“Immortalities”
and
“Biographical Quest in the Twenty-first Century: The Origins and Future of a Genre Reconsidered”

Nathan Hobby
20485799
Bachelor of Arts (Murdoch, 2003)
Graduate Diploma Information Science (ECU, 2007)

This thesis is presented for the degree of Master of Arts (Creative Writing) of The University of Western Australia

School of Social Sciences (English and Cultural Studies)

2013
Abstract

“Immortalities” is a novel about memorialisation and mortality. Two biographers, Tom and Kristen, are drawn together on a quest to discover the truth about the eccentric Sinclair Morgan, who built a ten-storey library in Perth a century ago, and his librarian, Alice Greene, who mysteriously disappeared. Piecing together diaries and letters discovered in archives, a picture emerges of a millionaire who sought immortality and a high-achieving Aboriginal woman pretending to be white only to return to her roots after tragedy. Their lives are still echoing in the present. Morgan’s grandson, Sinclair IV, has lived his life protecting Morgan’s legacy but now must witness its dismantling as the library is corporatized and the great collection dispersed. Tom is himself the great-grandson of Alice and confronts the effect her secrets have had on his family. Against this backdrop, Tom and Kristen fall into an ill-fated romance as Tom’s obsession with death intensifies.

The novel fits within the “biographical quest” genre, and this is the topic examined in the dissertation. A genre featuring biographer protagonists who learn the truth about their subjects’ lives through discovered documents, the pre-eminent example is A.S. Byatt’s Possession: A Romance. After evaluating definitions from Suzanne Keen and Jon Thiem, the dissertation reconsiders the genre’s origins, arguing that a key factor was the shift from the respectful biographies of the Victorian era to the preoccupation of twentieth century biography with “uncovering secrets”. This shift coincided with a recognition of the biographer’s presence in biography and the appearance of a minor subgenre of nonfiction biographical quests in the mould of A.J.A. Symons’s The Quest for Corvo. Considering the genre’s future, the dissertation argues that in the digital age the genre will continue to insist on the possibility of a ‘non-virtual’ past and retain a nostalgia for print.
Acknowledgements

Thank you to my wife, Nicole Hobby, for living with this thesis for so long, encouraging me along the way and making many excellent suggestions.

Thank you to my supervisor, Van Ikin, whose sound advice and narrative insights have been very helpful and whose experience has been invaluable in navigating the postgraduate maze. Brenda Walker gave incisive feedback at short notice, for which I’m most appreciative.

Thank you to Tim Jones, Jonathan Morling and Michelle Atkinson-de Garis for feedback and proofreading, and Laurie Steed for some great conversations about writing. Michael O’Neil put me onto A.S. Byatt’s Possession.

For a time, I met with a group of writers at UWA including John Kinsella, Tracy Ryan, Siobhan Hodge, Matt Hall and James Quinton; these discussions were encouraging and stimulating. Tracy has taught me so much about writing (and reading), for which I’m grateful.
Candidate’s Declaration

This thesis does not contain work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.
## Contents

Abstract iii

Acknowledgements iv

Declaration v

Immortalities (novel) 1

A Note on Sources 131

Biographical Quest in the Twenty-first Century:
   The Origins and Future of a Genre Reconsidered (dissertation) 132

Bibliography 158
Immortalities

Chapter 1

During Kristen’s year away from her PhD, she thought of Alice Greene quite often. It was a year of playing wife to Matt to see if it was what she wanted. In a foreign country with time on her hands, she learned to cook a little, exercised a lot and made some English friends, all the time remembering Alice, imagining how the PhD would proceed. In the Manchester cold she thought of her as she imagined a historian should, picturing the revealing letters she would find: brittle, slightly scented, preserved in trunks of neglected family relics by Alice’s lovers’ descendents. It would be Kristen who would bring them out into the light a century later and tell the secret stories. All things would be revealed when Kristen got back to Perth. She would return to the quaint Sinclair Morgan Library rising up from the island on the edge of the city. The cantankerous old madman who had been in charge would be gone and the archives on the tenth floor would be thrown open to her. Within it she would find a shrine to Alice, who had been Sinclair Morgan’s first librarian. Hanging in a wardrobe would be Alice’s dresses; running her hands over the aged velvet, silk, embroidered cotton would be almost like touching Alice; she would even slip on one of the dresses herself. Most importantly of all, there would be hundreds of photographs—all the key moments in Alice’s life recorded for posterity, recorded for Kristen, who was the biographer fated to one day come and remember Alice to the world. She would find Alice’s overgrown, chipped grave and stand contemplating the woman’s remains. The vast blank spaces of Alice’s life would be mapped out. The ‘unsatisfactory progress’ verdict Gary Neville, her supervisor, had given her would be erased.

When she found out by email that Neville had taken up a post in America and she was going to be transferred to Ira Blanning on her return, a greater unease settled over her. There was trouble in the history department—it was being downsized and amalgamated; Blanning was the last Australian history specialist left. While Neville had spent his years at the uni pushing biography as a valid form of history, she’d heard Blanning was unenthusiastic about it. Best not to think about it, she told herself; she would sort it out when she got back.

At the end of the year, Matt didn’t want to go back, and so she decided to return alone. It surprised her that she chose this; she’d begun to think she’d probably stay with him, settle down at just twenty-three, eventually become the wife of the up-and-coming physicist. Instead, she chose Alice.

She and Matt were both striving for nonchalance, and nearly succeeding. On the morning she was leaving, he said, ‘You’re thinking of what last photo to take, aren’t you?’
‘No,’ she said, and snatched up her Nikon from the table, snapping him with his mouthful of porridge. She laughed and said, ‘This is how I’m going to remember you forever.’ She half-meant it, already imagining it captioned online as ‘Last Breakfast’.

‘I want something better,’ he said.

She took out the tripod from her suitcase and used the self-timer to take a posed shot of the two of them, her arm around him. The camera couldn’t catch the smell of him, though, and she tried to remember it, the faint manly odour of him. She thought of their first photo together, posed on her dad’s front lawn in the twilight just before they’d set off to the 2003 Guild Ball, more than three years ago.

‘Matt, this is too sad,’ she said, and she started crying, the tears streaking her make-up.

She came back via Melbourne and on the tarmac of the Perth Airport she wound her watch back three hours—always behind the rest of the country—as she wondered what sort of mood her dad would be in. She’d been vague about her plans; he’d be unhappy she wasn’t coming back to get a real job. When the doors opened, she finally emerged into the hot February noon. Walking across the tarmac made it feel like a country town airport.

The airport was busy, awash with high-vis singlets. She saw her dad before he saw her and, from a distance, she photographed him unaware. She was proud of how good looking he was, corporate handsome even today in his Saturday smart-casuals, fiddling with his phone as he waited. He hugged her longer than he normally did and she savoured it.

‘You’ve just been gone too long,’ he said. ‘How many photos did you take?’

‘Millions. You should join Facebook; I’ve just started putting them all up there.’

‘Haven’t heard of it.’

He had a new Range Rover, and she couldn’t help feeling a little thrill entering its luxury.

‘What are you going to do exactly?’ he asked.

‘I’m carrying on the PhD,’ she said, as cheerily as she could.

He took a while to say anything. ‘You know what my problem with history is?’

‘Doesn’t contribute to the economy?’

He chuckled. ‘Well, that too. But also, it’s a mistake to be looking backwards all the time.’

She sighed, not wanting to be drawn into a predictable row. ‘Dad, someone has to remember what’s gone before.’

‘And I should be the one subsidising that by giving you somewhere cheap to live?’

‘You don’t have to, but I do appreciate it.’

They were coming toward the city. The weekend traffic was heavier than she remembered, and cranes were silhouetted on the skyline.

‘I heard your stepbrother’s making a packet doing fly-in fly-out,’ he said.

‘You’re on speaking terms with Mum, then?’
‘I like to keep track of her. What I’m saying is there’s a lot of money around town at the moment. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime boom.’

She said nothing; he didn’t care whether what she was doing was meaningful or interesting.

The door to her room was shut; the air was so stale that perhaps it hadn’t been opened the whole year she was away. A year’s dust had collected on every surface, over all the objects she’d left behind. The single photo she had of Alice was waiting above her desk. Alice was posed in front of a table with a great stack of books. She was slender and defiant looking, her hair curly and her complexion dark. Kristen had found no trace of her before she turned up in Western Australia in 1897. In 1918, the year after her marriage, she’d resigned from the library, and this was the last mention of her Kristen had found; she didn’t even know when or where she had died. The hunt for Alice had to resume.

The first couple of weeks at uni she was avoiding Blanning, hoping to fly under the radar as long as possible. Blanning was a combative historian in her sixties, wearing her white hair in a crew cut. Blanning probably didn’t know what Kristen looked like; she’d only taught her for one unit right back in first year. A couple of times Kristen caught sight of her in the corridor and put her head down.

