

Prologue

30 DECEMBER 2000

in the converted boathouse at Fishing Point on Lake Macquarie

Stefan Novak woke to the screech of the smoke alarm. He reared up, entangled in the sheets. Stunned, he squinted at skeins of smoke snaking across the ceiling, confusion spiralling into shock. *Am I dreaming? Am I cornered in another fire? Have the arsonists tracked me down and set my work ablaze again?*

Heart racing, he steeled himself and peered across the room.

The laptop was open on the table, his files and papers scattered beside it as he'd left them. Beneath the table lay the box where he stored the latest edited revisions, along with Lennard's collection of research notes, photographs, etchings and copies of hand-drawn maps and sketches.

There were no flames. The novel was safe.

Eyes smarting, his throat raw, he scrambled from the bed. He pounded the alarm with a broomstick, then staggered across the floor to slide shut the plate glass doors. Beyond them, cinders swirled from a lurid yellow sky, ash and charred leaves settling like black snow on the veranda and the lawn between the boathouse and the lake. He stared out for several minutes. No live embers flashed among them.

He glanced at his watch. Sunrise. He looked across the hazy foreshore for seabirds. Saw none.

He switched on the television, reassured the power supply had not been cut. He flicked the dial across the channels, then watched Watagan State Forest and the slopes of Mt Warrawalong kilometres away going up in flames, a raging fire-front spurred by swirling winds roaring across the trees. Now and then, two

giant yellow helicopters swooped through the smoke discharging bursts of water that turned to plumes of steam as they hit the ground. On one crest he saw flames writhing from a fire tower, its watch house flaring like Sydney's Olympic torch above a field of smouldering tree trunks glowing orange as wind gusts reignited them.

The news presenter confirmed a weather change was on the way. The possibility of rain would give the firefighters a chance to regroup. There were no reports of deaths or gutted homes reduced to buckled ruins, but Stefan imagined charred koalas wedged in the upper branches and panic-stricken sugar gliders leaping from tree to tree, their fur alight, as they tumbled to the forest floor in balls of flame.

He reached beneath the bed for his empty backpack and threw in some clothes and toiletries from the shower recess. *Just in case.*

Then he sat on the bed and picked up his mobile phone. There was a two-hour time difference between Fishing Point and Perth, but he decided to ring the hospital anyway. *Lennard may be awake*, he thought, *or a nurse might take the call.*

As he dialled, he recalled the haunting vision of his friend, Aboriginal glass sculptor Lennard Currie, staggering from the inferno of the Fremantle glassworks three months ago, dragging the red-hot oxy-acetylene tanks behind him, hurling them onto the lawn before they could explode. Stefan had turned the garden hose on him writhing on the grass, the back of his T-shirt in flames, his singed hair a sparking crown of thorns as though he'd set himself alight in an act of self-immolation for his people.

There was no answer. He recorded a brief greeting, 'How are you, Ace? In case you're watching the news, the fires here are a fair way from the boathouse. You get well. I'll call back later.' He hesitated, then added drily, 'Don't you die on me, bro. We've got too much work to do. And remember, Ace—you are a de Waal!'

He rang off and sat staring down at the phone.

Garla! Fire! Lennard saved the glass cenotaph and lit the flame of remembrance for his ancestors, but it almost cost him his life. The shocking memory brought a wry smile. *What if that had been me? How far would I have gone?*

Shaking his head, he reached across the bedside table to pick up Gerrit's abalone shell pendant. Lennard had insisted he wear it while working on the book—the *banduga*, the albatross would give him the inspiration he'd need to ward off writer's block if it struck him, he'd insisted, and it might inspire the ending.

'Guaranteed, bro. Guaranteed. It's never failed me.'

Stefan had looked down at him, lying on the hospital bed swathed in gauze and spray-on skin. He'd sent him an ironic smile. 'I'll believe it when I see it, Ace.'

He straightened the leather thong and hung the pendant carefully round his neck before examining the shell in the palm of his right hand. He ran his fingertips across the albatross cameo carved into its nacre, wings spread, as it swept across the lucent swirl of sea-blues and greens as if far out in the Southern Ocean.

