

“Action-packed and thought-provoking.”
“Smart, thrilling and romantic.”

ATOMIC SEA

*A terrifying chase through stormy
waters and ancient landscapes in
this fast-paced nuclear thriller*

C.M. LANCE
RADIATION BOOK 2

ATOMIC SEA

Amazon Reviews

"I loved this book... it's a clever story about thoughtful, caring people from different backgrounds (there's even a love story or two woven into it) thrown into an unexpectedly terrifying and violent political situation, and how they deal with it with humor and ingenuity."

"Brilliant! Every chapter holds a twist you can't see coming. Fast moving and worth the reading ride."

"Took me a couple of days to get into it, but hit the halfway point and could not put it down. Great read. Sort of this weird mix of thriller style action, contrasted really strongly with the down to earth Australian thing. Also, the protagonist is female and in her forties - she's not James Bond, not bullet-proof. Completely relatable. And in a world where there's a lot of men with a lot of guns, it was a perspective I found pretty enjoyable! Giving this five stars."

"Atomic Sea is a novel I loved from start to finish. With so many twists and turns one could be fooled into thinking this is a straight up action thriller (and it certainly feels like it is in some parts - in a great way), but what sets Atomic Sea apart from others is the wonderful beating heart of its delightful, intelligent cast of characters who must face very relatable and human challenges amidst all the carnage around them."

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Fiction

The Turning Tide
Harbour of Secrets
Embers at Midnight
Testing the Limits
Silver Highways

Non-Fiction

Alan Villiers: Voyager of the Winds
Redbill: From Pearls to Peace

ATOMIC SEA

C. M. LANCE

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**To my IPv6 comrades
Tony Hill, Kevin Karp and Michael Biber**

It's one of the more common modern forms of doublethink ... to allow that of course the universe we experience is a mental construct rather than an objective reality, and then to turn right around and insist that some currently popular features of that mental construct—the deadness, mindlessness, and meaninglessness of the cosmos, for example—are objectively real truths, while features of mental constructs that our culture doesn't encourage—the presence of life, mind, and meaning in the nonhuman cosmos, for instance—are just plain wrong.

John Michael Greer

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PART I. BROOME

Prologue

The blue wooden boat drifts.

The sea is still, the waves are slow ripples. The hull rolls just enough for a steel drum to softly clang one way, then the other, between the mast and the side of the old Asian fishing boat, someone's hard-scrabble livelihood.

Yet those on board do not have the look of labourers: they were once plump men with soft hands. The man in the cabin leans forward on the table, his head on his arms. The other one lies on the deck, fingers over his eyes as if wiping away tears.

I'd like to imagine a shower of rain had swept in to cool him, to mingle with his tears and offer him a final drink, to ease him through that agony of vomiting and voiding and weeping burns. I hope it rained and gave him a moment of comfort, but I don't expect it did.

Then in the dimness I notice a heap of white powder beside him and the hair on my scalp lifts.

The powder is glimmering with a soft blue light.

Simon whispers, 'Is that shit *glowing*?'

'Oh fuck,' I say, backing away, my voice shaking. 'We've got to get out of here!'

Was it only three days ago I thought my life dull?

1. Worm Turning

Jessie's plane has already landed when I get to the airport. The terminal is just a large, airy shed and from the door I can see my sister waiting by the conveyor belt, wearing a black T-shirt and jeans, a backpack over one shoulder, her long hair up in a pony-tail. A magenta and orange pony-tail.

She grabs a suitcase and comes towards me grinning. We hug and I take the bag.

'Wow, Jess. Kitchen sink?'

'Didn't know what to bring.'

'Well, you only need the minimum. Can't you feel the heat?'

Just then we emerge from the terminal and she gasps. 'Holy hell, Lena, it was only six degrees in Melbourne.'

'Welcome to Broome, little sister. I doubt it's ever hit six degrees here.' I grin. 'But the hair suits.'

'Did it especially for Broome—orange, purple, pink—appropriate, yes?'

I laugh. '*Perfect*. Welcome, little sister.' We drive out of the parking lot and I put the air-conditioning on full blast and say, 'Now, the hotel's not far. Let's get you registered then we can sort things out.'

'Things?'

'This evening, the welcome event. A tour of Worm Turning with nibbles and refreshments. You don't have to come if you don't want to, but I got you a ticket—'

‘Do we get Chernobyl champagne and Fukushima finger-food?’

‘Oh God, Jess, don’t say things like that at the conference. Except to me of course.’

‘Okay. Hey—food, wine and a big hole in the ground. Who could ask for more?’

It’s the first time we’ve met in nearly a year. I work in Sydney, Jessie in Melbourne, so my conference here in north-west Australia was a great excuse for a holiday together. The rather nice hotel, with its pool set in a swathe of green above teal-blue Roebuck Bay, doesn’t hurt either.

While Jess unpacks I return to the endless last-minute tasks of the committee. Event organisers are handling the registrations so I mainly run around sorting out mislaid presentations and soothing ruffled feathers. Finally everything seems to be on track for tomorrow, so I go back to my room for a shower and change into my new grey linen sheath.

But the dress that seemed so smart in Sydney appears drab in colourful Broome. I try to do something with my hair, pulling it up into a bun then letting it hang to my shoulders. It used to be red-gold when I was young but now? Mousey brown at best. It looks dull. I look dull. My life is dull.

I sit down with a sigh.

Jess knocks and I let her in. She glances at my dress. ‘Haven’t you got anything more festive than that, Lena?’

She’s changed into black jeans and a silk tank top, set off by scarlet lips, dark eyebrows and cheekbones like cut glass. And the orange and magenta hair.

‘You should bloody talk,’ I say. ‘Haven’t you got a single garment that isn’t black, Jessie?’

She grins. 'Not a one.'

We gather with the others at the front of the hotel and take our seats in a luxury bus. I nod at my fellow committee members and a few friends, surprised at how many people are strangers but, after all, this is an inter-disciplinary conference, with geologists, biologists, physicists and even the odd economist.

Arnold, the committee chair, checks everyone on his list is present, then the doors close with a whoosh and the bus departs. We head out on a road going north.

Jess and I settle back and catch up with the latest on friends and family. She's my baby half-sister: my parents divorced when I was ten, and when I was twenty Dad married Suyin and had Jess. I've always adored her.

She works for one of the massive Internet companies, the consistently cool one she says. She doesn't even have to leave her beautiful apartment in central Melbourne to go to work either, they do everything remotely. Once I teased her about holding meetings via hologram and she said, 'Next year.' I don't think she was joking.

We pass through a landscape of orange-dust pindan and small gum trees, the indigo sky above blending with a hazy lavender horizon. The scrub isn't the dry grey-brown I'm used to seeing around Sydney either: here it glows with lime, emerald and silvery jade.

After a couple of days in the Kimberley I'm still not used to the vividness of the landscape, the rich blues of the sea and the rust-reds of the soil. Even Jess, usually unimpressed by nature, keeps turning around to stare.

The road isn't sealed but it's wide and glides smoothly beneath us, and we reach the Worm Turning plant in less than an hour. At a big T-junction we drive onto a sealed road with

beautifully landscaped verges and sculptures scattered among the flowering shrubs.

After a short time I see enormous steel gates ahead of us, guarded by a surprisingly large cluster of soldiers in black. In a clearing to one side is a little camp of tents and chairs with a fireplace in the middle.

The bus slows. Suddenly there's a group of people running along beside us. They're yelling and waving placards reading *Our Land Not Yours, No Nuclear Plant, Stop Digging in Sacred Ground!* Some of the protesters are silver-haired Sea Rovers but most are Aboriginal.

In Sydney I know only two Indigenous people—a girl from Wagga doing a doctorate and a boy from Redfern in my honours class. They're handsome brown kids, bright as buttons, my grandfather Mike would have said. But these people are dark-skinned, their faces plain, passionate, furious.

The bus stops for a moment at the gates and I realise a large white-haired man outside is gazing at me. Our eyes meet and I can't turn away. He nods thoughtfully as if he knows me.

Then he smiles, a glorious open smile illuminated by his long white beard, and I can't help but return it. What a lovely man—why on earth would I think 'plain'?

