

STEFAN

MELBOURNE, NEW YEAR'S DAY 1997, several minutes after midnight.

Stefan Novak was on the balcony of his third storey unit leaning against the rail in partial shadow, alone and still. He was peering up at rockets bursting into blazing spheres of red, green and blue beneath a cloud-streaked sky, before waning in a glitter of dust and smoke. More soared above the city's skyline, their detonations thumping among car horns blaring on Lygon Street beyond the courtyard below. Dazzling showers of sparks lit up his face, striking cheekbones and the shadow of a beard giving him a sombre, hawkish look.

It's time, he thought. Time for a new beginning. Time to get my act together. Time to do something out of left field, to swim for it across the current to avoid going under.

Then the telephone shrilled over the clang of pots and pans and voices yahooing on the balconies below. Desperate for a call from Tania, he scrambled through the sliding door.

'Steve Novak?' The caller was barely audible over the baying of the Dobermann next door, hysterical at the ruckus.

'Yes. This is Stefan.'

'Stefan. You're still up. Good. I haven't dragged you outta bed.'

'No, I'm watching the fireworks.'

'Good onya. Look, I know the timing's lousy and I won't keep you, but I've got a favour to ask. Something for you to mull over before you give me the answer I want.'

Stefan hesitated, frowning. 'What answer?'

He was disappointed and bewildered by an unexpected caller whose voice, though vaguely familiar, he failed to recognise.

'A simple yes will do me. That's all I'm after, bro. No argument.' And then, as the dog quietened, 'That noisy fella yours?'

No argument from you perhaps, and bro? Why bro?

On guard, he replied, 'No, the dog belongs next door.'

What's the question? A simple yes sounds complicated to me.'

Who am I dealing with? Some crank who's hacked my name and number? About to slam down the receiver, he thought better of it and, as though sensing Stefan was about to ask who on earth he was and what he wanted at that time of night, the caller introduced himself.

'This is Lennard Currie, but you can call me Ace.'

Stefan was taken aback. While they'd never met, he knew Lennard's name and reputation. He had admired his work for years and now he recognised his voice—a resonant baritone with a characteristic outback intonation he'd heard for the first time last September when Lennard took part in the SBS television debate on Truth and Reconciliation. He'd spoken with passionate conviction that night, his argument laced with irony, his powerful frame standing out among the panellists. Some friends had considered his point of view convincing, but Stefan was sceptical of his line of reasoning that raised more questions than it answered.

There were voices in the background—laughter and the faint sound of a guitar with someone singing to it. Archie Roach? Surely not!

Where was he calling from? What was he after? If he was chasing a donation he was pushing his luck.

'I'm not expecting a snap decision,' Lennard continued. 'You've got three days to chew it over.'

'That's generous of you. So I do have a say.'

'Of course you do.'

'Glad we got that sorted. What am I agreeing to, then?'

'Just a minute, hold your horses.'

Lennard shouted and silence fell, broken by the muted song and the guitar. 'It's not so much a favour as a proposition; an offer too good to knock back. Hear me out. You'll get my drift.'

'Ask away.'

He heard Lennard speak to someone across the room and there was a burst of laughter. He stiffened. *Was the joke on me?*

Lennard Currie! He'd been at the cutting edge of Australian art since the early 1970s—Aboriginal Australian art. He was one of its leading lights; a maestro whose glass sculptures were acknowledged worldwide, fetching five and six-figure prices. Several of his pieces were on show in London's Victoria and Albert and New York's Metropolitan and Corning Glass Museums, and the Acquisitions Committee for the Quai Branly Museum of indigenous art proposed for Paris had recently approached him to prepare an installation as part of its landscaping.

A month ago, Stefan had visited his latest exhibition. He'd walked through the colonnades of the National Gallery into a breathtaking blaze of colour flashing through a forest of slender head-high glass sculptures radiating light. It seemed a liquid flame lit by the fiery desert sun glowed in the recesses of Lennard's imagination and by some magical sleight of hand and eye he'd brought the quartz outcrops and scorched red dunes and sweeping skies of the western desert indoors with him.

One sculpture, in particular, had caught Stefan's eye—the centrepiece, an exquisite, statuette of dichroic glass lit alternately from within and without, each flash lasting thirty seconds. It glowed in a magenta wash when light was transmitted from within, and reflected sensuous tones of aquamarine and turquoise when lit from without. The raw beauty of its colours and the patterns that materialised like fiery hieroglyphs through its core in waves of light on light enthralled him. How much colloidal silver and gold had Lennard used in the glass batch to create the effect? Or had he come up with an experimental chemical composition to achieve it?

Back on the street that afternoon, envy had speared through him as he'd compared the failure of his crystal ware business with

Lennard's success. He'd wondered bitterly how much of that success was attributable to Lennard's Aboriginality, singling him out for the approval and support of the art fraternity... then he acknowledged his thoughts were mean-spirited and regretted his prejudice. The sculptures were one of a kind; technical mastery and creative flair evident in their arresting brilliance. Lennard's streak of genius in combining glass and light the way he did deserved accolades.

About to tear up the exhibition catalogue, he'd changed his mind and folded it into his back pocket.

Now he looked down at the unopened letters scattered beside the telephone and rummaged through them to find it. On its cover, vermillion and scarlet patterns swirled through a glass figurine beneath the words *Earth and Fire*. On the back was a photograph of Lennard, masked and pouring a braid of red-hot light from a ladle brimming with molten glass. He had signed his Malgana name across it—*Malajarri*. Stefan read the translation and his smile was sardonic—*Thunder*.

'So what are you after?' He broke the silence.

'How old are you? In your late thirties, yes?'

'Give or take.' Stefan was mystified. 'I'm one year shy of the big four-o.' Then he added, with a touch of sarcasm, 'I can't bloody wait.'

'And I'm fifty-five as of yesterday. Fifty-five to the day if you count back twenty minutes. We're still celebrating here.'

He gave a caustic laugh. 'Congratulations! You're closing in on sixty and you're celebrating when you should be cursing?'

'Not when you're having fun, by crikey.'

'Having fun?'

'Sure am, bro. I'm packing it in before I pack it in. It's the only way to go.' And then, businesslike, 'Thirty-nine; what's that make the two of us? A hundred?'

'Close enough. Ninety-four.'

‘Then we’ve got all the experience we need, all the know-how in the world.’

‘What for?’

Stefan was unprepared for his reply.

‘You and me, we’re gonna cast a monument—a replica of Jandamarra’s Rock.’

‘Jandamarra’s Rock?’

‘The one in Windjana Gorge. You ever seen it?’

‘No.’