At home there, he thought. Much like Gerrit.

He spent the morning editing the script on the laptop. The smoke and ash settling around the boathouse were reflected in the scene he'd decided to revise—a description of the sea battle off the mid-Atlantic island of St Helena and the capture of the Portuguese carrack *Santiago* by the Dutch in mid-March 1602, its decks slippery with pools of blood despite the sand bucketed across them, the air blasted by cannon fire and reeking of cordite, shattered body parts lifted to the deck rails and flung overboard.

He worked through several pages and, as always, lost all sense of time.

When he finished late in the afternoon, the wind had swung onshore. Cooled by the Pacific, it cleared the smoke. Showers sweeping in across the coast turned the ash to slush. While there was still sufficient light, he stripped down to his bathers, walked out into the rain, checked the damage and began the clean-up. He hosed down the veranda and did what he could to sweep the lawn, which he'd spent an hour mowing the day before.

The tide was out. He swept the muck over the embankment and onto the narrow beach, where it was easier to shovel into the wheelbarrow. He deposited it on the flowerbeds. He did the same to the jetty, spraying the pier and the two yellow kayaks there before scrubbing the matting on the farthest pontoon afloat in deeper water.

He took a breather when the light faded and the showers eased, squatting at the end of the jetty to watch the sludge drift towards the shore, buffeted by the breeze.

He was due to pick up Tania from Belmont airport in three days' time. It was four years almost to the day since he'd last seen her. The prospect of reconciling excited him, but he was wary. There were issues yet to surface. *How much has she changed?* he wondered. *Is she on the rebound? How long will we spend treading on eggshells, feeling each other out?* He frowned at the thought of misreading the signs. *I can't lose her for the second time. Not again.*

He recalled her voice on the telephone a month ago, when she'd contacted him after the opening of the glass cenotaph, and her terse first words echoed in his memory, 'It's me, Stefan. I'd like to see you. Can we meet on neutral ground?'

While the four-year separation was still acutely painful, he had come to terms with it, blaming the failure of his business and threat of bankruptcy for the rift, though he was still uncertain exactly what had tipped her over the edge. When he'd heard that she'd resigned from the Wirruwana Aboriginal Dance Company and accepted an invitation to choreograph for a dance company in Brazil he was convinced he'd never see her again.

Now he sat with his feet in the water, as they'd done each afternoon last time they'd been here on holiday from Melbourne in October 1996, three months before she'd left him. They'd polish off the wine left over from the night before while he'd improvised on his guitar or played the latest flamenco piece he'd mastered. If she had her nose in a book, she'd occasionally glance across at him, her dark brown eyes alight with teasing hints she dared him to interpret, or distant, as though she was considering something she'd just read, returning to her book before he could ask what she was thinking.

She'd been engrossed in *The English Patient*, he recalled. She'd occasionally place it face down on the pontoon to search for a passage from a well-worn copy of Herodotus she'd bought second hand in Newcastle. She'd been excited about the film version, due for release in a month. Juliette Binoche was among her favourite actors, and she'd been keen to see her play the Canadian nurse.

They'd brought the video *Three Colours: Blue* with them on that visit. Each time they'd watched it, she'd raved about Binoche's sensitive performance as the principal character, Julie, and the subtlety of the filming techniques.

When they'd returned to Melbourne, he'd surprised her with a glass chandelier of blue crystals he'd created, identical to the one in the film. It was the only memento Julie had saved after the death of her husband and daughter in a car crash in the opening scene, removing it from her daughter's room and hanging it in the flat where she'd relocated. A shimmering mobile of multifaceted blue diamonds, spheres and cubes suspended beneath a circular mirror, its eye-catching beauty and delicate tinkling when Tania had walked past and set it swinging in the bedroom had delighted her.

Now, staring out over the lake, he remembered the first time they'd watched the fatal opening car crash scene together, both his arms around her, leaning back against him on the sofa. 'I couldn't bear to lose an only child,' she'd said. 'To lose the one thing that completes you. Can you imagine that?'

‘And a husband,’ he’d replied.