With a roar of acceleration the bus rushes through the gates. Looking back, Jess and I can see the soldiers pushing into the group, swinging their weapons viciously at the outnumbered protesters. We turn to each other, horrified.

'Wow. That's overkill for some bits of cardboard,' she says.

I nod, thinking of the bearded man and his lovely smile.

We drive quickly along a road bordered with manicured bushes, then turn right into a large car park and halt. We emerge in the afternoon heat and are met by three tour guides, the leader a young, cool-faced woman. Our beefy bus

driver greets her and takes her aside, murmuring.

She turns back to us. 'Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Geo-Garrod's new plant, Worm Turning,' she says. 'Our apologies for that little unpleasantness at the gates. Professional agitators that's all. We'd like to point out that this land was acquired legally, via compensation to the traditional landholders.'

'So what was it about, then?' says Jess. Sometimes I wish she'd let other people ask the awkward questions.

'There's always a disgruntled few,' says the woman, shrugging. 'Didn't get their share I expect. Now we'd like you all to climb aboard for the tour.'

Three small buses painted in the crimson and green of Geo-Garrod Ltd are waiting for us. Jess and I are towards the end of the queue, so when we get on our bus we have to take separate seats.

I'm beside a pleasant-looking young man—well, most people seem young to me now I've passed fifty. He's lanky and bearded, with curly brown hair and a long sensitive face.

I nod hullo and say, 'Lena Whalen,' and he replies, 'Matthew Rossi.'

'And what's your interest in the conference, Matthew?'

'Um,' he says, rubbing his forehead with his hands, and I realise he's upset.

'Are you okay?'

'Oh, bit appalled at what just happened at the gates,' he says. 'Those people are friends of mine.'

'Yes, that was horrible. Do the soldiers always pile into them so aggressively?'

'Often enough.'

The bus doors shut and we start driving past the main building, around to the rear of the plant. It's a startlingly

modern complex, with curved red and olive-green steel shapes along the facade that seem to echo the surrounding landscape.

‘The guide said the agreement for this land was legal,’ I say tentatively.

‘Well, she would say that, wouldn’t she?’ Matthew laughs softly. ‘But no. They paid some opportunists for their signatures—all blacks look the same to them after all. But they keep refusing to talk to the *real* custodians of this land, those people outside the gates.’

‘Isn’t there some tribunal they can appeal to?’

‘Are you kidding? No, the Sea Rovers lawyers have done what they can but so far ...’ He turns and smiles wryly at me. ‘You’re not from around here, obviously.’

‘Sydney.’

‘Ah. Well, things are different here in the west. A lot of people would just love it if this state separated completely from Australia. They hate land rights law—any Commonwealth law—and they think they’d all get rich if they could do whatever they liked.’

‘What?’

‘Western Australia’s closer to Asia than the eastern states. It’s always had a secessionist streak but the mining roller-coaster has really brought the crazies out to play.’

‘I had no idea.’

‘Now there’s only a couple of independents stopping the politicians from giving it a go. God knows what would happen if ...’ Matthew shrugs. ‘Anyway. Sorry to be depressing.’

The guide taps the microphone and says, ‘Welcome, ladies and gentleman. Here you see Worm Turning’s innovative new nuclear reprocessing plant, many times smaller than similar facilities due to Geo-Garrod’s patented technologies. The plant has already received international awards for its engineering

and architecture.’

At the rear of the building we drive past a massive open structure full of loading docks and railway lines. It’s as dramatic and attractive as the front.

‘To your left is where the plant will receive used nuclear fuel from all over the world. After undergoing Geo-Garrod’s revolutionary new treatment, valuable radioactive material will be extracted and returned to its owners. The waste will be encased in inert material and disposed of in the famous Wormhole.’

The bus turns away and we drive along a sealed road through bushland. A double railway line leads from the plant, running beside the road.

Matthew says, ‘So what brings you to the conference, Lena?’

‘I was press-ganged onto the organising committee—I work in medical nuclear physics. What about you?’

‘Geology. Recently relocated to Broome from a lab in Perth.’

‘Nice change,’ I say. ‘Why did you make the move?’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t stop pointing out that the structure of this region isn’t quite as Geo-Garrod claims. Unfortunately my lab was in the running for a big contract from Geo-Garrod and once they got rid of me they landed it.’

I’m surprised he’s so matter of fact. ‘That must have been a bit ... rough.’

‘Turned out for the best,’ he says. ‘I’ve set up a small local consultancy now. Family here, too.’ His sensitive face is still and I wonder if there’s more to it than that.

After a kilometre or so we halt in a car park and get out. We climb a flight of stairs onto a timber platform and I see Jessie through the small crowd and wave. She smiles and goes back to showing something on a mobile to a young man, who seems more interested in gazing at her smooth brown shoulders.

Our guide says proudly, arms outstretched, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, Worm Turning’s famous Wormhole.’

I move to the railing and look forward and gasp, like everyone around me.

I’d always assumed the Wormhole was some sort of ordinary mine, but it’s a vast, open-cut, wound in the earth. Railway lines spiral several times around the sides then pass into a tunnel at the bottom and disappear.

‘The excavation is half a kilometre deep,’ says the guide. ‘And below the surface is a maze of tunnels spreading down a further half kilometre, where the waste will be permanently stored.’

‘My goodness, *marvellous*,’ says Arnold, the committee chair, his bushy white eyebrows almost meeting his hairline.

‘Sales of mineral sands from the excavation have helped fund the plant and mining will continue for some time yet, however the initial phase is complete. The Wormhole is now ready to begin storing nuclear waste and it’s large enough to do so for a long time into the future.’

‘When do operations begin?’ asks someone in the crowd.

‘After the grand gala opening next week.’

I stare at the structure, astonished by its sheer scale.

‘Amazing, yes?’ says Matthew quietly beside me.

‘Not at all as I’d pictured.’ I look at him, curious. ‘But you don’t like it.’

‘No. Something’s wrong with the whole thing and it could be dangerous.’

‘To whom?’

‘All of us. They’ve systematically lied—’

‘Dude!’ A plump young man in a black T-shirt slaps him on the shoulder. ‘Didn’t think you’d have the nerve to turn up. Man, you’re a glutton for punishment.’

‘I think I’ll just go and see my sister,’ I say, and slip away through the crowd. Matthew Rossi seems like a sweet guy but it sounds as if he’s got a bit of a chip on his shoulder.

I move to the railing again. What an enormous hole, all that soil—mineral sands, I think the guide said—dug up, shipped away and sold. And that was just a precursor to the main event, the revolutionary new reprocessing plant.

I turn and contemplate the red and green steel building in the distance. What an audacious scheme.

The conference welcome event is held in a vast reception foyer at the front of the plant. They serve us exquisite canapés and what may be the best champagne I’ve ever tasted. I chat to people I know and get introduced to dozens I don’t.

It’s all a bit of a blur after the second glass, but very pleasantly so. As always, Jess is perfectly at home chatting to a bunch of techies.

Later, when we leave the plant, I tense as our bus passes through the now floodlit gates. The ominous soldiers are still there and as the lights glitter on their insignias I realise they’re American military, not Australian.

The protesters are back in their camp—I see moving shadows against the flickering fire—and I hope they’re all right, especially after the pounding they took today. From what Matthew said they have good reason to protest.

Jessie has fallen asleep on my shoulder, tired after the flight from Melbourne. I brush my cheek against my sister’s hair for a moment and smile to myself, content to be with her again.

Non-technical people find her difficult. She asks awkward questions and finds it hard to bother with people who can’t keep up with her crystalline intellect. She’s in her thirties now

and I worry she won't find the right sort of guy to settle down with, someone who'll love her and let her be her own slightly eccentric self.

But then, who does get to find that special guy? I sigh.

Street lights are now flashing past the windows and we're turning into the brightly-lit hotel car park. I shake Jess gently and say, 'We're back.'

The doors whoosh open and we stumble out of the air-conditioned bus into the hot, humid evening. Arnold calls out, 'Don't forget, everyone, nine a.m. start on the *dot* tomorrow.'