‘Then I’ll take you there, to the Kimberley. You haven’t lived until you’ve been. Like I say, we’re gonna sculpt it in solid glass. It’ll be the biggest thing since Palomar.’

‘Big as Palomar?’

‘Bigger. Half as big again.’

A brief silence was broken by Stefan’s snort. ‘Pull the other one, why don’t you?’

‘I’ve never been more dinkum in my life.’

Now he’s really taking the mick, Stefan thought. He frowned, picturing Hale’s gigantic Pyrex telescope disc, some twenty tons in weight, six metres across and two years in the cooling, it had taken eleven painstaking years to grind and polish into a flawless parabolic mirror reflecting the farthest reachable stars. He listened as Lennard suggested they put their combined experience in the technical intricacies of working with molten glass to good use. Then he was astonished to hear him mention the problems they might face firing a complicated mix including silicates of garnet sand.

‘Did you say *garnet* sand?’

‘You heard me right. Garnet *buthurru*. It’s there by the truckload in the Hutt lagoon dunes, acres of it, in my Nhanda brothers’ country, waiting for us to dig it up.’

He’d never worked with garnet silicates before, Lennard admitted, but he had a feeling in his bones that Stefan would

revel in manipulating the extreme temperatures required to release the spectacular colours lying dormant in the garnet's carmine pink.

Stefan's thoughts raced. What a challenge! Garnet, with its unpredictable thermodynamic properties and precarious melting point! The chemical balance in the mixes, the subtle interaction with other metals for colour contrast, the complex process of bringing down the temperatures during the annealing, and always those unforeseen intractable problems to resolve with spotting or with air bubbles contaminating the final product.

He looked sceptically at Lennard's picture on the catalogue and slowly shook his head. Given garnet's hardness—it was seven on the Mohs' scale—he doubted the feasibility of using it in glass. It was useful in jewellery design or as a sandblasting abrasive or polishing agent, but surely nothing more.

Intrigued, he did not express his reservations. 'So fill me in.'

'We'll be playing with *garla*, bro, playing with fire, but it'll be a piece of piss for the hundred-year-old fella that's you and me rolled into one.' Lennard gave a throaty laugh. 'I can see us now, up in lights—the Freo Glassworks alchemists! I got a nose for these things. Trust me.'

He mentioned the staggering tonnage they'd need and pointed out how long the project might take—four years by his reckoning.

'I'm aiming to knock it over by December 2000.'

'To coincide with the millennium?'

'Partly.'

Four years! And garnet in the batch! Stefan found no words.

'Cat got your tongue, bro? What? Too big an ask? You chucked in the towel already? That's not what I hear around the traps. Word is you're still in the saddle, digging in your spurs.'

Digging in my spurs? Flogging a dead horse more like it, Stefan thought, baulking at Lennard's vision, at the

overwhelming ambition of a glass pour of that magnitude requiring garnet sand by the truckload. *And a mould of that dimension; how does he propose building that? He's off the planet or having me on.*

'You still there, bro? *Nyinda jindithayinu?* You giving me the silent treatment? I haven't bored you shitless so you've done a runner, have I?'

'I'm still here. I'm gobsmacked is all, trying to get my head around it.'

Lennard said he was flying back to Perth that morning and asked Stefan to meet him at Tullamarine airport. He could think of no more appropriate a metaphor than the first day of a new year to begin exploring an idea as original as the one he had in mind. They could yarn about it while they sobered up over a coffee or two.

'Make sure you show, brudda,' he said when Stefan hesitantly agreed. 'You'll be doing us both a favour, so don't pike out and don't sleep in.'

He rang off, but Stefan failed to hear the disconnection. Unsure whether Lennard had more to say, he listened to the silence before asking, 'Are you still there?' Confused, he repeated the question and when there was still no response he laughed outright. *The story of my life! Listening for an enlightening reply from someone who isn't there.*

Now he was caught between Jandamarra's Rock and a mountain of garnet sand on one hand and his bankrupt business and recent split with Tania on the other. If he did take up Lennard's invitation things could hardly get worse but with his recent run of bad luck, why not?

Back on the balcony, he stretched across the railing to look up beyond the roof-line. The firework display was over. A classy celebration to commemorate the failure of his business and his finances going down the drain, he thought drily.

Scattered stars flickered through skeins of smoke drifting high across Melbourne's glow. For a moment he visualised their reflections in the polished mirror of the Mt Palomar telescope, waves of light transmitted into the eye of an observer, their illusory sparks transmuted by the trickster mind into particular images of aeons past.

Then, with a wry smile, he shook his head. *Lennard Currie, of all people! Who'd have guessed? It's perfect timing for such an unexpected offer though, now I'm skint and a month in arrears with the rent.*

So where should he go from there? He'd acted on impulse once before when he'd thrown the shackles off four years ago and pulled the pin on Pilkington Glass. What was there to stop him now?

For one lurching moment he was back in the factory, hanging his white coat for the last time on the hook behind the R&D laboratory door. They'd given him a boisterous roasting at his farewell, his manager wishing him well, toasting Australia's answer to Swarovski and Pandora, before predicting he'd last six months—six months at best—before he'd come crawling back to plead for his job. He'd promised to keep the revolving door open for him until then.

Stefan had thanked him for the gesture and then, 'Come back and work a conventional nine to five with the likes of you blokes? No chance! If it comes to that, I'll settle for a plot on the wrong side of the grass.'

'Careful what you wish for,' his manager had warned.

He'd walked out past white-hot furnaces roaring on the factory floor, flat ribbons of glass streaming across acrid baths of molten tin within the floats. A summer thunderstorm had loomed over the Dandenongs as he'd crossed the car park and strode down the avenue of purple jacarandas, his footsteps crushing fallen flowers along the road less travelled.

Before he'd reached his Ducati, heavy drops of rain had struck his shoulders in twos and threes. They had been warm and welcome and he lifted his face to them.

Then he recalled Lennard's warning. What was that word he used? *Garla*. It had been a baptism of rain that time, next time it would be fire!

By the time he'd accelerated onto Greens Road it had been lashing down, soaking him to the skin. He had been laughing fit to burst as he'd tasted the intoxicating freedom of following his dream, racing through this opening to the unexpected, never looking back and never mind the risks! He'd roared down the bitumen on a high, his severance pay in his wallet and a return flight to the Czech Republic to visit the Moser glassworks in his father's home town, booked for the following week. Each split-second moment had presented an exhilarating opening in the weave of his future, promising endless possibilities.

Had he been reckless? In hindsight maybe, but he'd known the risks. Did he regret the decision? In part, yes, but he'd given it his best shot. And he was young enough to start afresh. Besides, he'd met Tania as a consequence. That justified every move he'd made, even though she'd cut and run for whatever reason eight days ago. They were the best of years... and the most testing.