It was harder than she thought to get back into her research. Her notes from a year ago were cryptic and fragmented, words written by a stranger. She was remembering her relief at leaving the project behind for a year. At the time, a year had seemed an unimaginable expanse; when it finally elapsed, the world would have shifted and the archives would yield the truth of Alice to her. Because of her unsatisfactory progress, she had to submit an interim report soon to show she’d found enough sources.

Her luck ran out; she was summoned by Blanning.

One of the other postgrads told Kristen she was screwed. ‘She’s going to hate you for your private school manner—and your looks,’ he said, smiling.

‘Shut up,’ she said. ‘I don’t have a private school manner.’

‘I so pick it. But don’t worry, I find it sexy.’

She found this half-creepy, half-flattering, but also, in terms of Blanning, concerning.

Blanning’s office was small, its tiny window high up and the air stuffy. Kristen had been out at karaoke with friends the night before and felt fragile in her tiredness. She counted four dirty mugs on Blanning’s desk between piles of student essays and books. No photos of family.

‘I’ll get to the point, Kristen,’ Blanning said. ‘You’re going to have to change topics.’

‘Oh—but it’s already approved. I really am set on Alice Greene——’

‘A lot’s changed while you’ve been off gallivanting for a year.’

‘I know it wasn’t an ideal time to take a year off. But my partner… he was offered a post at Manchester Uni…’
‘I’m here picking up the pieces Neville left behind. Do you know what the completion rate of his candidates was?’

Kristen shook her head. An entrapping question, making her complicit in Blanning’s point. She looked around the office to get her eyes away from Blanning, but even the books were oppressive: bland, dry, chokingly serious.

‘Abysmal. You’re on track to be another of his casualties unless you work with me to come up with a proper topic. It’s perfectly viable to be looking at something like the experience of women in Federation Perth. What’s not viable is a narrowly focused, blow-by-blow description of one woman’s life.’

‘But that’s exactly what I want to do! I want to tell the story of Alice Greene.’

‘And we should give you a PhD for that? Forget Neville’s preoccupation with biography. Give up on the idea that you can get inside this woman’s head a hundred years after she died.’

The airless room and Blanning’s vehemence were overwhelming Kristen. She composed herself, trying to be reasonable. ‘You can’t just reject the whole idea of biography…’

‘Neville and I have very different approaches. But putting that to one side, in your case there’s an even bigger problem. Before you left, in your first annual report, even Neville had concerns about your lack of material. You’ve only got a few letters and newspaper articles to build a PhD around. Has the situation changed since?’

Kristen felt the tears coming out of her eyes and blinked them back.

‘I’ve only just started again! I’m being delayed by Sinclair Morgan IV, the keeper of the Morganalia Collection. Once he gives me permission—it should happen any week now—I’ll have a wealth of material!’

‘Kristen, your interim report is due in two months. My strong suggestion to you is that you develop—with my help—a bigger, more well-rounded topic relating to the period. If you’re willing to do that, I’ll make sure your interim report is treated leniently and you’ll have a far better chance of completing. If you insist on continuing with this biography, there’s not much help I can give you. You’re going to have to find your sources—which probably don’t exist—and come up with a couple of significant chapters in two months! Otherwise, the recommendation will be suspension of your scholarship and you’ll probably have to change topics anyway.’

‘I’d really like to stick with Alice.’

‘It’s your funeral.’

That seemed a natural end to the conversation. Kristen went and sat in the cafeteria, feeling stung. She didn’t want to do the PhD unless it was about Alice. Alice fascinated her. So many historians made history so dull, so eager to get to the big picture, so contemptuous of the individual. But all anyone had was a life; it seemed the most important kind of history of all. She tried to think of a Facebook update that would be appropriately cryptic yet still vengeful and eliciting sympathy. The right words wouldn’t come to her.
Sinclair Morgan’s copper statue rose up from the ten-storey library which bore his name, taunting her. Alice Greene had been his first librarian. The library was on Heirisson Island in the middle of the Causeway. She was walking down the avenue toward it, past all the creepy smaller statues, rehearsing her arguments.

Inside, she walked up the loud wooden spiral stairs, all ten flights, puffing by the end. The floors of the library were claustrophobically jammed with books, the shelves rising to the ceilings and the gaps between them dangerously narrow. It was a decrepit nightmare of a place, overwhelming in its smell of oldness. She sensed the presence of rodents all around her.

Sinclair Morgan IV—the grandson of the original—had his chambers on the tenth floor. If he were a coherent subject, she would ask him why he called himself the fourth, rather than the third. He’d recently been deposed as head librarian, but he was still in charge of the Morganalia Collection. The walls of his office were lined, floor to ceiling, with books and his desk cluttered with photographs of the original Sinclair Morgan. He was a stout, elderly man with wispy hair, reading in a grand leather armchair. Laying his book down, he stood.

‘Ahhh,’ he said, steadying himself on the arm of the chair. ‘Linda? I told you to stay away!’

‘I’m not Linda, Mr Morgan. I’m Kristen Hall. I’m researching Alice Greene, remember? Are you ready for me to see the journals?’

‘I met Alice, did you know? Not many people alive today can say that.’

‘So why did she disappear?’

‘I’m sure she had her reasons. I was very young.’

She’d tried to push him on this before, and after being initially excited by the idea he’d known Alice, had decided he was an unreliable witness. He was born in 1917, and so he was just one year old when she disappeared. The second time Kristen had visited he’d denied knowing Alice at all; now he was back to the story he told the first time.

‘I’ve been away for a year—last time we spoke you were getting the journals ready for me to see?’

‘I remember. You must realise what’s at stake here——’

‘My PhD is at stake! My supervisor is trying to make me change topics! She wants me to drop Alice!’

Kristen took a breath in, wishing she could erase her outburst.

‘We haven’t kept a diary for 161 years for the benefit of your PhD, Miss Linda. There are processes… there are many considerations… you can’t barge in here, you can’t just assume! There are other projects in train!’

‘I’m not Linda!’ she said. ‘You have me confused.’

‘I know who you are. Now please leave.’

‘Please, Mr Morgan, please, I need this!’

‘It wasn’t… I gave you a chance… You betrayed me. I know your game now. Out! Just get out, and stop hanging around this library!’
In desperation, she returned to the boxes of Alfred Drake in the State Library, where the whole project had its genesis. If this was a goldmine, it was an exhausted one. After an exchange of playful and revealing letters in 1907, testament to an affair of several months, Alice Greene had disappeared entirely from Drake’s world, at least until the year 1913, where Kristen had stopped after reading through a metre of archive, thousands of pages of Alfred’s (and his correspondents’) difficult handwriting confirming Alice’s absence.

After two fruitless days of searching she came to a letter from another teacher in 1916:

Did you hear, by any chance, of the rather odd marriage of stodgy old Edward Lamond to your friend, Miss Greene? Now Mrs Lamond, I suppose! A more unlikely coupling I could not imagine. It happened in Melbourne apparently; if Lamond’s mother hadn’t seen fit to announce it, I s’pose none of us would ever have known.

There was a newspaper clipping at the bottom of the archival envelope:

LAMOND-GREENE.—on 23 November at the Registrar-General’s Office, Melbourne. Edward Lamond, eldest son of Mrs Josephine Lamond of Thomas Rd, Shenton Park and the late Mr John Lamond, to Alice Greene of Perth.

Alfred had written back (the carbon copy difficult to decipher):

Miss Greene, you must know, proved to be no friend of mine! I only wish I knew what pompous old Lamond makes of her ways and ‘customs’. He is in for an education in the ways of the world. Or perhaps she’ll do things normally, now she’s had her fun around town and can afford to be in that ‘interesting state’.

She looked up from her desk at the other researchers, wishing she could say something. The words were a shock; she had stopped believing she would find anything. The mysterious Alice, the scandalous flirt, had married! And the news came with a rare insight into her sex life. But what were she and Lamond doing in Melbourne?

She kept reading the rest of the day, but as she feared, Alice made no further appearances.

That night, she blu-tacked a photocopied photograph of Lamond next to Alice above her desk at home and asked her, ‘What do you see in him?’

He had a kind face, but the way he looked into the camera made him seem a boring, earnest man. His name was familiar; he had been a prominent civil engineer sometimes mentioned in passing for overseeing various public projects. He’d died in 1946 and was buried in Perth. Nothing had ever been published about him. She’d discovered that he’d been a committed Baptist and thus probably very morally conservative, making him an unlikely husband for Alice.

The next day Kristen found an obituary for him in the swirly microfilm of the newspaper. It mentioned that he was ‘predeceased by wife Alice’ and that he was survived by one son, the
Reverend George Edward Lamond. Alice had a descendant! He was born, presumably, after 1917, and thus potentially still alive.

She checked the White Pages. It seemed too good to be true to find a listing for ‘Rev. GE Lamond.’ Writing the number down, she left the library and found a deserted step at the side of the library where she could call without being interrupted.

‘George Lamond.’ He spoke loudly.

‘Reverend, my name is Kristen Hall—I’m researching a PhD in Western Australian history.’

‘History?’ His tone had the mild distress of one not able to quite hear.