People say goodnight or wander off to the bar overlooking the bay, but I've eaten canapés enough for a four-course meal and Jess says she has too.

We briefly consider the prospect of a swim in the turquoise pool but decide it's time to crash out instead. It's been a long day.

2. Minister Iceberg

I hold up the card showing zero minutes remaining but the speaker ignores me. I stand and go to one side of the stage with his gift, hoping he'll take the hint.

'Let me just revisit ...' he says.

God, I hate chairing at conferences.

'I'm afraid we'll have to cut it short here Dr Wilson, we've run out of time,' I interrupt. 'I'm sure anyone with questions will take them up with you at morning tea. Would you all please thank Dr Wilson for that very interesting presentation.'

I give him his gift (a bottle of local wine) and start clapping, and the audience follows without obvious enthusiasm.

The man I call Dr Tedious sits back in his seat with a cross expression. From earlier talks I know his question would just be the usual dick-waving, so it doesn't bother me to end the session now. We're ten minutes over time as it is and delightful coffee scents are wafting in from the foyer.

At the break I stand quietly in the background and gaze at the attendees—mainly men of course. Occasionally I meet another female scientist, but as a woman in my field I'm usually pretty lonely.

I've done my best to learn the matey tribal customs over the years, and most of the time I fit in. Roughly. Every now and then it's painfully brought to my attention I never really can.

After the break my chairing duties are over, so I'm able to

relax and listen to the talks. I sit not far from the auditorium door—never know when a discreet departure might be welcome, especially if the jargon gets excessive.

I check my program for the session and see the first presenter is the young man I met yesterday, Dr Matthew Rossi speaking on *Geomorphology of the Dampier Peninsula: a New Perspective*.

Lanky Matthew takes the stage. After the usual problem with his slides—I think, come on support folk, does this have to happen every single time?—he settles in and gives a calm, efficient talk. It's something about structures deep in the land, unrecognised instability, unusual minerals.

I don't follow the details, but alerted by his words yesterday I realise he seems to be proposing something unwelcome to the mood of the audience. The geologists in particular don't seem very happy. I know many are employed by Geo-Garrod, and I wonder what's making them so cranky.

It doesn't sound like revolutionary stuff to me, but then what do I know about the geomorphology of the Dampier Peninsula?

Matthew finishes. 'I'm happy to take questions.' Excellent speaker I note, ended well within his allotted time.

The chair points at one of the raised hands and someone says, 'Look, Matthew, you've been trotting this out at the last few conferences and I just don't see how you can defend it any more. Surely the work of something something indicates something?' (I'm paraphrasing here.)

'Dave, they're not looking at this model, criticisms have focused on the older model.'

'A lot of good results have come out of that one,' someone interjects from the floor.

'One at a time, please,' calls the chair.

A new speaker stands. ‘We all know the recent model has major flaws. You can’t base predictions on that.’

‘It’s not based on the discredited section of the recent model,’ says the young man patiently. ‘This is the latest extended model.’

There are a couple of groans of contempt from the audience, and the chair says, ‘Thank you Dr Rossi, for that most interesting presentation,’ and gives him his speaker’s gift. There’s a scattering of applause.

Matthew leaves the stage, head down. Poor guy. Science is brutal.

After lunch it’s time for my own presentation, an overview to bring the non-physicists up to speed. Although I’ve spoken many times it’s always a bit nerve-racking, but soon I settle in.

The good stuff first: the atom is your friend. Radiation for medical imaging, scanning, diagnosis, treatment. Reactors to heat steam, drive turbines, create power.

Then the not so good: nuclear waste, accidents, fallout. Rotting old plants nobody wants, shiny new ones too close to fault zones. Exposure, survival rates, promising treatments.

I talk about the Hiroshima and Nagasaki children, the Chernobyl kids, the Fukushima babies, and the whole new generation from Hanford yet to come: always the children. I don’t emphasise the fact there’s not much anyone can do when particles, fast and invisible, overwhelm living tissue.

Finally here, Worm Turning. The new plant to relieve the pressure of all that nuclear waste which so urgently needs reprocessing after the Hanford *incident*. (That’s the term the spin doctors prefer to *disaster*, but I’m not sure even that comes close—perhaps mega-something might work?)

I close the talk by simply saying Worm Turning seems like a good idea. The audience approves and I get away with just a minor intellectual mauling from Dr Tedious.

Afterwards I get a cup of tea and sit on a balcony overlooking Roebuck Bay, and wonder how there could be so many shades of blue-green in that water.

Teal on the horizon, turquoise closer in, jade and aquamarine near the shore, and hues without names that recall gemstones and stained glass. So beautiful.

In the auditorium some economist is extolling the benefits of the nuclear industry but suddenly I can't cope with the buzzwords. I sigh and find myself puzzling how I got to this low point in my life.

Jessie's mum Suyin worked in medical physics and the subject fascinated me. Radiation in medicine was invaluable and life-saving in so many ways, and as a research student I loved the intellectual puzzles of my studies.

But research requires a focus on statistics rather than people and that abstraction insulated me for a long time.

Then in the nineties I went to work with a humanitarian group supporting the Chernobyl children, the thousands of kids suffering with radiation-induced cancers. After that I couldn't regard people as an abstraction any more.

It damaged me professionally, of course: now I'm stuck at the middle levels of academia and know I'll go no further. I don't have the right attitude, you see.

My hair flutters in the warm breeze and the reflection in the glass catches my eye. I wonder how others see me—a confident organiser who stands in an auditorium and tells eminent scientists what to do? An academic who speaks with calm authority on complex subjects? A quiet woman who moves unnoticed in the background of other people's lives?

Max used to say I reminded him of confident, lovely Meryl Streep. I doubt anyone would think that today.

Jess doesn't attend the talks because she's got teleconfs with Beijing and Tokyo, but that evening, as I'm dressing for the conference dinner, I tell her about Matthew Rossi's words at the Wormhole, and the odd atmosphere in his presentation today.

She's vaguely interested, but as it doesn't involve computing she doesn't really care. She's wearing some black slinky thing with a cutaway back. I search my luggage for something that might make me feel slightly attractive, with zero result, and put on a brown dress.

'Lena, what is this?' says Jess. 'Brown? You used to wear such pretty things. You're still not grieving for that creep Max? You've got to get out and find someone new.'

Drawing on my eyeliner, I shrug, which is something of a mistake.

'I'd like to, but so far ...'

'Well, tonight's your lucky night, I bet,' says Jess confidently. She is so wrong.

The dining room is bedecked with flowers, a jazz quartet softly playing. Jess and I are a few minutes late, which is unfortunate as everyone else has managed to find seats with their friends.

The only table with spare places is the boring one with the committee and official guests. And pariahs, I note, seeing Matthew sitting awkwardly alone.

I sit down between him and a man with a shaven head, and Jess sits on his other side. Across the table is the chair of the committee, Arnold, with his busy white eyebrows. The waiter

pours us wine.

Arnold says, 'Lena, we've had marvellous news—the Minister will be able to join us this evening after all!'

Oh damn, I think. I was hoping to avoid her.

'Now do let me introduce everyone,' says Arnold. 'Glenn Garrod, this is Dr Lena Whalen from our organising committee.'

I look up in surprise. The shaven-head man is the notorious owner of the Geo-Garrod plant? He's in his sixties, more attractive than he appears on TV, his eyes friendly, his shoulders solid in an open-necked shirt.

'And Dr Matthew Rossi—' Matthew nods.

'And ...?' asks Arnold.

'Oh, sorry,' I say. 'My sister, Jessie Whalen—Professor Arnold Sanders, chair of the committee.'

Arnold's eyebrows go up. 'Sister?'

I explain. 'My father remarried. We're half-sisters.'

With his usual tactlessness Arnold's eyebrows remain up.

Jess says, 'My mother was Chinese, Dr Sanders, that's why.'

'Indeed, yes of course.'

People arrive and mill around at the door.

'Arnold, I think they're here,' I say. He leaps up and goes to greet them, and my heart thuds.

Hell. Oh, *hell* to the thousandth power of hell.

