

NAKU DHARUK THE BARK PETITIONS extract

DECEMBER 1962

PROLOGUE

Yirrkala, Northern Territory

*Yol nha djal?* Who wants this?

It was the question Daymbalipu needed answered—urgently, like the burning jolt of a stubbed toe—when he saw the white pegs in the ground. Markers: drawing a boundary, staking a claim.

No one can remember the exact date, but the day itself was unforgettable. An all-day outing just before Christmas. A picnic and a swim in the shimmering turquoise waters at Melville Bay.

Ron Croxford, principal of the Yirrkala Methodist mission school, led the expedition, accompanied by his wife Margaret and their three children. Doug Tuffin, the mission's agriculturalist, drove the big green Bedford truck. His wife Joyce and their three kids came too. And along for the ride, filling the back of the truck with restless good humour, as many Yolŋu youngsters as the tray could physically hold—twenty-nine-year-old Djapu man Daymbalipu, Ron's teaching assistant, keeping them in line. *Bundi bundi!* Hurry hurry! *Yaka mari.* No fighting.

The picnic party lumbered out of the mission grounds early, before the heat and humidity of the day pressed down upon them. From the schoolyard, past the banana and papaya plantations and through the peanut paddock. Onto the rough red track that wound through twenty miles of dense jungle, past the sacred banyan tree to the sandy shores of Melville Bay. 'Jungle' was the English word the Yolŋu had chosen for the eucalypt forest they had known for tens of thousands of years as *wāŋa*. Country. Home. Place. One word to denote all the stringybark trees and pandanus palms and the cycad bushes and the grasses and the anthills. Each tree, palm, bush, grass and hill had its own name—several—but together it was *wāŋa*. Home.

Those who couldn't fit in the truck but didn't want to miss out on the fun resigned themselves to the walk. Walking was the old way, the only way until recently, to travel to the fertile hunting grounds of Melville Bay and the picnic spot near the old Macassan well, next to the mission pier. A clear swathe of sand tucked between two low rocky outcrops, forming a white fringe on the cerulean expanse of the Arafura Sea. This place was Mungurrawuy's *wāŋa*. The leader of the Gumatj people had given his permission for today's mixed bag of missionaries, clansmen, women and children to travel onto and use his traditional land.

Hours later *guya*, fish, speared and cooked over coals on the beach, sandy devon sandwiches consumed and litres of cordial drunk, the party packed up and drove home, tired and sun-frazzled, singing Yolŋu songs and Christmas carols. Back through the *gadayka*, stringybark forest, almost to the airstrip, then a left turn into the peanut paddock.

And it was then that Daymbalipu saw the white marker pegs. These ones had not been there when the expedition set out this morning, but Daymbalipu had seen others like them, further away from the mission, back out towards Melville Bay. *Balanda*, white people, had been wandering around, digging up the red earth, a bit here and a bit there. *Balanda* armed not with bibles and books but with shovels and drills.

The pegs that now studded the peanut paddock cast a little row of shadows as the sun sank behind them, like a line of stark white gravestones. Daymbalipu turned to Ron Croxford, his trusted workmate, his adopted brother.

*Yol nha djal?* he said.

Who wants this?