‘The thing is, I’m actually researching an important Perth personality from the turn of the century.’

‘Didn’t come onto the scene until well into the war, myself.’

‘But this woman—she was still around when you were born. Her name was Alice Greene.’

He said nothing and she bit her lip, waiting on him.

Finally, he said in a distant voice, ‘That has nothing to do with me.’

‘Reverend, I’ve recently discovered that this Alice married a man named Edward Lamond, and gave birth to a son named George Edward Lamond. I thought that must be you.’

‘You have your facts wrong. Or perhaps you just have the wrong man.’

‘I’d love the chance to talk to you, perhaps understand better——’

‘I’ll thank you not to call here again.’

He hung up on her. She sat down on the step, angry with herself. How could she have been so tactless? She should have secured an interview, avoided any mention of Alice.

She tried to get hold of George Lamond’s birth certificate but without his permission, he had to be either a hundred years old or dead. She decided she would ring the other Lamonds in the White Pages. She’d read a debut novel by a Tom Lamond a few years earlier, a strange novel about a young man who drops out of university and becomes a detective of found objects, piecing together the histories behind photographs and notes he finds on his walks around the city. She wondered if he was related to George. She’d remembered from the newspaper that he was only in his twenties then. She wanted to publish a book herself; she was certain the story of Alice would make an excellent one. But she worried fiction was more her thing; as an undergraduate, her marks had been better in creative writing than history. Between them, Neville and Matt had persuaded her to go with history.

A couple of Lamonds hung up quickly on her, thinking she was a telemarketer. Then she came to one of George’s sons, named Edward like his grandfather.

‘You’ve got the wrong end of the stick,’ he said. ‘My grandmother died giving birth. She was no historical figure, that’s for sure.’

‘But perhaps I could meet you and show you what I’ve found?’
‘It’s the co-incidence of a name, that’s all,’ he said. ‘There really is nothing I can tell you. My father is very sick—but I suppose you’ve contacted him?’

‘Um… yes.’

‘If he can’t tell you anything, there’s nothing I can add.’

The woman who answered the number for G & M Lamond, Margaret, tried to be helpful; yes, her husband was descended from the engineer Edward Lamond, and the Reverend George Lamond was her father-in-law, but she was certain there was no proto-feminist in the family, nor even a librarian—except for her son, Tom. Speaking of whom, he was a keen genealogist, and he, no doubt, would love to talk to Kristen about family history. Kristen had heard mothers like this before; she guessed Tom was single.

‘He’s not the writer, is he?’ she asked.

‘Oh yes,’ Margaret said. ‘He had a book out a few years ago; he was quite famous for a little while! He’s looking after his grandad, so you should be able to ring him there. But I’ll give you his mobile number, if you like.’

Kristen kept trying Tom’s mobile, but it was switched off and there was no voicemail. What could Tom possibly know anyway? A little scared, she tried the old man’s number again; George answered and when she asked to speak to Tom, he said, ‘You’re the student who called the other week, aren’t you? I cannot help you.’

He hung up on her. She had begun to feel she wasn’t going to get anywhere with the Lamonds.
Chapter 2

There were missed calls on Tom’s phone. He didn’t like phones, didn’t like their urgency or their surprises. Letters or emails were far better, complete when they arrived and responded to when one was ready. But he was a little curious, so eventually he rang back. It went to voicemail, and he didn’t recognise the name—‘Kristen’—so he decided against leaving a message.

At dinner time, he sat at the small table eating sausages with his dying grandad. Tom didn’t like sausages, but now he was cooking them every Monday night, and chops on Tuesday night, and he had even learned to make stew for Wednesday night, and so on through the week. He was re-creating the menu his dead grandmother had offered for so many years.

It was dim—his grandad was always turning off lights—and the clinking of knives and forks was too loud.

‘I have a job interview tomorrow.’
‘What’s the position?’
‘Head librarian at the Sinclair Morgan.’

A ponderous frown came over his grandad’s face. Finally he said, ‘A dreadful place. You’d be better off not working there.’

‘Why not?’ Tom asked.

‘What sort of man creates an idol of himself, a statue for everyone to see?’
‘A very eccentric one, I admit.’

“The wise man builds his house upon the rock.” What foundation do you think that library is built on?’

His grandad was pulling him into a sermon. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘Egotism, vanity, lies, debauchery,’ his grandad declared with the crescendo of a sermon’s high point. Then he looked down at his food and said quietly, decisively, ‘Built on sand, that library is.’

Tom liked the austerity of the narrow sleepout he was staying in while he lived with his grandad. It had been his grandmother’s sewing room, and he had packed up the sad, unfinished trousers for Grandad she had left there two years earlier, along with skeins, some half-finished and others, bought optimistically on special, not even unwrapped. On the wall, he had blu-tacked the spreading family tree which had become his hobby after he stopped writing. No-one in his family was interested enough in his discoveries, though online there were third cousins and relations even more distant who cared about new details of ancestors—at least the ones he held in common with them.

Next to the family tree were scans of his brain, now four years old, showing him free of the tumour which had nearly killed him. He also had a copy of his novel on the shelf; he kept meaning to put it out of sight, but he still hadn’t. His abandoned writing career was a painful spot in his
memory. The tumour had hit him while he was waiting for the novel to come out, just after he and Anita had got engaged. She told people she’d left him because he’d turned into a horrible person, not because of the tumour. Tom wasn’t convinced of this verdict, but he did regret the way he’d pushed her to have a baby in case he was dying.

He hadn’t died, but even now he still felt he was dying. The tumour would return, he was sure of it. At twenty-nine, he was living on borrowed time. It wasn’t what the doctors had told him, but it was how the world worked.

He lay awake listening to the murmur of the radio, wondering what his grandad hated about the Morgans. His grandad was prone to boycotts; he wouldn’t, for example, shop at the nearest supermarket because its CEO was paid an obscene amount.

His grandad had certainly not given him enough reason to refuse the job. And he wanted the job a lot. After five years indexing obituaries in the cataloguing department, he felt excited by the prospect of being in charge of a quaint library of three million books. It would be a worthy, quixotic thing to devote himself to. His grandad would be gone soon, and his disapproval would no longer matter.

At Sunday lunch a week ago, Tom’s sister, Lauren, had suggested brashly, half-seriously, that Tom was after their grandad’s house. She was wrong; if he had an ulterior motive, it was information. He wanted his grandad to tell his secrets before he died. The problem was, Tom hated pushing him.

Each time Tom came home, he had a small hope that his uncle or his dad had taken his grandad out and the house would be empty. Then he would just have to work up the courage to break into the cellar, which was filled with everything his grandparents had ever owned and would surely contain some clues about his grandad’s origins. But he also knew he would be too cowardly to do this, that he would wait until his grandad was dead, when it would be too late to ask him about anything he found.

His grandparents’ forbidden cellar had fascinated him since he was small. The stories he read in primary school had cellars; cellars were places where you would find treasures and mysteries. It had seemed unfair that real life lacked the things children’s adventure books assumed—not just cellars, but three-month summer holidays, rowboats and small islands with smugglers, trapdoors, and caravans of gypsies camped on the moors. So when he was young, seeking mysteries, he had asked to go into the cellar several times and each time his grandparents had firmly refused. When he was fourteen, he tried to break in with his cousin Julian while they were both staying there for the school holidays. Tom’s nerve had failed him at the last minute and he’d fled back to bed; Grandad caught Julian red-handed and drove him home the next morning. Tom’s guilt about the incident had nagged him for years afterward.

His grandad greeted him warmly in the morning; he was at his best then.
‘Good morning, fella!’ he said. He’d spilt water trying to make cups of tea for them both and his hand was shaking as he poured milk in. He was a determined man; a couple of weeks ago he’d ridden to the shops on his gopher while Tom was at work and had returned with a shopping bag of prunes, a book of crossword puzzles, and a Freddo Frog for Tom.

At lunchtime, Tom left the cataloguing office at the State Library and took a bus to Heirisson Island. He walked down the avenue toward the library, trying to imagine it as it would have been in its glory days, a century earlier. The avenue was paved with old handmade bricks and lined with trees on each side. He was gazing up at the massive statue on top of the library. It always took his breath away no matter how many times he looked at it. It was twenty metres of aqua-coloured copper, a stout man clutching a book to his chest with his left hand, his right hand raised with an open palm, an ambiguous gesture.

Tom remembered reading that Morgan had claimed that the statue wasn’t of him, that the sculptor created a generic figure, but the resemblance to the old black and white photos of Morgan—from before he disappeared from public view—was notable. It was a handsomer version of Morgan without, in particular, his engorged nose.