Arnold proudly escorts two people to the table. 'Everyone, let me introduce the Honourable Alise Berg, Minister for the Industrial Environment, and her new chief of staff, Brigadier Max Leopard.'

My stomach clenches.

Greetings, handshakes. Alise is wearing a blue silk suit that looks both professional and exquisite. Her platinum hair shimmers to her shoulders, her heart-shaped face is so perfect

I want to slap her.

She's on charm automatic until she sees me. 'Good *heavens*, Lena. It's certainly been a while. You're looking ...'

'Hello, Ice. Yes it has. How's James?'

'Fine,' she says coolly. 'And I'm sure you have so much to talk about with Max—' She waves her hand at her new chief of staff.

'Hello, Max. See you've moved up in the world,' I say lightly, feeling sick.

'Dr Whalen.' He nods stiffly, his eyes looking past me.

Jess stares at him with loathing.

'Don't tell me you're *still* cross with each other,' says Alise. 'You'll be able to get that divorce soon enough.' She smiles sweetly. 'We must all move on.'

Thankfully they do.

I take a swig of wine. *God*, I hadn't expected—

Glenn Garrod murmurs, 'You've clearly met the Minister before.'

'Um, Ice? Yes, did our doctorates at the same time. But she dropped out, preferred politics instead.' (And my first sweetheart, James. That still stung.)

'Ice? Ah, Ice Berg.' He's amused. 'And the Brigadier?'

I take another swig. 'My ex-husband, or soon to be. I'd heard he was promoted but didn't realise it was onto the Minister's staff.'

Max Leopard? If he'd been named Alpha Male he couldn't have been more butch, with his severely handsome face and his mysterious past. Too late I realised the only mystery was his compulsive lying.

Thank heavens I never changed my name to his as he'd

wanted. *Lena Leopard?* Great stripper name.

‘You’re a nuclear physicist, Lena, I believe?’ says Garrod.

‘Oh? Yes, but not your sort, I’m on the medical, human exposure side of things. Fuel reprocessing’s way out of my league.’

He leans towards me with the full force of his famous charm. ‘Don’t be modest, I read your latest paper in the *Journal of Physics*. It was excellent.’

‘Thank you, Glenn. Surprised anyone’s read it.’

‘I made certain I was across everyone’s specialities before agreeing to speak. Don’t want to be drawn and quartered tomorrow.’

I grin ruefully. ‘There’ll always be someone who won’t like what you say.’

‘Half the country in my case.’

‘Wasn’t it sixty-seven percent in that last survey?’

‘Ouch. Let’s not be too precise here.’ Garrod looks at me, eyebrows raised. ‘You’re one of the sixty-seven percent?’

‘As a scientist I must always assume the best advice is being followed.’ I’m a little flustered by his proximity but it’s easy to take refuge in formality, my second nature. ‘It’s odd putting a plant in such a remote part of the country, but at least it’s safely isolated. And it’s certainly needed—the levels of unsafe nuclear waste are just appalling.’

‘And of course, you’ve got to agree our disposal technique is a first,’ he says.

‘Yes. Rather neat, that—almost a closed loop. Very impressive, at least from the limited data you’ve released about it.’

‘Commercial secrecy must take precedence over scientific openness,’ he says, smiling. ‘But I can promise you our plant does exactly what we’ve said it does.’

‘Well, it’s desperately needed, so congratulations on the innovation. We had a tour of the grounds yesterday and it really was impressive.’

Garrod nods, pleased. He leans down and takes something from a briefcase.

‘If you’d be interested in attending the opening ceremony next week, Lena, I’d be delighted to see you there. Invitations for you and a friend, with my compliments,’ he says, handing me two ornate cards.

‘That’s very kind, Glenn. But I thought it was supposed to be a highly exclusive event,’ I joke.

He grins. ‘It certainly is, and damned tedious too. You might improve things a bit.’

I smile to myself as I tuck the tickets in my bag. Despite my brown dress the shroud of middle-aged invisibility hasn’t quite settled over me yet.

The Minister comes back from glad-handing the room and sits down beside Garrod, demanding his attention. I’m relieved to see Max is over at another table. He’s seated beside Dr Tedious and I’m not sure who to feel sorry for. Neither, I finally decide.

A man in uniform arrives and sits down beside the Minister.

‘Oh, *there* you are,’ says Alise, touching his arm. ‘Everyone, this is Colonel Wayne Zukowski, liaison for the US government at Worm Turning.’

He’s boyishly handsome with crew-cut hair, about my age I suppose. Arnold introduces us all and the entrée arrives.

I’m enjoying the food and music but realise there’s a silence to one side. I’d noticed Matthew speaking to Jess earlier but she seems to have gone quiet, probably mentally working through some technical problem.

I turn to Matthew. 'I enjoyed your talk today.'

'You must have felt lonely then,' he says, amused.

'Most of it went over my head, but it sounded like an area of disagreement.'

His gaze flickers past me and I glance around too, but Glenn Garrod is deep in conversation with Minister Berg.

Matthew says quietly, 'I think they've got the geology wrong. The Dampier Peninsula isn't as stable as they claim and they've misrepresented the field analysis and—' he shakes his curly head, 'something's wrong and I don't understand it.'

I've met a few scientists convinced they alone have The Truth but he doesn't sound like one of them.

'How certain are you?' I ask.

'I've been visiting this region for years, spent months camping in the country. As a geologist I've done dozens of field trips and kept up with the latest research. And as a friend, I've sat down with the elders and listened, *really* listened—'

'Sorry?'

'The Aboriginal elders, some of the people in that protest camp. They know more about what's under the surface of this land than anyone.'

'What, compared to modern science?' I say lightly.

A look of pain comes over his face and he goes to reply but Alise's voice cuts across the table like a scalpel.

'So, Lena—how's academic life *treating* you?'

'I'm enjoying it, Ice. It's—dynamic.' I'm sick of the treadmill but I wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of knowing that.

'I was *terribly* sorry to hear about you and Max,' she says, as intimately as you can get across a dinner table full of people hanging onto your every word.

'And James?' I say. 'Pity that didn't work out. What's he doing now?'

‘Oh, an embassy, somewhere,’ she says tightly. Poor James—a brilliant physicist but she’d forced him into the Diplomatic Service, then dumped him.

‘And Environmental Industry? Oh, sorry, Industrial Environment?’ I say. ‘Hard to tell one from the other, really.’

‘The environment as a recreational resource is under another portfolio, as I’m sure you know *perfectly* well, Lena.’ Her eyes are cool. ‘It’s my responsibility to deal with the harsh realities of industrial growth and economic benefit.’

‘At what expense?’ says Jessie suddenly. ‘I thought any serious cost-benefit analysis across the entire human and environmental economy, not just political cherry-picking, gives a very different measure of those harsh realities.’

‘I’m sorry,’ says Alise. ‘And you would be—?’

‘Jess Whalen. Universal secure system interconnections.’

‘My goodness, what a *big* title.’

‘It’s not a title, it’s not even a discipline. It’s what I do.’

Alise looks at me. ‘Of course, *now* I remember. You have that strange blended family, don’t you Lena? Your sister, yes?’

I nod, and mercifully the main course appears. We finish without further breaches of protocol, although I can see Arnold is already planning I won’t be on next year’s committee.

That’s fine by me, there probably won’t be a next year anyway. This conference is basically a one-off to reassure the public that the best minds in the country have considered the new plant at Worm Turning and given it the scientific thumbs up. Apart from Matthew Rossi, that is. Interesting.

The table is partly empty now as people circulate. Alise is charming her way around the room with Glenn Garrod at her side, and Jess has gone over to chat to a bunch of techies clustered around some device.

Wayne Zukowski nods affably at me and I say, with my helpful committee hat on, 'Are you stationed permanently at Worm Turning, Colonel?'

'For the immediate future, ma'am.' His voice is attractively deep.

'I suppose it's usually pretty quiet out there.'

'So long as the protesters keep their distance, certainly. But there's always the threat of terrorists.'

'I thought it was so remote there'd be no chance of that.'

