.

There was the screaming and shuddering of the truck breaks, and the thump of the impact, followed by the groaning and scraping of tortured metal as the concrete truck shoved the car along the road, and then it was all over. The car lay on its roof in a crumpled mess on the side of the road, wedged between the truck and a shattered electricity pole, steam and dust rising around the wreckage.

Cameron was standing beside the car with Sally and Zane. He looked both of them up and down and could see no damage, it was as if nothing had happened, he hugged them both with relief, then stepped back to look at them again. They both looked at him silently with sadness in their eyes and then Sally said softly.

“We have to go now my darling, I know you will miss us, but you are strong and we will see you again.”

Cameron looked at her and then at Zane, then back to Sally he couldn't understand what she was saying. She smiled sadly at him again and pointed to the car.

He looked around at the car for the first time since the truck had ploughed into them; there were people all around it; an ambulance had arrived out of nowhere, and he could hear sirens as fire utilities and police rushed to the scene. He looked to where the medical people were working, and saw that two bodies were under sheets on the footpath, and he could see that they were working on a third nearby. He suddenly understood; the person they were working on was him and the others were his family.

They were dead and they were leaving him. He spun around, looking to where they had been, he would go with them, but they were gone. He tried to follow, but follow where? He searched around frantically but he couldn't find them. He wanted to tell the medics to stop working on him, so that he could go as well, but suddenly as he turned, he was pulled back, as one of medics was shouting.

“I've got a pulse, we have him back Come on Mister Gates, stick with me, everything will be alright.”

Cameron was suddenly lying on the ground, in tremendous pain. He had some sort of mask on his face and he tried to tear it away, but willing hands restrained him, and he felt a needle jab his leg. All he wanted to do was to follow his family. Why couldn't he go with them? He struggled against the unconsciousness rushing toward him, but to no avail; the last thing he heard was the beep.... beep beep of the heart monitor, and then there was darkness.