He liked the smaller statues lined up along the median strip. Some called them Morgan’s Apostles, because there were originally twelve, but more had been added since. Instead of the usual aloof expressions of statues, these faces were anguished or gleeful or mad. Tom wasn’t sure of the identity of all of them, but he knew enough to get a sense of the neglected figures of history; the first sad looking youth was, he seemed to remember, Cain. There were still no women, but at the end were a couple of Aboriginal statues. He stopped to look at these. One of them had a plaque—Yagan, the Aboriginal warrior, spear in hand, unveiled in 1955 by Sinclair Morgan IV. The plaque for the other Aboriginal statue was missing. Tom was amazed Sinclair IV had commissioned a statue commemorating an Aboriginal freedom fighter right back in the 1950s, long before Aboriginal issues had penetrated mainstream awareness. He wondered what had inspired him.

Each floor of the library represented one of the ten Dewey classes, from the 000s—generalities—to the 900s—geography and history. The library was deserted, just a few readers, eccentricities hunched over books at desks or sprawled sleeping in the mismatched armchairs scattered around. He didn’t see any staff. The books didn’t leave much room for people anyway. Shelves of different colours, different sizes, different materials were tacked together, with only the narrowest gap between rows. The shelves jutted out to the edges of each floor. The uneven spaces and gaps, the lack of a pattern, turned each floor into a maze. Most of the books were jammed tight, some of them stacked on top of a row or double stacked, obscuring the row behind. Other books waited on overflow trolleys like patients in an overtaxed emergency room. Rather than putting him off, the state of the library induced a protective tenderness in him—he wanted to
restore order and experience the treasures the chaos suggested, the sense of an eccentric ten-
storey second-hand bookshop such as he only ever encountered in his dreams.

In contrast to the shabby stacks, the boardroom was immaculately and blandly corporate—
abstract art on the walls and contemporary furniture. Preceded by the purposeful clicking of heels,
a woman in her early twenties appeared with two older men in her wake.

‘Danielle Morgan. I’m the CEO.’ She introduced the other interviewers.

She was gym-attractive, confident, daunting. Libraries were meant to be a refuge from people
like her, and the Sinclair Morgan most of all. He felt her eyes judging him; she could tell he drove
an old car, bought clothes without thought and had his hair cut at the cheap Russian barbershop
next to a brothel.

Her first question threw him. ‘Do you have any experience selling books?’

‘Selling?’

‘Yes, the head librarian will be selling off a lot of our old books. And we’re also going to be
opening a significant bookstore—for new books—downstairs.’

‘You’re closing the library?’

‘Not at all,’ she said. ‘We’re putting it on a sustainable course. Many of the older books will
be going to enable this.’

‘Oh,’ Tom said.

One of the other interviewers said drily, his gaze down at his papers, ‘I have the sense you
don’t like us getting rid of books, Tom.’

‘Depends,’ Tom said. ‘I’m sure there’s some which could go. But what makes the Sinclair
Morgan amazing is—well, partly the fact it has more books than any other library in the state.’

‘The head librarian,’ Danielle said, ‘won’t be here to worry so much about the past. There’s a
PhD student writing about our first librarian at the moment. We want to leave the past to the
historians. The head librarian’s eyes will be firmly on the future.’

Outside the boardroom, an old man was sitting in one of the armchairs and put his book down as
he saw Tom coming. He was stout, with a wide face and his thinning white hair reached over his
ears. It was Sinclair IV, surely!

‘How was that, then?’ the old man asked. ‘Did you bowl them clean over?’

‘No,’ Tom said. ‘I wouldn’t say that, exactly. You know about the interviews?’

‘I was hoping you’d do well. We need someone of your calibre at a time like this.’

‘I’m sorry—have we met?’

‘I assume you’re the Lamond.’

‘You know my family?’

‘I knew your great-grandmother, Alice, of course.’

‘But that’s not possible——’
An old woman came between them, saying to the man, ‘You have to come in now.’ She was tall and thin, wearing an old-fashioned dress. The man grunted, saying to Tom, ‘When Mrs Staer calls I must follow.’

‘But I need to ask you——’

‘He needs his afternoon rest,’ the woman said to Tom, formidably.

‘Another time, old chap,’ the man said, conciliatorily.

He was wondering what to say to his grandad about his encounter with Sinclair IV.

Alice Lamond was the great missing piece on his family tree. He had managed to extract these facts alone from his grandad: her maiden name was Smith—making her very hard to track, especially without a middle name—and she married Edward Lamond roughly a year before his grandad’s birth, only to die in childbirth. Tom could find no record of the marriage and his grandad said he’d lost his birth certificate, fobbing Tom off when he asked if he would approve the issuing of a new one. The anonymity of Alice Lamond was perplexing, especially considering Edward Lamond had been moderately well known in Perth.

Tom had tracked all of the Alice Smiths he could find in the census in the first two decades of the century. One of them had died in South Perth in November 1917, six months after his grandfather’s birth, and he thought her the most likely candidate. This woman had died as Alice Smith, meaning she’d never married. He’d gently asked his granddad if his parents may never have married, and that had made his granddad explode in anger, demanding how Tom could even ask such a question. This explosion could be read as an endorsement of Tom’s theory; yet the theory had always had its holes. Edward had been a devout Baptist like Tom’s grandad, an unlikely candidate as a bachelor of forty to get a twenty year-old Alice Smith pregnant, let alone to do so and not marry her. The theory was now even more tenuous; if Sinclair IV had known Alice, she probably wasn’t an anonymous young woman, and she probably didn’t die in 1917.

He decided to be direct with his grandad, saying, ‘I didn’t get the job but I met a man who said he knew our family.’

‘And who was that?’ his grandad asked.

‘He never gave his name, but I assume he was Sinclair Morgan IV. He said the strangest thing—that he knew your mother.’

‘Now that’s unlikely. He would have to be very old indeed.’

‘That’s right—I mean, if she died giving birth to you?’

‘The man’s a liar—he never knew my mother.’

His grandad was cagey, tense.

‘You did warn me about that place,’ Tom said, smiling, but his grandad didn’t smile back.

Tom tried to re-immerses himself in his job. His desk faced the wall, away from the view of the city and the taunting glimpse of the Sinclair Morgan statue. It was a job he loved in many ways; he just
felt its time was up. Yet his predecessor had indexed obituaries for forty years; what was his five
years measured against that? He didn’t have forty years to give; he could never even be the
greatest indexer of obituaries the library had known.

People’s reaction to his job was predictable; they would tell him it sounded morbid. But he
saw himself as a micro-biographer. It started with the hunt for the obituaries themselves, flicking
through not only the major newspapers but amateur country-town newsletters and other obscure
publications which would otherwise slip into the closed stacks unknown and unread. The obituary
itself was a miniature biography, but then he condensed it further for the catalogue—a micro-
biography for the otherwise forgotten. It was about an act of remembering, when so much was
being forgotten.

It felt like he was flinging messages in bottles into the far-flung future. Some of them would
never be seen again; others would wash up on distant shores and tell someone something they
wanted to know. A hundred years from now, when Tom’s body would have rotted away, a family
historian would come to the genealogy desk of the State Library wanting to know information
about an ancestor. And the reference librarian would be able to say, sounding so clever, ‘Yes, we
have an obituary indexed.’ Perhaps that reference librarian would silently thank the anonymous
Tom for being so thorough and including a summary of the person’s rather average life in the
notes field, when duty did not require him to go to that level of detail:

Led the fundraising effort for the town’s first hockey field. Well known as proprietor of
the town’s only deli from 1963-2005. Survived by four children, seven grandchildren,
three great-grandchildren.

Tom sent out these message-filled bottles, not knowing which ones would ever be found, but
knowing some would. It made him feel a little altruistic.
Chapter 3

Tom’s grandad was weakening, the cancer overwhelming his frail body. He didn’t get out of bed any more, didn’t try to read the Bible or do crosswords. Tom would come home to him lying in the stinking dark, often with Tom’s dad or Uncle Ed sitting with him. Tom kept up the regime of cooking because it would feel wrong to stop; but his grandad, never before one to waste food, only managed a few mouthfuls at best.

There was talk of a hospice. To Tom’s surprise, his grandad agreed and was moved to one quite suddenly.

Tom thought of breaking into the cellar, but he didn’t, and then at the hospice his grandad mustered the strength to say to him, ‘If there’s anything in the cellar… any letters, say—make sure they get burnt. Don’t go… reading anything you shouldn’t.’

‘But Grandad,’ Tom said, ‘surely you don’t want our past destroyed?’

His grandad’s eyes closed and he didn’t answer.

The next day, his grandad’s face was puffy and he was subdued. His torso was swollen and Tom pictured bulging tumours pushing in every place inside him. He’d been dying so long that until now he’d begun to seem invincible.

‘How is your work going, fella?’ he asked, softly.

‘Fine.’

Tom didn’t want to talk about work. He wanted to ask him about something that mattered; he didn’t have many more chances. His grandad’s eyes were fluttering closed. He grasped his grandad’s big rough hand and said, ‘I love you, Grandad.’

‘I know you do, son.’

In films, there was always something which made the dying person speak. They never went to the grave with their secrets. But his grandad couldn’t even keep his eyes open and he wasn’t going to tell Tom anything.

Who are we, Grandad? What do you know about us you will not tell me?