'Beg to differ, ma'am. It's under the protection of the US Government and our agreement with your people is pollution *and* security, a world first. But this remote coast, right next to China?' He shakes his head regretfully. 'You need us and by God, we'll look after the place like it's our very own territory. We signed on the dotted line to do just that.'

'We're not precisely *right* next to China,' I say, and he smiles as if I'm joking.

'As good as.' He refills my wine glass. 'Now do tell me all about Sydney, ma'am.'

Luckily people drift back to the table before I have to sum up five million people and thirty square kilometres of civic infrastructure in a few words. Dessert is served along with more enthusiasm from Arnold, then the excruciating evening is finally over.

At least I didn't have to talk to Max, and the bigwigs are leaving after the Minister's speech tomorrow. They'll be back next week for the gala opening of Worm Turning, but with luck we won't have to meet again.

Jessie and I go to my room for a cup of tea. She flings herself down on my bed as I turn on the kettle. I think of the look of

loathing she gave Max and say hesitantly, 'Did he ever try anything on with you, Jess?'

'Who, Maxie the creep? Just once. I broke his finger.'

'Good on you. He said it was from playing football.'

'Well, he wasn't going to start telling the truth any time soon, was he?'

I smile. 'Did you have a good chat with the techies?'

'Techies? I'd have got more sense out of Madame Iceberg than them. They imagine their stupid new device is advanced.'

'Isn't it?'

She rolls her eyes and says, 'Wait on, got something for you.'

She goes to her room and returns with a small cardboard box. We sit together on the bed as she opens it.

'Now this is *advanced*,' she says with satisfaction. 'I'm doing the field testing.'

As far as I can understand, Jessie's speciality is somewhere between hardware and software, devising human-scale devices with unprecedentedly secure communication capabilities (her words).

But that doesn't look anything like the contents of the box: two wrist cuffs with intricate designs in gems and coloured enamel, and two rings covered with flat blue moonstones.

'Jess, they're *gorgeous*.'

'Here, put these on.' She taps on one cuff and it opens, then she closes it around my left wrist. 'And the ring.' She slips it onto my middle finger. Both ring and cuff fit snugly but as I move my wrist the cuff flexes, the colours shimmering.

Jess puts the other cuff and ring on her own slim hand, and I say dubiously, 'Field testing?'

'Yeah. See that small green stone on the inside of your wrist? There. And the array of enamel dots above it? Watch.'

She taps several points on her own cuff. I feel a tickle against

my wrist. She walks into my bathroom saying, 'Touch the green stone then hold your hand near your head.'

I do and her voice in my ear says, 'Cool, eh?'

'They're *phones!* Jess, that's brilliant!'

'No need to yell. I know they are.' She comes out of the bathroom grinning. 'Three years in design, first prototypes and now I'm testing them to destruction. I call them comcuffs.'

I kiss her in delight. 'Comcuffs! You amazing thing, show me how they work.'

'Well, I'll show you the code for opening them. The display is this small panel, and the ring has lenses for taking images, video too. Cuffs hide their data inside other network traffic, looking like a sort of digital static, invisible and untraceable.'

'Jess, I can't believe it. Dick Tracy watches, but pretty ones.'

'A bit better than that, thank you very much,' she grins. 'But listen, Lena. They're *seriously* secret.'

'Okay, secret, got it. Now show me all the magic.'

3. My Cousins

I awake at dawn, emerging from a delicious dream. I haven't touched a man for a long time and I yearn for contact: belly on belly, warmth, stubble, sweat—I groan in frustration. I want to be open, known, sated. That's what my body wants at any rate.

The rest of me says no. Trust again? Let someone come that close again? I don't think so.

I decide to go for a walk. The air is fresh and cool, the sky clear blue and gold-tinted to the east. My head clears as I stroll down the rise from the hotel to the town.

I look out to the bay, which isn't the postcard scene you might imagine, though it's still beautiful—blue-green water lapping on a muddy red shore lined with emerald mangroves. This is old Broome, not the glossy resort at Cable Beach a few kilometres away.

Near the road, half-hidden by trees, I can see a cluster of small dusty buildings, an Aboriginal community. On the town's green oval I've seen groups of dark-skinned people sitting under the trees or walking unsteadily or arguing.

The contrast could not be more brutal: my colleagues in the cool luxury of the hotel, those people with lives of such hardship. Two interlaced worlds, each of them invisible to the other.

I turn towards Dampier Terrace, facing onto the bay. It's so quiet all I can hear is a car in the distance and a couple of

seagulls. I notice a display of two luggers, boats once used for pearlshell fishing, and gaze at them with interest.

This is the first time I've been to Broome, but I have an odd connection to the place—my grandfather Mike Whalen grew up here between the wars. His mother even owned one of these big wooden boats and his father used to build them.

Mike would sometimes say my eyes were the colour of Roebuck Bay and now, seeing those turquoise waters, I recognise the compliment.

I'm sure every family has its secrets, funny and sad, and Mike was ours. I didn't even meet him till I was twenty. He'd had a fling many years before with my grandmother, and to everyone's surprise—including his—it turned out he was my dad's real father.

My darling Nana would say, 'Well, it was just before I got married after all, and my husband died in the war and I didn't have the foggiest I was pregnant to Mike, oh heavens.' And then she'd blush crimson and Mike would hug her.

I grew up in a small country town where my studious dreams puzzled everyone. My parents were divorced: Mum was happy with her new partner, and Dad, well, complicated doesn't come near it.

But my grandfather, an engineering professor, was the only person I knew who understood my love of science, who understood me: and he fitted into my family as if he'd always been part of it.

Mike's death a few years ago has left me with a bizarre sense of emptiness. While I can remember he was a kind, perceptive man, there isn't any emotion with that knowledge. I simply can't feel Mike's comforting warmth any more. A psychiatrist told me this was just the result of shock and would pass with time, but even after so long it hasn't.

I wander into a side street and around the corner, past the open-air cinema where Mike used to watch black-and-white movies as a boy. I'd hoped this trip to Broome might re-awaken my sense of that dear man, and I try once again to imagine him here in this place he loved so much.

But I can't feel him here. I can't feel him anywhere.

The final day of the conference, thank heavens, but it's the big one. First up the Honourable Minister for the Industrial Environment with a long, dull version of her 'economic benefit' speech from last night. Jess was right, it's just cherry-picking, with no genuine accounting of the real cost.

Bored, I flex my wrist to make the comcuff shimmer pleasingly. Even if it wasn't a fabulous device it would still be lovely. Jessie and I have been practising talking to each other—a casual hand to the head and soft sub-vocalising, and no one else notices a thing.

Applause at last, then the next speaker, charming Glenn Garrod from last night: the owner of Geo-Garrod Ltd and instigator of this new fuel reprocessing project. He's wearing a loose tie, the sleeves of his sky-blue shirt rolled up. He looks competent, approachable.

He begins, 'You're here to discuss Worm Turning and that's a good thing. People need to know how safe it is. How environmentally smart it is. How it can protect us by reducing the tonnes of nuclear waste that threaten us all.'

He looks at the journalists in the front row. 'So, a reprocessing plant—what is that? Well, the world is full of ageing nuclear power stations. We're stuck with them but I'll certainly say here and now, I'm glad to see more efficient new facilities already in production.'

A scatter of applause, and a colourful slide comes up on the screen. Uranium fuel is burning tidily inside a reactor, the reactor is heating steam, the steam driving turbines, the turbines creating electricity, and the electricity making a family happy as they pick flowers and smile at each other.

I sigh. If only it were that easy.

Garrod continues smoothly. 'As we all know, nuclear fuel has a limited life and becomes waste after a few years of use. For a long time that waste was kept in vast numbers of storage drums—until recently, of course, when the shortcomings of such a scheme were discovered in the most terrible way possible.'

He grasps the podium and lowers his voice. 'Well. The Hanford Incident. We all saw the tragic news reports. And we can only pray those parts of Washington State and the Columbia River become habitable again one day.'

He wisely doesn't show a slide of what happened to the people of Hanford. Not many happy families there.

Garrod stares fiercely at the audience. 'Suddenly we found ourselves with a global crisis. Thousands of tonnes of waste urgently needed reprocessing, far beyond the capacities of existing conventional plants!'