He sat at the balcony table and reached for the four-sided ivory *dreidel*, the spinning top dye lying next to a half-empty bottle of red wine. He spun it with a snap of thumb and forefinger and watched it skitter across the tabletop until it slowed and keeled over to show the winning Hebrew letter g—*gimel*, the symbol indicating winner takes all. *Go for it*, his thoughts whispered. *Buy some time. I can't play for time when time runs out. So what if it's another dead end? Learn from it. Enjoy the adrenalin rush.*

There was enough fuel in the tank to get him to the airport and back, he calculated. He might come away from the meeting with an opportunity to escape the trap into which the financial downturn and bad luck had led him.

He imagined accelerating fast enough to reach escape velocity and break free of his disasters; the trunks of trees lining the Tullamarine Freeway a hypnotic blur.

THE AIRPORT CAFÉ was packed. Stefan saw Lennard through the plate glass door, seated at a table to the left. He was the picture of self-possessed relaxation. His legs were outstretched beneath the table, crossed at the ankles. He was absorbed in a book lying open on the tabletop. He appeared to be making notes, a silver pen in his left hand poised over its pages.

Lennard looked up and caught his eye. He closed the book, inserted the pen as a bookmark and stood. He was taller and broader than Stefan had imagined, with the first signs of middle-aged spread evident under a sky-blue shirt. The sleeves were rolled up, a narrow armband of raised scars visible in a diagonal pattern above his left elbow. His skin was light brown, sinews of sheathed muscle gliding beneath it as he extended his right hand, the palm was square and work-hardened, the calloused fingers powerful.

‘Stefan Novak, I presume!’ He flashed a radiant smile, all teeth.

‘That’s me.’

‘G’day. I’m Ace.’

He waved Stefan to a chair and sat opposite, his elbows on the table, his chin balanced on the bridge formed by interlaced fingers. His face was broad and imperious, and although his eyes were shaded behind blue-tinted sunglasses, Stefan saw them dark and expressive. The wiry strands of his black beard were streaked with silver and his hair was unruly.

He stretched and leaned back in his chair. 'You have any trouble picking me out?'

'You're hard to miss.'

'I'm the only Yamaji here?'

'The biggest, anyway.'

'And getting bigger, so I'm told.' The brass eagle on the Harley buckle of his belt of polished snakeskin glinted as he patted his stomach. 'If my *wilygu warabadi* is anything to go by.'

'The TV doesn't do you justice.'

'It does if you've still got black and white.' He smiled. 'You know what they say—the bigger they are, the harder they are to fell.'

'That I can believe.'

Around his neck, Stefan saw a leather thong and, hanging from it, an oval of worn abalone shell patterned in a lucent swirl of sea-blues and greens. When he looked closer, he saw the outline of a bird carved in cameo in the nacre. It appeared to be an albatross, its wings spread in cruciform flight.

'It's good to meet you at last, brudda,' Lennard said. 'It's time we crossed paths. We've got things of importance to see to.'

At last? Am I the celebrity here, Stefan wondered, *the one with familiar features? Hardly!*

'Secret men's business?' he asked.

'You could say that, long as nobody's listening and you're not about to grass.' Lennard glanced at his watch. 'I'm catching the early flight. That gives us forty minutes, long enough to give you the heads up.' He stood to buy the coffees. 'You take yours white?'

'White and one.'

'I'm with Henry Ford—any colour, long as it's black.'

When he returned with the tray, he took a deep appreciative breath. 'Nothing beats that smell, that's for sure.'

Stefan was in unfamiliar territory, unused to the company

of a national celebrity, unnerved at the prospect of conversing for the first time with a charismatic icon of Australia's Aboriginal community. Ill at ease, he searched for something to say. Then he noticed the photograph of a high-winged, triple-engine monoplane skimming a line of dunes under a lowering sky imprinted on the side of his coffee cup. He held it up and examined it. Was it Kingsford-Smith in the *Southern Cross*? Or the *Kookaburra*, sent to search for the *Southern Cross* when it disappeared in the Kimberley in the late 1920s?

He tapped the picture. 'That's got to be the *Kookaburra*.'
'The what?'

Stefan turned the cup. 'The *Kookaburra*. The poor blokes on board crash-landed in the Tanami when they were searching for Kingsford-Smith. They died of thirst. They drank their own urine in the end, apparently, with a dash of ethyl alcohol and distilled water from the compass, would you believe, topped up with petrol mixed with oil.' He paused. 'Some cocktail that must have been.'

Lennard lifted his cup and studied the design. 'Sounds a likely thirst quencher, bro.' He took two spoons of sugar and stirred. 'Rather them than us. Let's hope this brew doesn't have the same ingredients, by crikey. At least we're not stuck way out there in the Tanami, but. It's hard *manangkarra* spinifex country, that Warlpiri land.'

'There was probably a waterhole within cooee.'

'Every chance.'

Lennard turned in his chair and, from an inside pocket of the worn leather jacket slung across its back, he withdrew a faded Kodak envelope. 'Never mind the *Kookaburra*,' he said. 'Let's kick-start this conversation and get down to business.'

He shook the envelope and spilled several photographs into his palm. He shuffled them, riffled them against the table like a card shark, squared them up and spread them face down across

the table as though dealing a hand in blackjack. He waved a hand across them, inviting him to pick a card, any card.

Stefan flipped the first photograph to his left. A woman looked up at him. Waves of dark copper hair framed her fine-boned face. Her skin was pale and lightly freckled. He leaned closer, saw the hint of a smile. Beneath dark brows, her eyes were green and candid. He saw humour in them and, it seemed, a questioning; a fierce intelligence with a touch of... what? Mockery? *Who was she teasing?* He cast a quick glance at Lennard, who was observing his reaction with a half-smile. He turned back to examine the backdrop—a wall of weathered rock, white and marbled and immense, encircled by a dark reflective pool on which it seemed to float.

‘Whoever she is, she’s drop-dead gorgeous, Ace. And bloody hell! If that’s Jandamarra’s Rock you’ll be working your ring off.’

‘No doubts there, on both counts. That’s my Rosie—Rosalie O’Sullivan. And that’s Jandamarra’s Rock. Top choice first up. The omens are good. Now check out the rest.’

Each photograph showed the rock from a different perspective as if the photographer had selected each new vantage point to show a different surface, an unexpected blend of sunburned colour, an unusual pattern of weathered angles and shadows. He noticed the photographer’s footprints in the sand encircling the rock, as though he or she had walked around it many times deliberating over the composition or the light.