‘*A husband?*’ She’d given him an ironic nudge. ‘Nice try, Stefan.’ She was thoughtful as the horrific scene unfolded. ‘But a *child?*’

He remembered how they’d slip into the lake when the urge took them, swimming to the nearest buoy and climbing aboard the yacht to stretch out on its deck or sometimes ducking beneath the canvas canopy, the intimacy of their lovemaking on the cushions of the cockpit concealed from the shore and their sated laughter barely audible.

A passing kayaker had almost surprised them once, the splash of paddles warning them. On that occasion Tania had suppressed her sighs and slowed the rhythm of her movements as she’d leant over him, challenging him with a quotation from the video, ‘Now try coughing!’ she’d whispered in his ear. He had simulated a cough, and the prospect of imminent discovery and her involuntary contractions as she broke into laughter had added spice to their excitement.

Three months after they’d returned to Melbourne that last time, Tania had walked out on him without explaining why, and everything had changed. He looked out across the lake as a familiar rush of anger and regret flooded through him. *On Christmas Eve, for God’s sake... and without warning!*

When her sister Alexa had arrived on Boxing Day to collect Tania’s belongings, she’d been business-like, impatient and distant, maintaining a hostile silence except when she’d informed him that Tania wanted the blue mobile kept safe for her. He was not to include it with the crystal ware to be auctioned as part of the liquidation of his business. That was a strange request from someone determined to end the relationship, he’d thought at the time, but he’d done as she’d asked. Now it lay packaged under the bed in the boathouse. He intended surprising her with it for the second time. *If things work out well.*

He wanted the boathouse shipshape to welcome her for this meeting. It was their favourite retreat—an L-shaped room converted into a self-contained single bedroom with a kitchenette and spa and a wide glass frontage at the base of a

cliff, overlooking the lake. It belonged to the couple who ran the boarding house above them, and they'd climb the flight of concrete steps to join other guests for meals when it suited them.

The sound of lapping water and the blue and purple perennial geraniums in terracotta pots lining the veranda gave the boathouse a Mediterranean feel that had never failed to enchant her.

'We could be holidaying on Lake Maggiore,' she'd said once, 'without the mountains for a backdrop.'

She loved the gardens surrounding it and, in particular, admired the Stanhopea orchids flowering in hanging baskets attached to the veranda eaves, their wax-white blooms suspended like winged insects with a camouflage of vermilion freckles, so much so that he'd struck a bargain with the owners for cheaper access to the boathouse in exchange for manicuring the lawns and caring for the collection of plants. The line of highly scented blue and white Brunfelsias at the base of the cliff held a special appeal for Tania. 'These are Kiss-Me-Quicks,' she'd told him once, turning to face him and placing a finger on his lips. 'Why don't we take the opportunity?' They did, and each time they'd emerged from swimming after that, they'd done the same.

He was anxious for the meeting to go well. There was still a chance she wouldn't make it, though. The fires had disrupted flights and considering the heatwave and warnings of further outbreaks, she might decide against it.

Would that be for the best? he wondered, then drove away the part admission. He needed her on side if he was to agree to Lennard's latest proposal they'd discussed in July—that he stays in Fremantle and assist him in preparing the landscaping installation he'd been invited to create for the Quai Branly museum planned for Paris.

A curtain of rain smothered the peak of Coal Point opposite. It churned across Kilabin Bay and lashed the shoreline, rattling on the kayaks. He stood, arms outstretched and face to the sky, the cold sting of rain beating at his skin.

By the time he reached the boathouse, the gutters were overflowing, sluicing the remains of the slush across the lawn and over the embankment.

The next morning, he awoke early. The smoke had cleared. The lake's reflections changed from gunmetal to silver as the sun rose over the Pacific, piercing the clouds and scattering shafts of light across the water. The breeze raised waves in diagonal ridges, each racing to leapfrog the next before they reached the jetty.

He was gazing at the shimmer of the headland opposite, floating in the watery haze like a Japanese aquatint, when a pied cormorant broke the surface ten metres out. It splashed up and perched on a channel pylon, shook itself, held its wings out to dry as if pegged to an invisible line and, with a quick double twist of its tail, added another squirt of guano to the black and white streaks collected like barnacles on the timber.