A new slide appears, an artist's concept of the red and green factory we'd visited the other day, more glossy than the real thing and set in lush countryside rather than the Australian bush.

'The solution the world was crying out for? *Worm Turning!* Our fast, secure plant with its patented technology can take all that lethal waste and break it down, leaving just a small active source and a chunk of stable remainder. We return the source to its owners and bury the remainder on-site in our other great innovation—the *Wormhole.*'

A slide of the Wormhole at sunset appears. It looks like an abstract painting in a glamorous penthouse rather than a great wound in the earth.

Garrod spreads his hands, smiling disarmingly. 'Look, people, doing this stuff is bloody expensive. But Worm Turning pays for itself. Next to a superb source of mineral sands, we're mining it, shipping it away, recouping the expense and even making a profit to keep our shareholders happy.'

There's laughter.

He leans forward and says emphatically, 'And that stable remainder is buried deep inside the Wormhole forever and ever. It's win-win-win for all of us!'

The last slide is a graphic of ships—somehow *happy* ships—converging on Worm Turning, which is also greening the desert, saving the planet and no doubt bringing about world peace.

'And this new era starts in just a week, a week until the future begins! Thank you.' Garrod steps away from the podium to a roar of applause.

Bloody clever, I think, then see movement near the front of the auditorium. A deep voice calls out, 'You're destroying sacred ground, Garrod, breaking the serpent's back! It'll turn on you in the end!'

Garrod chuckles and returns to the microphone. 'I guess that's the real meaning of 'worm turning' but I don't think it's going to fly here. Wondered when you'd pop up, Paddy, old mate.'

I see several security guards heading down the front. They converge on a small group of Aboriginal people—a middle-aged woman, a young man and a large white-bearded man, who's the one calling out.

The guards march them to the exit near me, then stop for a

moment to listen to something on their earpieces, and I suddenly realise the white-bearded man is the protester I saw at the plant.

Our eyes meet and he nods and smiles delightfully, just as he did the other evening. The guards start pushing their captives roughly towards the exit. They pass through the doors to the foyer outside and I get up and follow them.

‘That’s enough,’ I say. ‘I’m from the committee. Leave them with me, please.’

‘We’re supposed to eject them,’ replies one guard.

‘I’ve got the responsibility here. Go back to the auditorium, you’re needed there.’

They shrug and leave. I look at the three surprised ejectees.

‘So,’ I say, surprised myself, ‘can I offer you a cup of tea?’

The white-bearded man laughs. ‘Sure you can.’

We sit on the balcony with our tea, looking out to the bay. A new speaker is on stage so everyone else is still in the hall.

‘I saw you on the bus the other night,’ says the man. ‘But I know you anyway.’

‘I don’t think so,’ I say. ‘I’ve never been to this part of the world before.’

‘You got relatives around here?’ asks the woman.

‘Not really. My grandfather grew up in Broome, and his half-brother came back, but he died a few years ago.’

‘Liam,’ says the man. ‘Liam Whalen. Good mate of mine.’

‘That’s *him*, my uncle! How on earth did you know?’

He grins. ‘Not blackfella magic—just your name tag. Good painter too.’

(He certainly was. Granddad gave me some of his famous brother’s paintings and I treasure them.)

‘Welcome,’ says the woman. ‘Welcome to country, cousin.’ She has friendly eyes and a dramatic silver streak down one

side of her hair.

I laugh. 'I'm not really a cousin—'

The white-bearded man says, 'Yes you are, you just don't know it yet. Lena, is it? I'm Paddy Bull, this is Maggie Everett and that's Aidan Cooper.'

The young man smiles. 'Hiya, Lena.' He has dark arched eyebrows, perfect cheekbones and a silver earring.

'So what were you yelling out to Garrod in there?' I ask Paddy, to stop myself staring at beautiful Aidan.

'I told that bugger he was breaking the back of the serpent and messing with sacred ground. It'll hurt him in the end.'

'Sorry,' I say politely. 'What do you mean?'

'Look. Things I can talk about and things I can't,' Paddy's brow creases. 'But what I can say is there's a serpent deep underneath. Runs from the top of the Dampier Peninsula, past Worm Turning, past Broome to south of here. If you dig into it, interrupt it, it'll be bad for everyone. Really bad.'

'But that's ...' I can't say *superstition* to these lovely people.

'They think we're against change for the sake of it,' says Aidan, 'but it's not that.'

'Here's the man,' says Paddy. 'He'll tell you all about it.'

Lanky Matthew is coming towards us, grinning. 'I see you've met my friends, the elders. This is what I was trying to explain last night.'

Assumptions. Got to lose my big-city assumptions.

These aren't naive outback folk. Aidan is a paramedic, Maggie a primary school teacher and Paddy a drug and alcohol counsellor for his countrymen. Paddy and Maggie are clearly elders, but Aidan?

'An elder is someone with knowledge, and responsibility for

that knowledge,' Maggie explains.

We're sitting in a quiet corner in the cafe. I don't want to be interrupted by anyone from the conference as they stream out for coffee. I'm fascinated by my new companions. My 'cousins.'

'Let's put it in scientific terms, Lena,' says Matthew. 'Knowledge of this land has been passed on by Indigenous people for the last sixty thousand years or more—initiations, legends, even the stories we invaders are allowed to hear. It's not mythology. It's a code—part social structure, part natural science.'

'Okay,' I shrug. 'Codes makes sense to me.'

'The codes preserve a wealth of knowledge of geological structures above and below ground. What the elders have told me aligns precisely with research and my own observations.'

Paddy looks exasperated. 'Well of *course* it does, Matthew. Jeez.'

'There's a large aquifer, a deep subterranean watercourse the length of the Dampier Peninsula,' says Matthew in his quiet voice. 'And the Wormhole is right over the aquifer—if they break into it, the flooding will devastate the mine. Worst of all, the stored material will pollute the aquifer.'

'But why haven't their surveys found it?'

'Haven't gone deep enough, and now they won't because they're certain there's nothing to find.' He shakes his head, puzzled. 'Slow acceptance of research I can understand—but there's something else too, something very odd going on.'

'What?'

'It's a long story—'

Maggie laughs. 'I've heard all this before. My cue to go, got a class.'

'And me,' says Aidan. 'On duty soon.'

'I'll come too,' says Paddy. 'Good to meet you, Lena.'

We stand and I shake hands with these three fascinating people I met such a short time ago. I feel something I can't identify but it makes me surprisingly happy.

'See you later, cuz,' says Aidan.

Matthew and I sit down again; he's all elbows and knees. 'Cuz?' he asks.

'My grandfather came from here, and his half-brother—my great-uncle—was part Aboriginal.'

'Whalen? What, not *Liam Whalen*?'

'Yes. I had no idea that would matter so much.'

'Family's everything here. But you don't have to be family to become family.'

I laugh, then realise he's perfectly serious.

'So what's this odd thing about Worm Turning, Matthew?'

'Some background,' he says. 'Years ago a gas refinery was proposed north of here at James Price Point. The Indigenous name is Walmadan. There were massive protests. Heard of it?'

I shrug. 'No, sorry. There are so many industrial projects and protests but usually something gets worked out. Isn't that what happened?'

'No, backward and forwards for years, but bit by bit the infrastructure was built up.' He rubs his bearded chin slowly. 'Look, I'm a geologist, I *like* the idea of minerals being used for human benefit—but there's already a refinery like that in the Pilbara, and for the locals a gas plant just means ruining the valuable tourist economy.'

'So what's a gas plant got to do with Worm Turning?'

'The basic infrastructure at Walmadan was already in place when the reprocessing project burst out of the blue. The protesters were caught off guard and the whole thing got instant approval.'

'The Honourable Minister Berg, I suppose.'

He nods. 'And then of course the Americans got in on the act. Terrorists, security, the same tired old bunch of bogeymen.' He shakes his head. 'I have *never* seen a project move so fast, every legal safeguard was bypassed. Most reputable geologists can't believe it.'

'What about the ones at this conference?'

'Most of them work for Geo-Garrod.'

I'm surprised. 'I thought this was an honest review. It's not?'