In contrast to the echoing noise of hospitals, the hospice was hushed, carpeted, even the walls covered in fabric. Absorbing everything, preparing everyone for death. He felt eased into it himself, standing by his grandad’s deathbed.

Two days later, Tom was on the bus home from work when his mobile started vibrating in his pocket. He hadn’t meant to have it on. It was his dad calling to say his grandad had died.

The book he’d been reading sat forgotten on his lap. He looked all around him on the bus, and then he couldn’t get his eyes off the stupid advertisements on the inside walls. There was nowhere he could go without people trying to sell him stuff.
He suddenly realised he had no grandparents left, then he reproached himself. The person he should be thinking about was his grandad. He wanted to think precisely of what had just happened to him, to get past the words to the event itself. His grandad’s consciousness had been extinguished. Or if the old man was right, not extinguished, far from it: his grandad had entered God’s presence, and now awaited judgement and resurrection. Both prospects—extinction, afterlife—seemed impossible to Tom.

The focus was always on how sad it was for the people left behind, but Tom was thinking how the real tragedy was for the dead person. How could it be possible to die? For your mind to be thinking thoughts one moment, and then not thinking thoughts the next? How could it be possible to have a final thought?

His grandad had had a final thought, and no-one would ever know what it was. Let alone what came next for him. Tom wondered what his last words had been. People used to care about last words; they probably used to rehearse them. Your last words were the culmination of your life. No-one cared about last words any more.

Lost in thought, he went a few stops too far. Stepping off the bus into the dusk, he had to walk back along the highway. Bus shelter ads, fast food litter on the uneven slabs of the footpath and all the cars rushing past with such violence.

He got his car and drove to the hospice. An innocuous sign pointed to it down a residential street, lined with trees. None of these people in their houses knew that a long life had just ended in their street. It happened daily, people’s long lives coming to an end in beds inside a building on their street. Did they know how much was being lost in their midst?

His dad, Uncle Ed and Aunty Pat were gathered in the room where his grandad had died. His body had already been taken away. The bed was empty and unmade.

His dad asked in a low voice if he wanted to see the body. He said no. Even seeing the empty bed was too much. He hadn’t seen a dead body this far in his life and he didn’t want to start today.

On the bedside table was a book. He picked it up; a bookmark from a now defunct book exchange was stuck between pages 190 and 191. His last words were the culmination of your life. No-one cared about last words any more.

That night, he sat in his grandad’s armchair; it was embedded with the smell of him. He sat there until one in the morning, reading his grandad’s book. It was A.J. Cronin’s autobiography, *Adventures in Two Worlds*, a cheap paperback edition from the 1960s, the cover declaring it an international bestseller. He disliked bestsellers, at least contemporary ones, yet he had sympathy for the forgotten bestsellers of the past. Their obsolescence and their misplaced self-confidence were touching. They encapsulated their time and its passing.

His grandad had liked to read old paperbacks, perhaps for nostalgia, perhaps because they were cheap. Whether it had been chosen for him or he’d chosen it himself, it was a fitting book for his last read. It was a life story imbued with the same old-fashioned notion of common sense
that his grandad had lived by, the same refusal to be subversive, crude or despairing. It started in typical autobiographical fashion, full of a young doctor’s struggles to succeed in the world. But as the doctor became a best-selling writer, the narrative became more and more choked with anecdotes until it seized up altogether in sermonising.

He got to his grandad’s bookmark and powered on past it, reading what his grandad had never got to read and wondering what his grandad would have thought of the end of the book, as Cronin at the height of his powers looked back on a successful life in a self-congratulatory tone Tom found irritating.

He got to the last word and shut the book. The book was finished and Cronin wasn’t really at the height of his powers; he was surely dead by now, just as Tom’s grandad was dead. Tom found him on Wikipedia. He’d died in 1981, the year Tom’s grandad had retired; his autobiography had started in 1917 when he was eighteen, the year Tom’s grandad was born. The book was finished, the book was out of print, Cronin was dead, his grandad was dead.

The last book you read should be the one which made sense of life. Perhaps there should be a designated book for people to read on their deathbed which was beautiful and elegiac, summing up existence. But what if you lived on too long, finished that book, and then had to start something else? What were the odds of dying at the right time, when you’d just finished a book?

When the tumour returned, he would have a list ready. But he knew it wouldn’t work like that. The headaches had been so bad he’d read very little before the surgery. In the aftermath, he thought he wouldn’t ever pick up a book again. And then, as he had gradually started reading again, he hadn’t been inspired by his mortality to tackle important, worthy books. Instead, he’d turned to true-crime of all things, reading in a state of horrified fascination overwritten prose about gruesome acts and hating himself for it.

Tom drove with his parents and his sister Lauren to the cemetery through the petty obstacles and frustrations of the traffic. He felt the world should make way for them, that just for today they shouldn’t be subjected to congestion and red lights and speed limits and school zones.

‘Your grandad always liked Anita,’ his mum said. ‘Do you think you should have invited her?’

‘No, Mum, I don’t.’

His grandad’s strongest feeling, as far as Tom could remember, had been disapproval that he and Anita had been living together before they were married. But she was a teacher and she and his grandad had also had long, opinionated conversations about education. They’d probably liked each other in a certain way.

The chapel was full, people standing against the walls. He caught sight of his cousin Julian whom he hadn’t seen since their grandmother’s funeral; Julian had been in Europe. Before he could go over to greet him, the service started. It was, fittingly, a very Baptist service. Uncle Ed was leading it. He said George Lamond was celebrating with the saints in heaven this morning. He was probably singing his lungs out. So let us sing too, not with mournful faces but with hopeful
Hymns always had a mournful edge to Tom’s ear, no matter how they were sung. Perhaps it was the age in them, the generations who had sung them who now lay buried here in the cemetery while the songs carried on.

In the sermon, Uncle Ed preached that for Christians death held no fear. Tom looked at his dad and it was true, he didn’t seem afraid. Unlike Tom, he wasn’t trying to hoard his life. And Uncle Ed piled on familiar Bible verses, the sermon blending with every funeral sermon he’d heard, not grounded enough in the specifics of his grandad’s life or the dead body before them.

At the end, there was a mechanical creaking around the coffin and it began to descend into the bowels of the chapel. His grandad was to be burned up, a terrible fate to Tom’s mind. Didn’t his grandad believe in the resurrection, that God would gather up his body and renew and restore it? The thought of being cast into the furnace was such a terrible thing, flesh and organs consumed and even the bones, and then the remains crushed and homogenised, swept into an urn.

And yet what was the alternative? Years of slow decay rather than those horrific couple of hours. He didn’t know what he wanted for himself. Mummification, if it was offered. The Egyptians had the right idea.

Tom looked out over the gathering of people and thought how there were as many from his family tree gathered in one place as there would ever be again. In genealogy, people became crossword puzzles. Date and place of birth, facts of marriage, perhaps enlistment, ‘sightings’ at other addresses in years that followed, offspring, and circumstances of death. And yet here around him were living relatives.

After the service, he spoke to Ron Lamond, one of his dad’s second cousins. When he introduced himself, Tom said, ‘I know you! You were born in 1932 in Bunbury.’

‘Well I’ll be!’ he said. ‘What are you, the FBI?’

‘Family historian,’ Tom said. ‘I’m wondering—did you know my grandad’s mother at all? Alice?’

Ron pursed his lips. ‘She wasn’t mentioned much when I was growing up.’

‘I know—but why?’

‘You really think you can find out the truth this many years later? All I could ever tell—once my mother said she had a reputation—you know, for loose living.’

It seemed to hurt him to say this, and he patted Tom on the shoulder as he moved off.

Another funeral was already starting and the caterers wanted to set up the morning tea. His grandad’s funeral party was dissipating just as he felt it had been warming up, just as he had a sense of entering into the spirit of it, of encountering the scores of people to whom his grandad had meant something.

As they walked toward the car park, Julian said, ‘So, you wrote a book, got cancer, got better. What else you been doing?’
He didn’t know Julian had followed his life to even this level of detail, and he wasn’t sure what to do with the question, but he took it earnestly and said, ‘Family history. Trying to unravel where we come from. Not that Grandad was much help.’

‘Yeah,’ Julian said. ‘He must have had secrets—he was burning stuff out the back one time.’

‘What?’ Tom stopped.

‘Before I went overseas—he had a box of letters and he wanted me to help him burn them.’

‘But how could you do that?’

Julian shrugged. ‘They belonged to him.’

A sick sense of loss came over Tom. He resented Julian’s undeserved status as the favourite grandchild and his nonchalance about their heritage. He sifted through questions which might shed more light.

‘Do you know who the letters were from?’

‘No clue—I didn’t even look.’

It seemed to Tom an impossible silence would now descend between them, but instead Julian suddenly said, ‘You remember when we tried to break into that cellar?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You ran inside and I got sent home. I was pissed off at you.’

‘I was really sorry, you know. Thanks for not dobbing me in.’

Julian scoffed. ‘That’s not something I’d do.’

They reached the car park. Despite occupying a big space in Tom’s memory, the cellar incident had been reduced to a couple of sentences. It might never be mentioned again.