'Hey, cut the crap, my feathered friend, like I have to!' Stefan laughed, as he opened the glass doors to the veranda and placed the laptop on the table.

During the past four years while working on the glass cenotaph, Stefan had spent most of his spare time sifting through Lennard's research material, developing his distant Dutch ancestor's storyline and character.

It was his first attempt at a novel. His previous writing experience was restricted to informative factual reports on research and development in the manufacture of glass, but Lennard had brushed that aside. 'I've broken all the ground. I've done the research. Now I need his story written. And guess what?'

He had gazed intently at Stefan, eyebrows raised.

Bewildered, Stefan had taken several moments. And then, '*Me?* Write Gerrit's story?' He'd given an embarrassed out-breath. 'I don't think so.'

'Why not? I've read the articles you've published. You've got a way with words.'

‘For a scientific report, maybe. But a full-length novel? There’s a big difference. Writing up the findings in a glass experiment and ghost-writing a biography are poles apart.’

‘Writing the biography of a ghost, you mean,’ Lennard had replied. ‘I reckon you could bring him back to life if you put your mind to it.’

Stefan had shaken his head. ‘What about Alicia? She’s a linguist. I’d be a hack compared to her.’

‘She doesn’t have the time... she’s too busy working with the Yamaji Language Centre up in Geraldton. Tell you what, though, I’m sure she’ll do the editing. Give you some tips. Maybe even coach you, if you ask her. She wants to see it written as badly as I do.’ He had chuckled meaningfully. ‘I reckon she’ll jump at the chance to crack the whip.’

‘Oh, terrific! I can feel the sting of Madam Lash already!’

When Lennard’s partner Alicia had agreed to collaborate, Stefan had committed himself to the writing.

He had a wealth of detail relating to Middelburg and Zeeland during the seventeenth century to draw from—names and family trees, records of births, marriages and deaths, charts and copies of etchings produced at the time, and records Lennard had drawn from the VOC¹ archives detailing Gerrit’s service after he’d joined the company as a teenager. Born into a wealthy burgher family in 1685, Gerrit had lived at the height of the Dutch Golden Age during the period of European enlightenment and expansion across the globe.

¹ On 20 March 1602, the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC)—the Dutch United East India Company, was formed by government decree. The company amalgamated six previously rival Dutch trading companies based in Middelburg (Zeeland), Amsterdam, Delft, Rotterdam, Enkhuizen and Hoorn. Delegates selected from these chambers convened as the *Heeren XVII*—the seventeen lords who ran the company. They were selected from the *bewindhebber* class, the merchant class, who were shareholders.

While he'd been able to compile a linear narrative of Gerrit's life without difficulty, Stefan had found it challenging to create his character, steeped in his family history and shaped by the rapidly changing social and cultural worlds in which he'd lived.

Hesitant at first, he'd felt his way, often seeking Alicia's advice.

'Put him to the sword,' Alicia had suggested one evening as she'd answered him across the dining table, her jet-black hair framing her broad face with its accentuated cheekbones and olive skin, her dark intelligent eyes touched with humour. 'Check his resolve in a crisis. Observe his reactions to new experiences when you put him through the wringer and his resilience and resourcefulness are stretched.' She'd given him her characteristic wide smile, a dimple creviced in her left cheek, her Australianised Mexican accent lending the occasional vowel an extra syllable. 'Force him to live with the consequences of his moral and ethical decisions. As we all do.'

When he'd dreamed up such scenarios, he had asked himself: *What will Gerrit do when he's confronted with this dilemma? Will he surprise me by reacting unpredictably and out of character? How will he think when he's challenged with this circumstance? Will he have the tenacity to stay the course once he's made up his mind? Or will he regret his choice when it's too late, then fight the yearning to retrace his steps?*

'One question you must always keep in mind,' Alicia had said at another time, when they'd been sitting together on the back veranda steps on a pure blue day, enjoying a morning coffee and looking out over Fremantle and the ocean. 'How do you make Gerrit sufficiently believable across three centuries to interest a modern reader without losing his historical authenticity? From what I've read so far, I think you're finding that an interesting dilemma,' She'd grinned and nudged him with a sharp elbow. 'Remember, I'm here to slash and burn! So don't leave too much of yourself on the page. You're writing Gerrit's story, not your personal running commentary on his life.'