'I'm the token nay-sayer, but it's a whitewash. The basic science hasn't been done and protections aren't in place, legal or social. And it's on appropriated Aboriginal land.'

'Apart from the social aspect—and come on, Matthew, it's just a bit of bush—haven't the Americans guaranteed they'll take full responsibility for security or pollution problems?'

'Yes. That's what really scares me,' he says. 'When have they ever taken responsibility for their own pollution, let alone anyone else's?'

I laugh, then stop in surprise. He's right.

'And,' Matthew says hesitantly, 'it's *not* just a bit of bush, Lena. It's stolen land, beautiful land with great importance to the Kimberley. Something's wrong with how this was done and why it was done in that particular spot.'

I say dryly, 'Okay. I agree it doesn't sound very ethical. But that's not strange in itself, just business as usual.'

'Perhaps so, but other things worry me too. They're lying about what they're digging up, for instance. You heard Garrod announce they're selling the mineral sands at a profit?'

'You don't believe him?'

He shakes his head. 'Not true. There are deposits of the stuff everywhere. There's even a worldwide glut at the moment, no reason for anyone to be paying big money.'

'So what's actually in these sands?'

‘Mostly titanium and zircon. Titanium goes into paint and zircon yields zirconium.’ He smiles. ‘But you’d know all about that.’

I nod. ‘Zirconium’s used to clad nuclear fuel rods in reactors, it lets the radiation pass straight through.’

‘But to get zirconium out of zircon they have to remove traces of hafnium, and that has quite the opposite action,’ he says with an odd intensity.

‘Yes.’ I say, puzzled. ‘Hafnium *absorbs* radiation so it’s used to control nuclear reactions. Not much good for anything else though.’

He leans forward and says quietly. ‘But what about the induced gamma emission of hafnium-178?’

I look at him in amazement and burst out laughing. ‘Oh, come off it, Matthew. You don’t believe that tired old urban myth, do you?’

‘The US Defense Advanced Research Agency put millions into studying it.’

‘DARPA puts millions into lots of things, it’s their idea of loose change. And just like the imaginary hafnium bomb, they go nowhere.’

‘So you don’t find it strange the idea was ridiculed, the results practically buried?’ Matthew says.

‘No. It was absurd.’

‘The Chinese and Russians don’t think so. They’ve recently done some interesting work.’

I’m surprised. ‘Really? I didn’t know.’

‘Doesn’t get much publicity. I’ll email you the papers. What’s your address?’

I tell him, wondering if he does have a chip on his shoulder after all. He enters my address in his phone then looks up at my doubtful face and says, ‘I’m not crazy, Lena, I promise you.’

He's a lovely young man and I'm probably being a bit hard on him. 'Matthew,' I say gently, 'This is tinfoil hat territory, you know?'

'I used to think so too,' he says. 'But look, there's something else. The data they've published for the mineral composition is completely bogus.'

'Bogus?'

'A friend of mine did the initial analysis and privately told me about it,' he says. 'Then she was suddenly transferred and given a promotion, so now she couldn't care less.'

'Good for her.'

'A lot more effective than telling her to keep quiet, true. But I went to look for myself,' Matthew says. 'I know the area and it was easy enough to get through the fence, take my own samples, do my own tests.'

'And?'

'Geo-Garrod states it's the standard yield, one or two percent. But the Wormhole mineral sands have closer to *twenty percent* hafnium. It's a stunningly rich motherlode, there's nothing else like it on the planet.'

He spreads his hands and says quietly, 'So I keep wondering who's paying that big money? Who wants this stuff so badly—and why?'

4. At the Jetty

The conference ends that evening, with lots of hand-shaking and back-slapping and promises of eternal collaboration. I help with the usual committee tasks—sorting out loose ends with the venue organisers, pulling down banners, picking up appraisal forms, gathering water-glasses—all the famous glamour of global scientific interaction.

In the night Jessie and I go out to a restaurant for dinner, and sit at a table on the veranda. The air is humid but a breeze cools us down.

Over the meal I tell her about my strange day—meeting my ‘cousins’ (hers as well), and Matthew’s concerns. She says she likes his sequence of logic about the hafnium, but then Jess likes sequences of logic about anything.

We consider desserts. ‘The apple thingy might be nice,’ I say.

‘Mmm. Looks a bit like your mum’s speciality.’

‘Oh, I got an email from her last night, I say. ‘They’re leaving the boat for a few weeks and having a holiday in Cairns. Should be lovely for them.’

Jess says firmly, ‘Enough of all that. What about you, Lena?’

‘Me?’

‘You. Now this massive exercise in reality avoidance is over, what are you going to do?’

‘Pick up the dropped threads of my research. Carry on teaching, supervising postgrads. The usual.’

‘And is that what you want to do?’

‘Oh, Jess, I don’t *know*. My research isn’t going to be as useful as I’d hoped. I’ve got no new ideas. I’m fed up with teaching kids who don’t like learning.’ I sigh. ‘Why did you have to ask me such an awkward question?’

‘To hear your answer.’

‘Obviously.’

‘So you could hear your answer.’

I bury my face in my hands. After a moment I say, ‘I was hoping to ignore the disaster of my professional life for a week or two while we have a holiday.’

‘Okay. Ignored as of now. The apple thingy does look nice.’

I gaze at her with exasperation. Literal, sweet-natured Jess.

Next morning I wake up still puzzling over Matthew’s concerns about hafnium in the Wormhole sands. But I decide to worry about it later—I’m a scientist, I have to assume there’s a reasonable explanation. Once again I go for an early-morning walk to the old town while the air is still cool.

I admire the glamorous jewellery shops and their displays of large creamy pearls, then notice an old jetty stretching through the mangroves on Dampier Creek. I step onto it and walk carefully out to the end, seeing tiny red crabs in the mud below scuttling away in panic at the noise of my feet.

No one else is around, but I feel safe, and oddly content.

I sit near the end of the jetty and play with the comcuff Jessie gave me, touching the buttons she said were for taking photos. It’s not difficult at all.

The lens is one of the moonstones on the ring, and the images appear, wonderfully sharp, on a wide silvery gem on the inside of my wrist. Then I try to sort out the video setting,

and after a few false starts I'm charmed to see a view of pink clouds moving in the morning sky.

I lean back on my arms and take a deep breath and enjoy the peaceful scene. The rust-brown mud looks richly fertile and the roots of the glossy green mangroves reach like fingers into the air. Birds flutter past and the red crabs shuffle busily between their holes.

I close my eyes and feel myself relaxing deeply. It's as if I'm sinking into the jetty, the mud, the teeming life all around me. I smile. It's a new and pleasurable sensation. A long time passes, but it doesn't seem to matter. I feel so content.

Then I hear something splashing and come alert, imagining crocodiles. But it's just a man wading through the ankle-deep water in the mangroves. Damn. I was enjoying being alone.

He sees me and waves, and I politely wave back. He comes towards me, a fishing rod over his shoulder, and I realise it's the handsome young man I met yesterday, Aidan Cooper.

'Heya, Lena,' he says, as he gets closer. 'Great morning, eh?'

'Hi, Aidan. Just beautiful. Had any luck?'

He shakes his head. 'Nah, not today.'

He splashes back towards the shore. I follow, retracing my steps on the old jetty. When we meet he says, 'Cafe up the road's just opened. Want to get coffee?'

'That'd be good.'

He puts on his sandals and we walk to an arcade with small shops, get the coffees and sit at a table on the footpath.

I can't help noticing how striking he is, especially with that rakish silver earring. The shape of his eyes and golden skin show mixed ancestry too, like a lot of people I've seen around Broome—almost more Asian and European than Aboriginal.

I say, 'Do you do much fishing?'

'Relaxation mostly. Some of my rellies think I've gone soft

and couldn't last a day in country.'

'Your relatives still hunt for food?' I ask, surprised.

He smiles. 'Yeah. Run a trekking company for rich tourists.'

'Oh.' Another stereotype bites the dust.

'Always overbooked,' says Aidan. 'Deadly food.'

'That means good, doesn't it?'

'Yeah, great, fantastic.'