‘You here for long?’ Tom asked him.

‘Who knows? A while. Haven’t sorted myself out. I’m living at Mum and Dad’s.’

‘Well, good luck sorting.’

‘We should get a beer some time.’

The day after the funeral, there was a letter for him. It was a handwritten note on thick bond stationery, bearing the name and address of ‘Sinclair Morgan IV, head librarian Sinclair Morgan Library’.

Dear Tom Lamond,

I hope this missive finds you; I wheedled the address out of my great-niece, Danielle, but I don’t trust her.

Seeing you at the funeral today (I believe I escaped unobserved!) moved me to finally write to you, as I have been meaning to do since I ran into you at the library. I am sorry Danielle did not see fit to offer you the position; if it was up to me, you would have been a shoo-in. Your great-grandmother made this library great, and I believe you could have maintained its greatness in this dire time.
You first came to my attention when I had the privilege of reading your novel several years ago. An auspicious debut, Lamond. It augurs well for the future.

I have a proposal to make to you—in person. Please confirm with Mrs Staer you can come to my office on level ten at ten o’clock Saturday morning.

Warm Regards, Sinclair IV

What did Sinclair IV mean about his great-grandmother? Had she been the head librarian? He wondered with a sense of excitement what the proposal could possibly be.

Later, shortly before ten, he was in bed reading when the phone rang. He answered it with trepidation, fearing more bad news.

‘Are you the Tom Lamond?’ a woman’s voice asked. ‘The writer?’

‘I’m a Tom Lamond. And I wrote a book once.’

‘I really liked it! I’ve been waiting for the next one. But that’s not why I’m calling. I saw your grandad’s death notice in the paper, and I thought I’d try again. I’ve been trying to get hold of you for weeks. I’m Kristen Hall and for my PhD I’m writing a biography of your great-grandmother, Alice Greene.’

‘Alice Lamond, you mean?’

‘Well, yes, though I don’t think she ever went by that name. I’ve had a hard time even discovering that she got married and had a son. My working title is “The Life of Alice Greene: Rediscovering a Proto-Feminist and Librarian in Federation Western Australia”. I’d love to meet you.’

‘My goodness! We need to talk.’
Chapter 4

Tom googled Kristen and found a photo on the university website; she had a pretty face, curly brown hair and a big smile. After he looked her up, he felt stalkerish. When he opened the door, she kissed him on the cheek and said how glad she was to meet him. She was slender and wore a short black skirt with a tight blouse, her presence sexier than her photo had suggested. Her smile was gigantic. He could feel her cheer invading his perpetual gloom.

‘This is Alice’s son’s house! I can’t believe it. I feel like I’m closer to her just being here.’ He wondered what she made of the pervasive sweaty, stale smell of death, the near-squalor of the place. He had tried to tidy up for her, but he hadn’t made much of a dent. ‘Can I take some photos of the house?’ she asked, pulling out an expensive camera from her bag.

‘Sure,’ he said, and she went around snapping the lounge, the 1970s brown kitchen, the grimy bathroom, his grandad’s bare bedroom with its two single beds. She stopped before she got to his sleepout, which relieved him.

‘Are these going to make it into your PhD?’ he asked. ‘ Aren’t they a bit too removed?’

She laughed. ‘They’re more for me. I take a lot of photos. I want to record every bit of life. Can I take a photo of you, so I can remember the first time we met?’

He hadn’t thought he’d proven himself worth remembering yet, but he agreed, and she took a shot of him sitting in his grandad’s armchair. He was aware of his distorted mouth, the awkward smile he was giving her.

‘Thank you,’ she said, picking up a Kafka book by the armchair. ‘I’m guessing this isn’t his?’

Tom shook his head. ‘Not a writer Grandad approved of.’ On the coffee-table was Adventures in Two World, which he handed to her saying, ‘For the record, this is the last book he read—or at least started.’

‘You’re such a serious person, aren’t you? And deep, I mean.’

‘Not all the time,’ he said. ‘I mean… yeah, I’m serious, I guess.’

She giggled. ‘Cool. I have way too many frivolous friends. Of course my ex is a physicist, so he’s not frivolous, exactly. But then again, when he’s not being brilliant, he likes to watch action movies and drink beer.’

So she was single, it seemed. They sat down on the couch and she took from her folder the photograph of Alice.

‘I present to you,’ she said, ‘your great-grandmother.’

He stared at the photo. He had thought he would never see Alice; the most he’d been hoping for was some details. She was striking-looking and heavily bejewelled. He tried to find his own face in hers. For a moment he thought he could, but then the perception slipped away. ‘I’ve been looking for her, you know.’

‘She came to Perth from Melbourne in 1897. I can’t find any trace of her from before then, not anywhere in Australia. So I guess her real name probably wasn’t Alice Greene. I’ve got a letter
of hers where she mentions that her mother was Portuguese. That’s about the only clue to her origins.’

‘If only I’d answered the phone before Grandad died! Or left a message when I called you back.’

‘I don’t think it would have made much difference. He wouldn’t have told you anything—you only would have been more certain he wasn’t telling you the truth. Now, at least, we can see his birth certificate.’

‘Alice didn’t die in 1917, obviously.’

‘No,’ Kristen said. ‘But finding out she married Edward Lamond is one of the last sightings I have of her. She bursts onto the scene in 1897, during the gold rush, fully formed, with no trace of her past. And she departs in 1918, with no trace of the rest of her life. In between, she rises quickly up the ranks of the new public library to become the deputy, and then defects to establish Sinclair Morgan’s library.’

‘How did you find out about her marriage?’

She told him the story of her PhD, how Neville had inspired her to write a biography and she’d been reading randomly looking for someone to catch her interest. She’d actually been looking at an article on someone else entirely—the manager of a troupe of dancers—in a scandalous gossip rag; she just happened to notice on the same page a column mentioning that Mr Alfred Drake, English master at one of the schools and amateur poet had been sighted ‘talking at great length’ to the ‘exotic’ librarian, Miss Alice Greene, in the ‘disreputable’ Venice Coffee House.

Alfred Drake proved to have metres of archival material stored in the State Library—every letter he had ever received and carbons of every one he had sent. He had died in 1949 and his collection had been embargoed by his widow for fifty years; 1999 had come and gone without anyone noticing, and Kristen was the first to read through it.

In her first year, her research had been going on in the archives of the State Library, just next to Tom’s workroom. He tried to think if he had ever seen her; surely he would have remembered a girl who looked like her.

Not far into her search of Drake’s correspondence, she came to the first of a string of, by turn, passionate and playful letters between Alfred and Alice in the summer of 1907. Kristen mentioned how sexually liberated Alice was for her time; Tom objected that she was reading present day mores into the past—to which she said that he hadn’t read enough of his great-grandmother’s letters yet.

‘Of course,’ she added, ‘it’s my hunch that she wrote many others which have been censored—whether by the men themselves, their wives or their descendents.’

Kristen went on to explain the dead ends, the change of supervisors, and the obstructionism of Sinclair IV.

‘Sinclair IV? But I got a letter from him! He won’t let you in?’
‘No—he won’t. He’s senile, and he thinks I’m someone else. I had a meeting with the new CEO, Danielle. She was mildly interested and had no objections to me having access to everything. But that cantankerous old man controls the archive.’

‘He’s eccentric, but he seems nice to me.’

Kristen put her hand on his arm, and her touch sent a shiver through his body. ‘You know him? But this is perfect Tom! You’re going to be able to get me access to everything. Did you know that in that archive are the real Sinclair Morgan’s journals? He recorded every day of his life. They would have so much about Alice.’

‘I haven’t even met him properly yet. But I’ll do what I can to help.’

‘No pressure, but you do realise you’re my last hope, don’t you?’

Their conversation veered around; there was too much to talk about. She started asking him about his grandad, trying him out to see if there was some clue his grandad had unwittingly dropped about Alice, but there was nothing.

‘Maybe your grandad has some papers stashed away somewhere?’ she finally asked.

‘This was all going too fast; he didn’t know what he should tell her about the cellar.

‘I’m in a dilemma,’ Tom said. ‘As he was dying, he asked me to burn any letters I find.’

‘Hmm,’ she said. ‘But he’s not going to know now.’

‘Don’t the dead’s wishes count for something? And what if there’s an afterlife from which he’s watching?’

She laughed, misjudging his seriousness, but then he realised he’d intlected it with a whiny hint of flippancy so that she could laugh. She said, ‘Well, I certainly wouldn’t want the possibility of that to jeopardise our quest. You want to find out the secrets of Alice as much as me, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ he said, gingerly.

‘Do you think people should be allowed to cover up history?’

‘Probably not,’ he said.

‘So where are your Grandad’s letters?’

‘I’ve got to think about this,’ he said.

It was a sunny April day, and stepping off the lift at the tenth floor Tom could see out over the river to the east of the city. The world shifted this high up; the city became re-enchanted, a place he didn’t know yet, when he normally felt he knew it too well.