Most of Lennard's notes were scribbled in a barely decipherable scrawl, but here and there he'd discovered passages he'd expanded into narratives of remarkable vividness when he'd allowed his imagination to run free. Those episodes made it easy for Stefan; he'd barely changed a word. When he'd inserted them into the novel, he felt that he and Lennard were co-authors, unravelling his friend's European family tree and grafting it onto his Malgana Aboriginal ancestral roots, as though he was seeking out his future in the past.

In Stefan's mind, their collaboration in bringing Gerrit back to life—recreating him as a living ghost—had brought the construction of the glass cenotaph into sharper focus. It had given the project an extra dimension, highlighting its meaning as a memorial to the twenty thousand Aborigines killed during the frontier wars.

Now the novel was finished—except for the ending, the critical final scenes. While grappling with them a month ago, he'd asked Alicia to edit the first draft up to that point. A week later, he'd come close to regretting his request, baulking at her forthright recommendation of a radical revision. Cutting passages that, in his view, lent the book atmosphere was a big ask, but he'd followed her advice and now the latest draft was almost complete. He intended presenting it to her for the final edit on his return to Fremantle.

He fired up the laptop and retrieved an episode he'd revised the day before—*the lion hunt during the Zuytdorp's stopover in Cape Town, Wednesday 20 April 1712*.

He printed the pages and stapled them. Then, thinking nothing would irk him more than a grammatical mistake or spelling error he'd missed, he read through part of it.

Slung upside-down on a stinkwood trestle, its clawed feet lashed to a cross-pole, the lion's carcass was paraded in an open wagon through the streets of Cape Town. Its thick-necked, black-maned

head was flung back. A grotesque coil of tongue lolled from slack jaws. The tail had been shot away, its stump dark with flies above the furred pouch of the scrotum. A cluster of bloated ticks was dug in behind an ear, like polished grey pearls.

A group of local Khoikhoi children trotted alongside the wagon, awestruck at the gold glaze of its bloodshot eyes and the vicious curve of teeth that one of the dragoons seated alongside the carcass revealed to them, peeling back its lip with the barrel of his musket and bellowing with laughter at their shrieks.

The gleaming, raw-muscled carcass hung from a beam in the abattoir when Sunil and Gerrit went to inspect it. The flayed hide was stretched head-down on a frame beside it, leaning against the wall, scraped clean and packed with salt.

They knelt to peer into the jaw, now empty of bone and teeth. They tested the thick sharp claws and inspected the skull that lay on a side-bench, a handful of misshapen lead shot alongside it, dug from the flesh. A thong of lion skin was threaded through a drill-hole in the centre of each bullet—beads of lead on necklaces the dragoons would wear as a testament to their skill.

For Ensign Olof Bergh, who'd led the hunt, the scrotum would carry his snuff, and the bullet-severed tail would make him a smart flyswat.

They left the abattoir and returned to the Strand along the lane that ran between the stockyards of fat-tailed sheep penned for loading aboard the Zuytdorp and the Kockengen.

Sunil was plaiting a bracelet of several shining strands of black and gold hair he'd cut from the lion's mane. He twisted the ends of the threads into a pair of slipknots he tightened, then threaded the bracelet around his arm above his left elbow and

adjusted it there. It was designed to bring him strength and luck, as the elephant hair bracelets had done for him when he'd been diving for pearls along the Mannar sandbanks in Ceylon, or for coins tossed down to him by sailors aboard ships anchored in Galle Bay.

'My Vedda bracelet—for courage,' he said, looking back towards the door of the abattoir and removing his hat. 'I thank the lion for it.'

He withdrew more strands from his pocket and fashioned a second bracelet for Gerrit as they made their way towards the jetty to be ferried in a longboat back to the Zuytdorp.