The rock stood solitary in the centre of the gorge, solid and angular and timeless. The sandbank leading to it was edged with an overhang of paperbarks. The jade-green water surrounding it mirrored the background of soaring cliffs, their cave-pocked limestone walls so still it seemed you could walk across the water on their rust and sepia reflections. In one shot, Stefan noticed a narrow-snouted

crocodile basking on the sand as if carved to scale in polished rosewood.

He looked across at Lennard and held up the photograph. 'Is that what I think it is?'

'Yep, it's a freshwater croc. There's a few in the river. They won't bother you, long as you don't get too friendly.' He smiled, showed his teeth. 'Not like a saltie.'

In the last photograph, he saw Rosalie for the second time. The rock jutted sun-bleached from the river and she was seated on an upper ledge, smiling down at the camera, her beauty bathed in sunlight. Her hair flowed across her shoulders. Her arms were wrapped around her knees, her feet bare. Below were multiple tide-lines scoured by successive flooding of the river, which was shallow in the photograph, as though the wet season was recently over, or yet to begin.

Stefan peered at the rock. He visualised a two-storey monument, a pyramidal iceberg in glass and splintered sunlight.

Sculpt that? In solid glass? He looked up, shaking his head. 'No... bloody... way.'

'Yes way!' Lennard cut him short, lifting his coffee cup in both hands as if warming them. 'No way, no way. It's a memorial we'll be casting, remember? A memorial to my people.' He paused. 'A cenotaph.'

'A cenotaph!' Stefan exclaimed, and his heart sank.

'That's right! A cenotaph to commemorate our *wiyabandinugu murla*, our known and unknown heroes.' After a tense silence he asked forcefully, 'Are you aware how many we're talking about here?'

'How many died?'

'Were massacred.'

'Since when?'

‘Since the invasion.’

‘You mean since settlement.’

‘I mean since the invasion,’ Lennard fired back. ‘*Nothing* was settled.’

‘Oh, okay. If you say so. I’m not too sure, but I think I read somewhere it may have been around twenty thousand.’

‘If not more.’ Lennard leaned forward, adding tersely, ‘Perhaps twice that. But we’re not talking statistics here, bro, we’re talking flesh and blood. We’re talking *human beings*, by crikey. They lived. They died. And we’re bringing them back to the place they belong.’ He stared at Stefan. ‘In this country’s consciousness.’

Lennard’s sudden assertiveness jolted Stefan. Riven by confusion, he looked away. How could he collaborate in commemorating Lennard’s ancestors when he knew so little of their history and there were so many questions hanging over what he did know? And a *cenotaph*? A war memorial for massacred Aborigines? Was Australia prepared for that?

His face darkened as the disagreement that had erupted when he’d met Tania’s brothers in Cairns for the first time two years ago flashed across his mind. ‘So you’re not sure where you stand or what to believe?’ Richie, the older of the two, had growled sarcastically that dreadful afternoon, shaking an accusing finger as he paced the worn carpet in the lounge, his thickset frame bristling, his ponytail of dreadlocks flying. ‘Is that why you’re living in *our country* rent-free like you own the fuckin’ place and never signed a lease?’

Stefan had reared back in his chair as though fending off a physical attack, looking towards the window to conceal how mortified he felt, gathering himself. Rain had been bucketing down the glass, wind gusts thrashing at the spears of sugarcane across the road, their feathered seed heads ducking and weaving under the assault. In the uncertain light, he saw a patch of blue to seaward where the sun streamed through a

break in the clouds and he thought, *If the sun can weather the storm, then so can I.*

He felt the same determination course through him now. Steeling himself, he looked directly at Lennard. 'Alright. Go on.'

Alert to Stefan's discomfort, Lennard relented. 'I'm not inviting you on a guilt trip, bro. Guilt gets you nowhere, especially if it's associated with events you're not personally accountable for. Justice, now that's a different story. Justice is at the heart of the matter, but we can save that discussion for another time. Let's say right now I'm looking for a cluey off-sider with his head screwed on to help me build the thing and let it go at that.' He looked shrewdly at Stefan for several moments before adding, 'But I want an off-sider who's onside.'

Stefan's thoughts raced. Guilt and justice? An off-sider who was onside and committed to his vision and all it implied? In a less charged political context at a more convenient time, perhaps yes. But right now? With his business in disarray and his finances on the line? And Tanya gone?

A long silence followed, during which Lennard coolly observed him. When he spoke at last, he left Stefan mystified. 'Let's split the difference and agree for now that twenty thousand were massacred. Twenty thousand—and *one*.'

He checked his watch and then glanced at the flight announcements. 'Time's almost up. Let's put this to bed, one way or the other.' He picked up the nearest photo and circled the rock with a thick forefinger. 'So how do you reckon we get this done?'

Relieved, Stefan took the photograph. He studied the rock's sweeping proportions. After several moments, 'It's a bloody big ask,' he said. 'Palomar wasn't solid glass. It was honeycombed, except for the lens surface. And they ladled the melt into the mould. They had the manpower and the time to achieve it, not to mention limitless resources.'

‘If we need extra hands, I know people we can call on. All good blokes.’

‘With glass experience?’

‘Of course, what else? Even a couple of gaffers with lungs like Pavarotti. Mate, we’ll have the full orchestra, right down to the little fella tapping on the triangle.’

Stefan scrutinised the photograph. ‘My guess is you’d have to fire something that big in the mould itself.’

‘We,’ Lennard interrupted him.

‘We?’

‘You said you. Try we.’

‘All right. *We*.’

‘And *will*. Not would.’

Stefan responded with careful emphasis, ‘*We will* need a bespoke kiln with the proportions to cope. It’s hard to imagine. There isn’t one that size in the southern hemisphere. We’ll have to knock one up ourselves.’

‘That’s more like it.’

‘Not only that, the volume of batch to fill the mould will be humongous and we’ll have trouble with the timing of the melt, let alone the cooling. With solid glass for something that size you’re looking at eight years’ annealing at a guess, or maybe nine.’ He studied the photograph head down. ‘You mentioned a four-year schedule. If that’s the case, you’ve got to think a *hollow* structure, or a smaller one. Gut instinct tells me even then you’ll be pushing shit uphill.’

‘I understand the problems, bro,’ Lennard broke in. ‘Why else have I asked you along for the ride?’

Stefan did not look up. He scratched his temple. ‘And garnet! Why garnet? Neither of us has experimented with it. If we miscalculate the proportion in the mix, I can imagine a furnace filled with black molasses turning into bitumen.’ He gave a dry chuckle. ‘Good for surfacing the Gunbarrel Highway and doing

the outback tourists a favour. You'd be better off importing a chunk of obsidian from Yellowstone and carving that.'