Sinclair IV’s office was at the end of a corridor lined with precariously stacked cartons of donated books.

‘The old lady who had taken Sinclair IV away last time sat at a desk. She was dwarfed by shelves which rose to the high ceilings, crammed with more books.

‘Excuse me,’ he said, ‘I’m looking for Mr Morgan?’

‘Oh, come in. You’re obviously Tom Lamond. I’m Mrs Staer, secretary to Mr Morgan.’

He stepped in and realised there was a door behind her.
‘How long have you worked here?’ he asked.

‘I started when my husband died. I was thirty-one then and I’m eighty-one now—so I suppose that makes fifty years. But I’m a volunteer now. They sacked me when they pushed Mr Morgan out.’

‘I’m so sorry to hear that!’ Tom said. ‘Do you think you’ll ever retire?’

‘Someone has to look after Mr Morgan. It’s been my life’s work and I see no reason to stop now. He doesn’t have many people left—I’ve got thirteen grandchildren.’

She picked up her bulky phone, spoke to Sinclair IV and said, ‘He’ll see you now.’

The door behind her opened in a halting way, Sinclair IV pushing boxes out the way to get it open properly.

‘Glad you could make it, Lamond,’ he said, holding out his hand. His vitality belied the way he creaked as he moved.

Ushered into Sinclair IV’s office, Tom couldn’t take in all the contents. There was a window facing north over the city, but the walls were dominated by floor to ceiling books.

‘I love books, Lamond,’ Sinclair IV said, sounding aware of the impression his office had on people. ‘Do you love books?’

He gave ‘love’ the right intonation; Tom had heard too many people say too lightly they loved books.

‘Yes, I do.’

Sinclair IV eased himself into his chair and gestured for Tom to take the other chair. The books on his shelves were a mix of the canonical and the obscure; he noticed not only Homer, Gibbons and D.H. Lawrence but also the spines of self-published poetry and pulp science fiction.

‘Since I was fourteen, I have aimed to read a book each day. It’s a neat target, and it gives me something to get up for in the morning. I’ve never slept much nor concerned myself with other people. It gives one more time. Now tell me, when does your next book come out?’

Tom’s lips pursed. ‘It doesn’t. I stopped writing.’

‘Why?’

He wondered how honest to be. ‘I got sick. They thought I was dying. And I just didn’t feel it was worth it any more. There are so many great books already in the world. Why should I presume to add another mediocre one?’

Sinclair IV considered this before saying, ‘There are never enough books. There are always more stories which need to be told.’

‘Maybe. But these days I’m content to be a reader and a librarian.’

‘Ah. How selfless. Perhaps one could say the same about us Sinclair Morgans, only our statue rises up above us. It would be hard to claim I do my good deeds in secret.’

‘Were you sad to retire?’
‘Retire? Ha! Don’t use euphemisms on me! Danielle and the board—and this new lackey they have, this Throsby woman—they’re dismantling this great library piece by piece. I have spent my life making it what it is—and now they are racing against time to undo it all before I die.’

‘In the interview, Danielle asked me if I had much experience selling off books.’

‘That figures! She hates books—that’s the truth. Would you put someone who hates paintings in charge of an art gallery? Someone who hates animals in charge of a zoo?

‘I’ve had what should be an uncontroversial philosophy as head librarian: I’ve aimed to collect books, to bring together every book, pamphlet, newspaper and journal I can get my hands on. We are here to preserve the printed word! But this marks me out as an oddball, Lamond, a figure of ridicule. While all the other libraries of the world have been tossing out their heritage, I have been gathering it, saving it from the rubbish heap.’

‘You’ve done well,’ Tom said. ‘Not everything you’ve achieved will be lost.’

‘Don’t attempt to console me! There’s only one consolation I seek before I die! I told you I have a project for you. I want you to write the biography of Sinclair Morgan.’

‘But, as I said, I’ve stopped writing.’

‘Ah! Even better! I will be coaxing a book from a man who stopped writing. You’d be a fool not to take me up, Lamond. I may not have had a say in hiring the new head librarian, but I still have some influence around here, and some means. I have a lot of money tucked away. You have one year to write it, and I will pay you one hundred thousand dollars.’

It was more money than Tom thought he would ever earn in a year, let alone for writing.

‘That’s very generous, but a year’s not very long to write a biography.’

‘You’ll have to work quickly. Do I look like a man with a long time to live? We will be fighting the clock, son! Fighting the clock and fighting Danielle Morgan. I want to hold this book in my hand before I die.’

‘Why do you see your grandfather’s story as your legacy?’

‘The ancient Hebrews didn’t believe in an afterlife, not until much later. Father Abraham, he longed for an heir so that he could live on. They lived on through their descendents. I lay no claim to Jewish blood, but Sinclair Morgan lives on in me. I have a special connection with that man. I am his continuation. I want you to tell the life of Sinclair Morgan, because for decades he has been underappreciated and misunderstood.’

‘Oh,’ Tom said. ‘Do you have any heirs of your own?’

Sinclair IV’s face trembled and Tom realised he’d touched a wound. ‘That opportunity passed me by,’ the old man said. ‘I had a wife, for a short time. She died in a car accident. It seemed to me there was too much pain involved, too much loss to keep doing that kind of thing. Women and family—they take you away from what’s important! I’ve been too busy, Lamond, too busy building this up to stop for that kind of thing!’

Tom wasn’t sure what to say to that, and they sat in the wake of it for a minute. Perhaps he shouldn’t expect consistency from Sinclair IV; the man was a book of miscellanea.
Finally, Tom said, ‘Do you want this biography published?’

‘Lavishly, bound in calf leather and printed on linen paper. Or perhaps instead, a print run of a million, sent out around the world. I don’t know; don’t put the cart before the horse! The main thing is to deliver a manuscript into my hands before the year is out! Are you going to do it, or not? That’s the question.’

It was a far better opportunity than managing the Sinclair Morgan Library for economic rationalists; he had to seize it. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I will.’

Sinclair IV threw an envelope onto his desk, stuffed with old paper $100 notes.

‘Your first payment,’ Sinclair IV said. ‘You’ll have full access to the Morganalia Collection which I have spent my life cultivating. You will have your own office on this very floor. You’ll be the king of the world, Lamond, and you’ll be writing the most interesting story this city has to tell. Now come back on Monday morning.’

‘I’m going to need to give the State Library some notice.’

‘Fine, finish those things, go bury the dead. But I want you to start as soon as possible.’
Chapter 5

Kristen had sent him several texts, wanting to know how it’d gone. He rang her back.

‘Complementary projects!’ she exclaimed. ‘This is why you and I are just meant to have met!’

As he was about to get off the phone, she said, in a mock whisper, ‘I hate to be pushy but can I help you explore the cellar today?’

He hesitated then agreed. She was over fifteen minutes later.

He broke the lock open with bolt cutters from the shed. The flimsy wooden door opened with a creak and he felt for the light switch as they bent over and stepped down into the cellar.

It was cool inside and dimly lit. There was a clock on the wall, incongruously still ticking, five minutes fast, and many webs, some of them hanging down like drapes from the ceiling.

The room was jammed full of objects in boxes, crates and bags. It was a graveyard for his grandparents’ possessions. They had piled up their worn out shoes, unread books, unwanted presents and broken appliances in a purgatory for objects, a trial separation where they could be out of sight but not relinquished.

Where were the family secrets?

‘Where do we start?’ she asked. ‘It’s like an archaeological dig.’

He pulled a doll’s pram from the top of the pile. It dated back to his grandmother’s childhood and had been kept for the daughter who never came, then held aside for Tom’s sister but not given in time. He remembered the row when his mum had told his grandmother it was too late—Lauren was eleven and did not want the pram. Moving it out the way, he took down a box for Kristen and a box for himself.

His was an old packing box with a moving company’s ludicrously short phone number written on its side. Some squashed ping pong balls lay on top, reminding him of his grandparents’ table-tennis table from his early childhood; he realised he hadn’t seen it for years. The table was probably down here somewhere too. In fact, everything he had ever lost might be down here in this vast lost property room. Further down in the box were relics of the 1970s: old phone books, National Geographics, Christmas cards with the muted colours of a different decade’s wise men, Christmas trees and snowmen at once both familiar and unfamiliar.

The next box contained files of his grandfather’s sermon notes. ‘M-N’ one said, with tabs for Men of God I, II, III, IV, Meekness, Mercy, Nehemiah’s Restoration, New Creation. The notes were incoherent to his eyes—Bible references, key phrases, symbols; no-one would be able to preach from these notes again. But he put aside one of the files to keep because he had few things in his grandfather’s handwriting. He glanced at Kristen; she shouldn’t be here—she couldn’t understand the significance of these things.

‘This stuff must bore you,’ he said.

‘Not at all,’ she said.
But he hadn’t said quite what he meant and soon after, she pulled out an old knitted jumper with a wobbly pattern of golf sticks and golf balls across it, saying, ‘No wonder your grandad sent this one down here!’