Stefan was still undecided about retaining the passage. It lent atmosphere, but he knew it detracted from the narrative flow. To his mind, its relevance related to the men's bracelets. They were magical talismans that would bring them courage when they needed it most—such as six weeks later, fighting to survive the storm off the cliffs at Kalbarri.

Besides, he thought, the lion is the symbol of the United Netherlands. And it was Gerrit's grandfather, Laurens, who had carved the snarling red lion with its yellow mane and glaring eyes bolted beneath the bowsprit of the Zuytdorp.

He placed the pages on the table and looked up at the lake, shards of reflected light striking through the glass doors he'd left partly open. He decided on a morning swim. He picked up a towel and walked across the lawn towards the jetty.

Reading over his work sometimes so obsessed him he was unable to distance himself from it. As he headed for the lake, he seemed to cross a boundary and enter the scene. He heard the musket shots and the clicking of the reload, smelled the creosote stench of burnt gunpowder and felt his heart thumping in his chest as the enraged animal charged the semi-circle of riflemen before a second volley dropped it to its knees in a bloodied spew of clawed dust.

As he passed the yellow kayaks, he felt the wet seat of the longboat slam against his buttocks, the sea's chop jarring his teeth as they brought the boat alongside and Gerrit reached for the *Zuytdorp*'s iron ladder rungs, transferring the pewter canister he was carrying to his left hand as he began the climb, the butterfly chrysalises within it rattling as he reached for the deck rail. The tarry smell of fresh caulking on the open decks was overpowering.

He reached the floating pontoon and thrust the images from his mind.

The wind had risen, carrying a fine spray from the crests of breaking wavelets. He slid into the water, inhaled deeply and swam beneath the surface out into the lake as far as his breath took him.

Swimming strongly, he imagined himself alongside Sunil Dewaraja diving in Galle Bay for coins tossed from the decks of the *Zuytdorp* rearing above them. He chased the sunlit flash of a *stuiver* or a *schelling* or a battered Spanish half *reale* as it sank, before snatching it up and adding it to coins already retrieved and held in the pouch of his cheek. Still underwater and desperate for air, he looked down at the blurred shadow of a patch of weed in the sand below, imagining the ominous glide of a tiger shark rising towards him before he barrelled to the surface and sprinted back to the pontoon.

Back at the boathouse, he set the pages of the lion hunt to one side and opened up a manila folder he'd taken from the box beside him. It held a collection of photographs of Middelburg, along with hand-drawn sketches and charts.

He selected a photograph he'd taken of the engraving hanging on the wall in Lennard's lounge. It was by Mattheus Smallegange, dated 1699. It showed a view across the inner harbour towards the Middelburg *dokhavn* shipyard. In the foreground, an old man and teenage boy were pictured beneath the archway entrance to the VOC Company headquarters.

'I like to think that's Gerrit and his grandfather on their way home,' Lennard had said when they'd inspected it through a magnifying glass four years

earlier. 'I like to think he's called into the carving shed after school to join the old fella for the walk home.'

The boy was not elaborately dressed. He was wearing a collarless shirt, the v-neck laced to the throat, and long trousers beneath a knee-length coat, an open leather satchel displaying several books slung across his shoulder. Examining the tilt of the boy's head and jut of chin as he spoke to his grandfather, Stefan saw a sturdy, square-shouldered dark-haired teenager whose animated expression suggested someone learning to stand his ground, perhaps downright obstinately on this occasion.

'If it is them,' he'd glanced up at Lennard, 'the young fellow may respect his grandfather enough to walk home with him, but he looks like he's got a serious streak of the larrikin in him.'

'Could be. Look at the old man's face, though. Whaddya see? A patient frown? Someone who knows the young fella takes shrewd handling?'

'He looks one tough old bloke. I wouldn't like to cross him. I reckon he'd rip the kid gloves off to put Gerrit back in his place when he's crossed the line.'

'For sure, but I can see he has a softer side. Comes with the wisdom of old age, they tell me.'

Stefan leant back and looked thoughtfully out across the lake as he closed the folder. Then he lifted the lid of the laptop and, with his finger on the touchpad, he opened the novel at the first chapter and began to read.