Lennard listened, his head tilted like a bird of prey, before sweeping away Stefan's objections with an open palm as he reached for the photograph. 'Never say die, bro. It's not in my vocabulary. You think the project's bigger than Uluru? It is! It's bigger than *Ben Hur*. Did you hear me say it was gonna be a walk in the park? No! You're forgetting we're Aussies and we'll improvise. We've got the knack and that's where you come in, so don't get your budgie smugglers in a twist this early on the technicalities.'

Then he sat back and said it was good to see Stefan already setting his mind to it. 'Give the idea a chance to sink in. It'll be worth it.' He lifted his cup, took a swallow. 'One thing I know for sure and certain, bro—this is an opportunity too challenging for you to knock back.'

Stefan inclined his head. There indeed, Lennard had his number. He thrived on the technical intricacies of working with molten glass. He revelled in manipulating the fierce and unrelenting power of the flame, in drawing living colour from opaque silicates and nursing temperatures down through the annealing process before opening up the mould to reveal, for that first ecstatic instant, glassy landscapes of the infinite reflected in grains of sand. He gambled his technique and creative intuition against the odds on generating colours and tones, shapes and movement in the viscous liquid, with white-hot flame his only ally and the cruellest of arbitrators, unrelenting, taking no prisoners.

Lennard placed the photograph face-up on the table and veered in an unexpected direction. 'Tell me something, bro. It's none of my business, but aren't you on the bones of your *manda* right now? Aren't you in deep shit with your landlord?'

Stefan gasped. 'Who told you that?'

‘I’ve got all the good oil. I know you’re going down the tubes and you’re about to hit rock bottom if you haven’t already.’

Stefan braced himself. ‘So I’ve fucked up big time.’

Lennard gave him a knowing grin. ‘They also tell me you’re rootless at the moment, except for our dancing girl, Tania Tibora.’

‘You know Tania?’

‘Small world. I know her brothers, Rex and Richie.’

Stefan froze. *So he knows about the bust-up, but he doesn’t yet know about Tania.* ‘You’re behind the times. Tania’s gone. She’s back in Cairns. In Caravonica with the family, last I heard. Who knows? She may be heading overseas.’

‘Sorry to hear that.’ Lennard snapped his fingers. ‘So you need cheering up and I’ve got the remedy.’ He reached for the book he’d been reading—*Six Australian Battlefields*, Stefan noticed, by Al Grassby and Marji Hill, a book he’d never heard of. Lennard withdrew a Qantas ticket from between its pages. ‘Maybe this’ll do the trick. I’m a blackfella boy scout. I come prepared.’

Stefan read the destination and flight time—Perth, fourth of January, one way, requiring confirmation. He placed it back on the table. ‘You may have come prepared, Ace, but we’ve only just met and this is very generous.’

‘Not to mention presumptuous!’ Lennard laughed aloud. ‘Didn’t think you’d take this long making up your mind. Crikey, bro, where I come from you make up your mind or you miss out. Being decisive is the name of the game, and I’m game if you are.’ He gestured at the ticket. ‘Use it anyway. Come over for a break. Check things out. Give it a burl and you never know, one of our good-looking Freo chicks might do the trick and keep you there. Forget Tania. Sounds to me she’s bitten the hand that fed her. We’ll find you someone with more chilli in her than a Fisherman’s Friend, a bushfire blonde hot to trot to put the sting back in your tail.’

'I wish it was that simple.'

A speculative look passed between them and Lennard slowly nodded. 'Sometimes a change of scenery works wonders, bro. It'll take your mind off her, give you time to work out strategies for winning her back if that's what you want.'

Stefan looked down at the ticket. *If I accept his invitation, am I clutching at straws? Am I allowing my circumstances to force me into a decision I might regret? Do I have any alternative?*

He glanced up. 'What was that word you used last night? Alchemy? You're right. The technical challenges are undeniable. We'll be balancing on the razor's edge.'

'Nice analogy.' Lennard smiled. 'One slip and we're both talking with squeaky voices.'

Stefan felt a wave of irritation. *I'm not usually this backward in coming forward. Get over it! This offer is exactly what I need right now.* He reached for the ticket, folded it and slid it into his shirt pocket, brushing aside his reservations. 'Ah, what the hell, luck's a fortune and Freo's as far from Cairns as I can get.'

'Not to mention the landlord.'

'Yeah, her too.'

He looked at Lennard in silence, his mind churning. The unpredicted crossing of their paths, the disconcerting power of Lennard's presence, the certainty of his vision and his passion... tempered by what? His humour? There was all of that, but he also sensed uneasily the strangeness of things unrevealed, the uncanny mystery of things unknown.

'Okay, you can count me in,' he said at last. 'It's a yes. I'll give it a go.'

'*Gu'ugu! Nyinda wangganyina!* Now you're talking!' Lennard reached across the table to shake Stefan's hand in both of his, grinning broadly. 'You little ripper! So one door closes and another opens. Welcome to your next four years.' He scooped up the photographs and stacked them in front

of Stefan. 'Study these and bring them with you.'

'You look like you've struck it rich.'

'Still panning bro, still panning, but I reckon I saw a flash of colour and I'm stoked.'

Stefan stifled a laugh. 'You sure it's not fool's gold, Ace?'

'I'll back my judgement.'

'Why me in particular?'

'Simple. You've got a handle on the technology I need for a project this challenging.' He tapped his forehead. '*Gambarra nyinda*—they reckon you're the real deal. Don't think I'm blowing smoke up your *manda*, but I've heard you've forgotten more technical tricks of the trade than I'll ever know. It's time we tapped in. And they tell me your *wurduru*—your heart—is in the right place for a *wajbala*. I've never known them to be wrong.'

'Them again! That's quite a network you've got out there.'

'That's the *gurdumutha* for you—the brothers.'

'You can't mean Tania's mob. I'd find that hard to believe.'

'Them too. The point is I can't do this on my own. It's too big and it's too important. It's gonna take the two of us.'

'To stuff it up?'

'To get it right. With my Yamaji vision and your *wajbala* technology we're on a winner.'

Stefan gave an explosive snort. 'Look where my whitefella technology's got *me*.'

'Deep in dog shit? Forget all that. When you've taken a fall, you pick yourself up and you don't step in the same *duthugura gunda* twice. It's on the nose if it sticks.'

Stefan raised both hands palms up and shrugged. 'I'm not exactly flush at the moment, as you know. I'll have to put the acid on you for a grubstake.'

Lennard pushed back his chair and stood. He looked briefly at Stefan over the top of his sunglasses, startling him with the intensity of his gaze and the colour of his eyes. 'We'll take care

of you, bro. I'm not a short-armed tightarse with long pockets, you can rely on that. You're not gonna make a fortune, but we'll keep your head above water. This is about sharing in the spirit of what's mine's yours and what's yours is mine.' He glanced across at the departure times flashing in the frame to his right. 'And it's about knowing when it's time to shoot through.'