'Did you grow up around here?' I ask.

'Nah—near Karratha, further south. But Mum's from Broome. Her dad was a Japanese pearlshell diver back in the day.' He laughs. 'You were just about to say it, weren't you? *You don't look Aboriginal.*'

My face goes hot. 'Sorry, would that have been offensive?'

'Depends. If you're denying someone a scholarship, say, after you've taken everything they had for generations, then yes. Honest curiosity, no.'

'Scientist, I say. 'Always curious in my case.'

'Well, being Indigenous is defined by descent, identification and community, but none are easy. Descent? No birth certificates, and families broken apart when a hundred thousand kids get stolen for the sin of being partly white.'

'But wasn't that *ages* ago?' I say.

'Only sixty years. Curious, Lena? Ever wondered how so many half-white kids got conceived in the first place? Colonisers see rape as a perk of the job. My dad's granny—' Aidan swallows. 'Well, accounts for the narrow nose.'

He takes a breath. 'Identification's hard too. Kids felt shame, alienation, getting their culture beaten out of them in those bloody institutions. Why identify with people they're told to despise? Bonds get eroded, lost, denied.'

He sips his coffee. 'So really, being accepted by community, that's pretty fundamental. When people know each other's

country, grannies, aunts, great-uncles, when they know where you *fit*—that’s what matters. Not what you look like.’

I nod slowly. ‘Okay. Thanks, Aidan.’

He smiles. ‘You’ll need to be across all this family stuff, cuz. First time back home, you said. How’re you finding it?’

‘Broome’s not my home. I’m from South Gippsland, live in Sydney. Only my granddad’s family came from here.’

‘Holiday, then?’

I nod.

‘Ah, might surprise yourself. Hard to leave this place.’

‘I have my work in Sydney,’ I say. ‘Interesting stuff.’

‘Yeah, must be.’ I think he knows I’m lying.

I clear my throat. ‘And you’re an ambulance paramedic?’

Aidan nods. ‘Started as a volunteer then went into a training program. I really like being an ambo.’

‘Can’t imagine a place as peaceful as this with too many emergencies.’

‘Lot of drugs and alcohol, Paddy Bull’s pretty busy. Not just an Aboriginal problem, across the whole community—guess that’s how it is everywhere now. But all up, yeah, this is a pretty good place to live.’

‘Deadly?’ I say tentatively.

Aidan grins. ‘Way deadly.’

‘I hope Paddy and Maggie are all right after yesterday,’ I say. ‘You were pretty brave taking on Geo-Garrod in public. Are they big employers around here?’

He shakes his head. ‘Nah. The plant’s mostly automated, which doesn’t help the kids needing jobs. The Sea Rovers have helped with a couple of court challenges, but no luck. But the real problem is what the plant’s doing to country. The damage is massive and soon there’ll be no going back.’

He puts down his mug and leans towards me. His eyes are

amber beneath the dark arches of his brows.

‘And I worry about what Matthew says. You’re a physicist, Lena—what do you think about the mineral sands with all that hafnium stuff? Could they really make a bomb out of it?’

‘I don’t know, Aidan. It sounded plausible some years ago, but fell apart in experiments. Matthew says people are still working on it, but I expect it’s like the fantasy of perpetual motion or cold fusion—realm of crackpots.’

‘Whoa, bit harsh there, mate,’ he says, grinning.

‘Well, science *is* harsh, it has to be. But personally, I just hope any new sort of bomb stays as impossible as possible.’ I smile at my own words. ‘Dopey thing to say.’

‘You need that holiday I reckon. I’m taking time off too, annual break,’ he says, finishing his coffee. ‘You going on that boat cruise later today? I’ll be crewing—they’re mates of mine.’

‘Yes I am, should be nice,’ I say. ‘It’s so lovely here.’

‘But not all paradise, remember. Summer’s always bloody hard work, and even though it’s autumn now it’s still stinking hot, hasn’t rained for weeks. Then there’s the tropical cyclones too, of course.’

‘Cyclones? In April?’

‘Yeah, sometimes.’

‘My granddad Mike told me about a cyclone when he was a kid,’ I say. ‘He said boats were smashed, houses blown away. But I guess buildings are much stronger today.’

‘Broome’s been stupidly lucky for a long time,’ he says. ‘But a direct hit from a cyclone would be like an atom bomb. Not much at all would be left standing.’

‘Oh.’

Aidan frowns slightly. ‘Look, I’m not trying to wind you up, but keep an eye on the weather. For instance, there’s a low a thousand kays north-east right now. It’ll probably wander off

into the Indian Ocean as usual. But if you hear it's coming closer, pay attention.'

'To something a *thousand* kilometres away?'

'Oh, yeah.'

I get back to the hotel in time for breakfast. Today we've got the end-of-conference event Aidan mentioned, a sail along the coast on an old Broome lugger.

This is for the people who aren't immediately leaving town, of course. I assume Garrod and Berg have already flown the coop and taken my rat of a husband with them.

I'm just pouring a cup of tea when I realise the rat in question is hovering at the restaurant door. I'm even more surprised when he comes over and sits at my table.

He clears his throat. 'The other evening I noticed Garrod giving you invitations to the opening of Worm Turning.'

'Yes, I'm very well, thank you, Max, so is my family. How are your parents?' I ask.

'I haven't got time for pleasantries—'

'That's true.' My throat hurts.

'Lena, listen.' His jaw tightens. 'Please.'

I'm surprised. I don't think I've ever heard him say that before. Then he ruins the effect.

'It's not a good idea for you to go. I'd rather you didn't.'

'Why not? Bad for your image? Iceberg's been taking the piss?' I'm suddenly angry. 'Get lost, Max. I'll go if I want.'

His fists clench and I remember the rage beneath the smooth surface. He says, 'You stupid bitch. I'm trying to help.'

'Yeah?' My heart's pounding.

'Look, I don't think it'll be safe. Too many interests colliding. Protesters, psycho Yanks, hyped-up security out in the middle

of nowhere looking for a fight.'

'At the gala? I suspect the only danger'll be blindness from all the diamonds.' I'm suddenly puzzled. 'Psycho Yanks? Don't you mean Iceberg's best buddies?'

He licks his lips, his eyes evasive. Here we go, I think, what crap's coming up now?

'It's just a feeling ...'

'Feeling? Christ, Max, you'll be cuddling kittens next.'

I'm furious to realise my eyes are stinging. I just wanted to get through this *bloody* conference and have a peaceful holiday. The last thing I wanted was to talk to this horrible man again.

'Look, I just don't trust that Yank terrorist bullshit,' he says bitterly. 'They don't even believe it themselves. I can't work out why they're throwing such cash at this stupid little project. They're in a depression, their own country's knee-deep in shit, it's all crumbling roads and illiterate kids. I just don't get it.'

With a shock I realise he's sincere. I say, 'Perhaps it's not such a stupid little project. They might see it as getting rid of the nuclear shit, at least.'

He scoffs. 'Lena, you and your mates might agonise about nuclear waste, but governments don't give a fuck. Despite Hanford, the longer the problem's swept under the carpet the better they like it. Exploit what they can, move on, let someone else pay for the clean-up—that's how they've always done it. What's changed?'

'The problem's so massive to me I forget most people just don't care.' I look at him. 'But do you really think it could be dangerous at such a public event?'

'The whole thing makes me uneasy and I don't know why,' he says pompously. I'm astonished to hear him admit there's something he doesn't know.

Hating myself for placating him, I say, 'Look, I'm not

desperate to go, all I want is a quiet holiday. I'll see how I feel when the time comes.' I change the subject. 'Congratulations on your new job. How's it going with Minister Berg?'

'Not easy.' He frowns. 'She's too bloody cosy with Colonel Zukowski. And she's playing both ends against the middle ... except most days I'm not even sure what the ends—or the middle—are. I just do what I'm told,' he says with a shrug.

I gaze at him for a moment. His dark hair is less perfectly trimmed than usual, there are a few wrinkles on his shirt and he seems to have mislaid his defining self-assurance. I reject a sympathetic urge and stand.

'Well. Thanks for the advice, Max. Got to go.'

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