He hooked his thumb into his snakeskin belt, adjusted it and straightened his shirt. He noticed Stefan's curiosity. 'It's a rattlesnake skin from the Shenandoah Valley. The Powhatan who gave it to me said wearing it would preserve my magic. Let's find out, bro. It's time for us *gutharra thayadi*, us pair of snakes, to strike.'

Then he removed his sunglasses to polish them on his sleeve and Stefan saw his eyes once more—one was dark brown, almost black, with a hypnotic ring of amber around the pupil, the other a piercing arctic blue. Unexpected, startling, they were accentuated by the colour of his skin. He'd noticed this characteristic in Lennard's appearance on SBS but had no idea how remarkable it would be close up.

'Well, it looks like I'm bringing home the bacon,' Lennard said. 'I'll know for sure when you arrive. You got any questions before I do a runner?'

Stefan paused thoughtfully, and then, 'Why is December 2000 so important to you? You said it was partly to coincide with the new millennium.'

'It is bro, but the real reason?' His voice was intense, his words clipped. 'The 1991 Act has a clause bringing down the axe on the Council for Reconciliation by the first of January, 2001. We've been given ten years to negotiate for change across the country.' He raised his voice still further, turning heads at nearby tables and Stefan stiffened. '*Ten years!* The bastard pollies think turning around two hundred years of history is something with a decade's bloody deadline! It's not! It's gonna take more time.'

He broke off, replaced his sunglasses and put a reassuring hand on Stefan's shoulder. 'Scare you, did I, bro? Don't mind me. I get carried away sometimes thinking about it. The point is this—we need the cenotaph as a marker before the council is disbanded. It's the first step. To symbolise reconciliation as a process that's ongoing, not completed on a designated day.' He gave Stefan an engaging smile. 'There's that and the Sydney Olympics, of course. I thought you'd have that one sussed.'

Before heading for the door, he did something curious. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a polished silver coin, which he flicked into the air. It rang as it spun from his thumbnail. He watched its flashing arc, caught it in his right hand and slapped it onto the back of his left. 'Your call, bro. We'll let the coin decide.'

Stefan hesitated, and then, 'Heads.'

Lennard showed him the coin. 'Heads. You win. So you're coming, no ifs and no bloody buts. Now you're free because you no longer have to choose.'

'I'm free because I have no choice? That sounds contradictory.'

'There's nothing like a paradox to keep you on your toes.' Lennard leaned across and rapped the table with the coin. 'You're free because you're no longer at a loss on what direction to take. *Ngayiwu nyinda garlgunyina?* What's keeping you, bro? You're outta the cage. You can show us your fighting qualities.'

'So I'm out of one cage and into another?'

'That's up to you.' Lennard held the coin by its edge, twisting it this way and that. It glinted in the air between them. 'One thing's for sure—in my workshop, you'll be free to use your skills the way you want, instinctively. It's not my way or the highway. You'll be free to experiment, to use your imagination. You can invent and let things unfold, with the

rock and garnet as your guidelines. You hear what I'm saying?'

The cenotaph would give them the artistic context, he said. How they got there was another matter. He contemplated the coin and suggested that Stefan might discover things about himself he'd never known, that he might learn to see both sides of the coin at the same time. 'It's the only cure for the one-eyed, bro. Not that you are, I'm not suggesting that.' He tapped his belt. 'You might learn to wear two skins like I have. Find out for yourself when you get to Freo.'

Stefan reached for the coin before Lennard pocketed it. It was Dutch; a Zeeland *schelling* minted in 1711. It was slightly bent and burred at the edges. On one face he saw a crouching lion holding what appeared to be a hat balanced on the point of a sword.

Lennard retrieved the coin. 'The lion was the symbol of the United Provinces, the Netherlands,' he said, 'and that's the hat of liberty on the end of the sword. Same as the hat you're wearing right this minute, only you don't know it yet.' He turned the coin over and showed him a lion rampant emerging from the sea embossed within a shield. 'And this is the Zeeland coat of arms. My mother gave it to me years ago when I was a *yamba*; a little tacker. It's a relic from the wreck of the *Zuytdorp*. She went down on the cliffs north of Kalbarri, in my country, Malgana country, up near Shark Bay. This is the memento I carry with me.'

'I thought you were Yamaji.'

'Same thing, bro. I'm Malgana, one of the tribal groups of the Yamaji nation.'

Stefan pointed at the coin as he pocketed it and suggested it must have quite a history.

'It's my lucky *bardalyi*; my lucky coin. It keeps away the *muwanuga wambu*; the bad spirits. It's a long story. I'll tell you about it when you arrive. It'll make the trip worthwhile.'

‘You let the coin make all your decisions?’

‘Only when I’m at the crossroads, bro. It reinforces my conviction I’m engineering the fate that’s engineering me.’

‘This is a crossroads?’

‘For you it is.’

‘You got that right.’

‘And I’m the bloke handing you a map marking your escape route.’

‘I’ll need a compass to go with it.’

‘No you won’t. Travel due west. Follow the *wabarnu*; follow the sun.’ He winked. ‘Cattle class, down the back by the crapper like the rest of us. Only don’t go down the gurgler on the way across.’

As he slung his leather jacket across his shoulder, Lennard asked Stefan if he had the feeling he’d been hijacked and before he had a chance to reply, he added, ‘Consider yourself on the payroll as of now. I’ll ring you from Freo.’ Then he grinned. ‘A friendly warning though—I’ll have your nose to the grindstone. I’ll be looking for blood along with the sweat and tears. I’ll be extracting my full pound of flesh.’

‘You’re too late.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘I’ve been circumcised already.’

Lennard roared, surprising a couple at the next table who looked up and laughed without knowing why. ‘So you’re the pride of the village! What do we call you? Horse? I’ll warn that redhead to expect more than she’s bargained for, by crikey!’

He picked up the book as his flight was announced and said he’d have to run or the plane would leave without him. Stefan struggled to his feet and Lennard shook his hand again. ‘I’m not gonna twist your arm, but if you don’t come over, bro, you’ll live to regret it. Not for long, though, because I’ll be back to break your bloody neck. I’ll catch you later.

When you fly, travel light. I'll meet you at the airport on the Harley.'

He turned to leave, then hesitated at the door and looked back. 'Oh yeah, one thing I forgot. It won't all be plain sailing, but. We've been getting threats from some crackpot bastard aiming to put the stoppers on us.'

'Threats? What sort of threats?'

'Could be bomb threats.'

'Now you tell me!'

'I've had a few weird phone calls, but don't let that put you off. They've gone quiet on me lately.' He glanced back through the plate glass as it swung shut. 'So what's new?' he called out. 'No guts, no glory!'

Stefan watched him thread his way down the escalator through the crowd, and the thought struck him—bomb threats! A few crank phone calls! During the past few months as his fortunes had changed for the worst, he had developed tunnel vision and he needed a light at the end of it. Was Lennard showing him a light or driving a runaway locomotive in his direction?

He spread the photographs across the table. He looked down at the two pictures of Rosalie. When he examined the larger portrait, she seemed to challenge him once more. He sensed in her green and candid eyes a disconcerting, playful touch of will-you-won't-you irony and knowing humour.

'You're right,' he said to her, 'I must be going troppo. I don't have a clue what I'm getting myself into.' Then he smiled ruefully. *Here I am, talking to a stranger in a photograph. How desperate is that? She makes a good listener, though. No backchat, just that penetrating gaze as she reads my mind. What's her secret? Will she let me in on it when we meet?*

He slipped the photographs back into the envelope.

He walked out into the fresh wind beyond the airport

buildings and watched a Qantas Boeing 737 labour up into the empty sky, suspended impossibly between climb and fall. He imagined Lennard aboard, down the back next to the toilet, but in Lennard's case, definitely not going down the gurgler. As it climbed, he wondered if this was a crossroads or a parting of the ways. Was the spin of Lennard's coin another double-or-nothing moment in his life of uncertainty? Had he lost the call or won it?

ON SUNSET THAT evening, Stefan celebrated the improbable turn of events. He filled a glass from the bottle of wine he'd saved since Hanukkah—a Mount Mary Quintet he'd bought during a fire sale at the winery door. He conceded it wasn't exactly kosher, but the thought was there.

Then he took out one of the stylish crystal *menorot* candlesticks he'd salvaged from the stock in his workshop and did something he hadn't done since leaving home in Geelong as a seventeen-year-old—he loaded nine candles into its arms and lit the central *shamash*, the guard and the tallest of them, before lighting the remainder with its flame. Since Hanukkah was officially over, he lit them alternately from left to right, humming the first stanza of the *Ma'oz Tzur*, smiling when he recalled the opening reference to the Rock of Ages.

As he lit them, the sudden thought struck him. *Eight candles! Each marks one day since Tania walked out on me on Christmas Eve.* He felt a rush of anguish as he recalled her cutting him to the quick when she left, her tongue a scalpel as sharp as his for once.

She had been halfway through the door that afternoon when he'd returned with the last-minute shopping for the Christmas lunch he'd promised to cook for her. In his other hand, he'd held a bunch of her favourite carnations.

She'd stepped back to let him in. He saw that she'd been

weeping, but she was composed and, when confronted, she was unexpectedly self-possessed. She was so out of character she'd caught him off guard. Dancing on stage, she was a consummate professional; a graceful perfectionist absorbed in fine-tuning movements she'd been learning since she was six, but when she was at home and relaxing, even though she could arc up unpredictably at times, she usually displayed a mix of reserve and innocence he adored.

During the past week he'd felt gutted each time he'd pictured her standing in the open doorway, her green Adidas sports bag in one hand and her favourite bonsai plant—a Moreton Bay Fig tree her mother had planted in 1970 to celebrate the day she was born—balanced with great care in the crook of her other arm.

'I'm taking time out,' she'd said. 'I need some space.'

His mind in sudden turmoil, he'd stammered, 'You're leaving? Why?'

His question hung unanswered in the shocked silence between them. His thoughts had reeled. Was she bored with him? Was she going walkabout to recover between Yajarlú and Wirruwana Dance Theatre assignments? If that was the case, she would have said so, surely.

Was it the failure of his business that alarmed her? Or the age difference between them? Was she leaving him for another man, younger maybe, with better prospects? Or a woman? Was it the unexpected disagreement he'd had with her brothers? Or perhaps his point-blank refusal to have the child with her she craved?

Her last dismissive words before she'd disappeared had stunned him. She wasn't sure she'd be coming back, she said, and saw no point in explaining why. She'd send her sister Alexa round to pick up the rest of her belongings on Boxing Day.

'*Alexa* had a hand in this?' he'd snapped.

'No! This is my decision. Mine alone.'

'So you're leaving me for dead.'

'No. I'm leaving you for life.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Never mind.'

'It's a simple question.'

'With a complicated answer.'

After a moment's charged silence, he'd asked, 'Does for life mean for good?'

'For my good, yes. You wouldn't understand.'

'Try me.'

'It's too personal.'

He'd lifted to shoulder height the bag of groceries and the carnations, which she hadn't acknowledged. His sudden gesture barely missed her face and she'd shuddered back with a sharp out-breath as though he'd slapped her, the rich whiff of Lion's Christmas fruitcake added to the cinnamon fragrance of the flowers. 'Nice timing, Tan. It's Christmas Eve, for Christ's sake. We can't waste these.'

'I'm sorry it doesn't suit you.'

'My oath it doesn't suit me.'

'I'm not under house arrest,' she'd said, her eyes alight, her voice unflinching.

She'd leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek before stepping back and waiting expectantly for him to move aside. He'd hesitated before doing so. She'd brushed past him. 'Look on the bright side,' she'd said, looking back, 'now you're free and so am I. It's not your fault. It's mine.'

He'd seen her eyes brimming. He'd dropped the flowers and groceries and moved towards her, off-balance, as if stumbling down an unseen step in pitch darkness, but she'd shied away and shaken her head. 'Not now!' she'd warned, and then she was gone, her sandals echoing down the stairwell.

Stung, he'd fought the urge to call her back. After several moments of resentful bewilderment, he'd checked the empty corridor before closing the door. He'd cursed himself for failing to read the signs. *What signs, for God's sake?*

Hurt, enraged and panicking, he'd looked down at her from the balcony as she'd walked across the courtyard, the eccentric combination of her bonsai and gym bag lending her the forlorn appearance of someone homeless carting all she valued to the next night's shelter under a forgotten bridge.

'At least tell me where I can contact you,' he'd called out. 'Don't leave things like this.'

She hadn't replied, but then, before she'd turned the corner, she'd slowed and glanced back, briefly. She'd nodded and he'd waved in return, a surge of hope racing through him.

In that frozen moment, he'd seen a Sikh couple walking arm in arm along Lygon Street. They'd hesitated at the courtyard entrance, alerted by his shout. Both had glanced at Tania, then up at him. They'd stopped, then the man had murmured something and they resumed their walk, the woman with her face framed in the cyan shimmer of her flower-patterned sari looking back at Tania. For one dizzying instant, he'd imagined Tania reflected in her gaze and the crazy hope arose that she might turn and bar her way, prevent her departure and convince her to return to him.

But no, they'd disappeared in different directions among the passers-by.

A weight had descended as she'd vanished, and it dawned on him how much he was going to miss her, how much he relied on her being around. Two years of happiness had been snuffed out and he hadn't seen the writing on the wall. Struggling to save his business over the past few months, he hadn't given her the attention she deserved. Had he taken her so much for granted that now she'd turned her back on him?

He'd filled a vase from the kitchen tap, set it on the balcony table and stood the carnations within in it, still bound by a twisted green rubber band. They'd be visible from the street.

That evening when he'd searched the flat, he found she'd sorted all her gear from his, down to their collection of CDs, to make it easy for Alexa. On her dressing table, he'd discovered the crystal bird of paradise pendant he'd made for her when they'd first moved in together. He'd spent days designing and sculpting it and she'd raved over it, rarely going out without wearing it. It lay with the silver chain coiled beside it, as though dropped there as a hasty afterthought. Or was it? Wasn't it a clear signal she was done with him? Another deliberate gesture, like the bonsai, to drive the point home.

He'd hunted desperately for the charm bracelet he'd fashioned for her birthday a year before. It was his business stock in trade and he'd added elements to it month by month, twelve abstract shapes in shimmering glass combined with fragments of a range of precious and semi-precious stones, each charm commemorating meaningful moments in the progress of their lives together. *They're my speaking stones*, she'd told him, a memory behind each. It seemed she'd taken that with her. At least she'd done that.

Nor did he find a farewell note of explanation. *Did she write one? If I hadn't turned up when I did, was she going to slip it beneath the door as she closed it behind her?*

He'd been distraught, confused and obsessed. For several days, he'd contacted her family and friends without success, until at last her brother Richie rang to confirm that she'd arrived in Cairns. She'd decided to break off all ties with him, he said. And then he dropped the bombshell. She'd been invited to Brazil to work with the *Sapatos Alados* Dance Theatre in Belo Horizonte.

‘So *that’s* the reason she walked out?’ Stefan had snapped. They had offered her a contract to work on a production before she met him, and it had taken him an agonising week to change her mind and move in with him instead. ‘When did they invite her back?’

‘They called her yesterday. She’s in two minds, but we’re advising her to take the opportunity.’

‘*Of course you are!*’ Stefan had shouted after a stunned pause. ‘Thank you very much, Richie, I appreciate your interference.’

‘Hey! Try me, why don’t you? I swear I’ll take out a restraining order on her behalf if you make a move in her direction—’

Shaking with rage, Stefan had slammed down the phone.

Later, when he’d calmed down, he knew he must resign himself to her decision. Had she stayed it would have been against her will. Added to his financial troubles, her ill-timed desertion which, in his bitterness, he judged a betrayal, was unbearable, but he knew that worse was to come. When she’d moved to Brazil, she’d deliver the eighty-first blow, the most stinging of them all.

He snuffed out the eight lower candle flames, leaving the *shamash* burning. He deep-fried some hash brown *latkes* and heated three doughnut *bimuelos* he’d found in the fridge, washing them down with a last half glass of wine before the reek of mozzarella and pepperoni scorching in the ovens of the pizzeria across the courtyard drove him indoors.

When he cleared the debris from the balcony table the *shamash* waned, then flickered out. Had Tanya’s love for him as well? She’d done a runner and wouldn’t be back anytime soon. *If ever, for God’s sake!* He reached for the wilting carnations, shook the water from their stems and flung them into the bin.

Later, on the verge of sleep, Stefan reconsidered Lennard’s invitation. One nagging thought disconcerted him—the monument was intended as a memorial to twenty thousand

massacred Aborigines about whom he knew next to nothing. While he acknowledged the number, he hadn't heard their stories and knew few of their names. *Would it make a difference if I did know? They're really no concern of mine. They're in the past, long gone and best forgotten. It's time to move on, isn't it? Time to keep pace with progress taking place across the country with frightening acceleration.*

When he and Tania had moved in together and his first meeting with her brothers had proved so disastrous, Stefan agreed to explore her Yirrganydji people's collective history to better understand their point of view. It was one way to repair the damage, she suggested.

So when they'd returned to Melbourne, he'd researched incidents arising from the clash of cultures during early settlement around Cairns. While there were some eye-opening moments, he was disturbed to discover conflicting narratives and records in some of the diaries and reports he referenced and he was disconcerted by contradictory interpretations and bias in passages from books Tania selected for him. Were the Aboriginal tribes made up of thinly scattered family groups or organised into sovereign nations? Were they primitive hunter-gatherers to be brushed aside or domesticated farmers in settled villages cultivating yams and native plants? Was the virtually empty continent there for the taking or was the Mabo decision a justified step in the right direction?

The more he read the more confused he'd become. Two hundred years loomed as an unbridgeable abyss so that in the end, nothing could shake his growing conviction that his research had no point. It was too late in the day for meaningful corrective action and any that was taken now would only widen the divide.

He didn't lie to Tania.

'It seems to me we'll never get a handle on the real truth, Tan,' he'd asserted one morning. 'It doesn't matter what steps

we take to fix things now, it's far too late. Land rights granted because they were once usurped? A treaty negotiated two hundred years after the event? An apology to the stolen generations and compensation for past mistreatment? We both know whatever's conceded or denied, one mob or the other comes out of the process wanting more or feeling duded.'

Tania was furious. 'We can't stop trying,' she'd exclaimed. 'The stakes are too high.'

'For your mob, maybe.'

'*For all of us*, Stefan! We have to set things right,'

'For all of us?'

'Are you blind? *For the nation!*'

'For the nation? Careful Tan, you're walking into quicksand.'

She hadn't replied. She'd stormed out to dance practice and given him the silent treatment on her return, relenting only when he'd picked up his research where he'd left off. But nothing changed his view. Though she hadn't pursued the disagreement, he was aware how deeply his admission had dismayed her.

And now, lying in the dark, he wondered how he could convince her to return. *How far do I have to bend?* he wondered. *To find the answer I need to work alongside someone like Lennard and hear him out.*

When he woke the next morning, he took the plunge before he had a change of heart. He confirmed his flight.

It took him the next three hectic days to wind up the paperwork for the liquidation, store the Ducati and clear the flat. He packed a selection of his crystal ware moulds and notebooks to work on during his spare time in Fremantle, including one of Tania's favourites—a delicate, sparkling mobile of blue crystals that had taken him weeks to fabricate.

The morning after his arrival in the west, he and Lennard were working for the first time in the vast and airy space of the glassworks on the foreshore of Bathers Beach.