‘Please don’t!’ Tom said, a memory stirring of his grandmother at work on it twenty years ago.

Kristen put her hand to her mouth. ‘I’m sorry! That was rude.’

‘No—I shouldn’t be so sensitive. Weird feelings for me, going through this stuff.’

The flotsam and jetsam of his grandparents’ lives gave him a sense of communion with them; something of them lived on in their arrangement of junk. Their mania was infecting him. He began to feel the logic of why none of it could be thrown out. Just the fact these objects had already existed for decades seemed to justify their existence. Who was he to destroy objects older than he was? To throw away things that showed the world as it had been? He wished he could explain these feelings to Kristen, but any attempt would fall short and feel like a cheapening of them. Instead, they cheerily called out to each other the quirky finds of their rifling—Betamax video tapes; a calendar from 1980 with a series of soft filter sunsets. He was glad she could ironically appreciate retro, but he doubted she felt any of the melancholy or beauty of the past he felt.

He was ready to stop when he came across a box of loose documents. Amongst receipts for a holiday and supermarket coupons, he made his discovery. It was a letter of two handwritten pages, without the sender’s details.

14/5/56

Dear George,

Well I’m not going to wait for your reply to send you another letter, because experience has taught me I could be waiting till hell freezes over. Sorry, you probably find references to hell most inappropriate, and you must know I respect your religion despite anything else I might say. Without wanting to manipulate you, I think it’s your Christian duty to write to me every now and again.

Edward Jr must be four years old now! Extraordinary. I hope he doesn’t take too much after his namesake. And little Graham—two years old? I do think you should send me some photos, if I am never to see them in the flesh—which I must say is one of the disappointments of my life.

Things are going along here as you might expect—progress here, and setbacks there. We are making a difference, as small as it may seem. I know it’s a long way to come, but you would be welcome to visit—as the Reverend, if you prefer, rather than as my son.

I miss you and think of you often.

With love, Ma.
'Kristen…’ He passed the letter to her. He had found the secret. Or not really; he had discovered that there clearly was a secret. Not just a lack of facts, but a cover-up. Alice had been alive in 1956 and writing to his grandad!

It was tantalising; there was no return address, and the letter assumed so much knowledge, explained so little.

‘Tom,’ Kristen said, ‘this could save my PhD.’

They checked the rest of the box thoroughly to see if there were other letters from Alice. There were none; it seemed a single, random find. They would never know what it was doing in that particular box, or why it had survived. Perhaps by accident, perhaps not.

On the phone, he said, ‘Dad, I don’t know if you’ll want to hear this or not…’

‘What did my great-great grandfather do this time?’

‘Closer to home than that.’

‘Oh.’

‘Your grandmother—on your dad’s side—this might be upsetting… I found a letter from her in the cellar. It’s dated 1956.’

His voice had gone down to a whisper to deliver the date.

‘Are you sure? That doesn’t sound possible.’ A pause and then, ‘Maybe you shouldn’t go digging in Grandad’s stuff.’

‘She says she wishes she could meet you and Uncle Ed. But it sounds like Grandad wouldn’t let her.’

‘That’s strange,’ his dad said. ‘I suppose he had his reasons.’

The next day was Sunday and Kristen was knocking on his door just as he was getting up at eight o’clock.

‘I didn’t think you were coming for another hour,’ he said. She was wearing tight jeans, her curly mane tied back, and she looked so beautiful it made him ache.

‘At least pretend to be glad to see me.’

‘Sorry—I am, actually. I’m glad you care about my ancestor. I rang Dad to tell him what I found, and he wasn’t very interested.’

They drank tea first. She heaped in three sugars, which he found endearing; she was impressed by his teapot and tea leaves. ‘My first tea-snob friend,’ she said.

‘It’s not as cool as being a coffee snob.’

‘Who needs cool?’

She told him about her sense of disorientation coming back to Perth. ‘Doing a PhD is hard enough anyway,’ she said, ‘but on top of that I have to pretend to my dad that it’s going great. And to my supervisor, who really wants me to fail at Alice.’
He felt sorry for her and determined to help her get through. The conversation ran on. She made some remark about year twelve; he asked her what year she had graduated and worked out from her answer that she was only turning twenty-four this year. He wondered if she would care that he was six years older, or if she even thought of him in the category of prospective boyfriend. Certainly not this early, surely. But she was so enthusiastic about him.

The previous day it had felt like they’d reached the end of the excavation, but the new day revealed pockets of unchecked junk. A disintegrating Coles New World plastic shopping bag was filled with the childhood artwork of Tom and his cousins. A drawing of a vampire signed by Julian. Rainbows and fairies by Lauren. Tom himself had drawn a secret passage under his own house which led to his grandparents’ cellar. There was a skeleton in the tunnel and a treasure chest and a scroll. The cellar in the picture was empty; had he been unable to imagine what might be in it or was the picture unfinished? The drawing brought back the memory of its creation in Tom’s mind, the flavour of a long cloudy day in the school holidays of year two or three, and the pride he’d felt in drawing it. It had pained him as a child to give his drawings away; he’d never been confident they would be appreciated enough, because the adult delight in them seemed feigned.

‘It’s adorable!’ Kristen said. ‘You haven’t changed you know.’

‘I think I might have changed a bit.’

‘I want to hang it up on my fridge.’

He didn’t mind being teased by her; yesterday’s mild sense of trespass had disappeared and he felt only delight and gratitude at being with her. He kept stealing looks at her, enchanted by her face, her smell, her body.

The morning was nearly gone and their hopes were low when Kristen found a wooden crate of papers. The crate was uncovered, the papers on top yellowed and speckled with rodent dirt. One was a letter addressed to Edward Lamond—Alice’s husband, the father of Tom’s grandad.

They took the crate up into the house, setting it down on the dining table. Most of the papers were notes and drafts toward Edward’s unfinished encyclopedia. One page had the proposed title: ‘The Encyclopedia of the World: Being 101 Articles Which Capture the Essence of Life According to Mr Edward Lamond, a Welshman In Perth, Western Australia’.

‘Grandad told me about this a couple of times,’ Tom said, ‘I think he was warning me about the danger of quixotic projects.’

In the crate was a note from Alice.

1-7-18

Dear Edward,

I write with a heavy heart, to say I am going away and I shall not be returning. I am sorry to do this to you. I do not do it by choice, but out of an obligation that runs even deeper than our marriage. I cannot explain but please know that I am going not on a whim, but to do what duty requires me to do.
You are a kind man, the kindest I have known, and it only pains me to know you will forgive me even this.

I think it kindest if you tell George, when he is old enough, that his mother died. It is not altogether untrue, for whoever I have been in my time in Perth—that person is dead to the world.

Love Alice.

It was frustratingly oblique; mysterious to them, and probably mysterious to Edward too.

Underneath it was an unsent letter to Alice. The envelope was filled out with ‘Mrs Alice Lamond’ and stamped but lacked an address. An unsent letter was such a sad thing, Tom thought, a thing said but unsaid.

‘He obviously didn’t know where she’d gone,’ Kristen said. ‘But he was optimistic—putting a stamp on. And calling her by her married name.’

Tom gently pulled the crisp old writing paper from the unsealed envelope.

Dear Alice,

I send this letter after you, in the hope it will find you, and prick your conscience to return to your home, to your husband and to your son. You speak of ‘duty’ calling you away, but before God you have no greater duty!

Our Father in Heaven is a merciful God. I urge you to repent of your sins, whatever they may be, whatever state of mind, whatever hysteria has taken hold of you, and to know that you can start again. Return to me, and I will not hold this madness against you. George is inconsolable. He cries and cries, and neither Mother nor I can do much good for him.

I remember the first day I laid eyes on you. There is something about you which sparkles, and which moved me in my soul. I heard God whispering to me that the path I was taking was a painful one; it was a warning from the Almighty, a caution—but do you think I could understand just what He meant, the agony which now clenches my heart?

Do you remember we spoke of encyclopedias? I had just fallen out with Battye; he had found offensive my comparison of my encyclopedia to his own. You said how glad you were to find another who shared your passion for the form. You were even willing to listen sympathetically to my complaints about your old boss. (I have no heart to finish the encyclopedia now. It seemed a worthwhile, diverting hobby at the time; now it seems only futile.) Our cups of tea in your office enchanted me. You made time for me, even though I feared I was not the most interesting conversationalist. I was smitten.

Yet I could not understand the contradictions in you then and I cannot understand them now. The life of the mind and the life of the flesh—it seems you can never choose. Do you really think you can have both? Your love of books is God-given and life-giving. How many respectable husbands are there who would let their wives return to work as soon as their infant is suckled? The ignominy I have faced so you can do what you love! I cannot force you to be grateful, but you leave me mystified and broken-hearted. Why is it like this?

I will tell you something I was not going to tell you. When you told me you would accept my proposal, but warned me of your situation, I went away with a deep pain in my soul. I
walked around Hyde Park an hour, praying over what to do. And this is what the Lord said to me: ‘You are Hosea; take Gomer’s hand and marry her; take the child and raise it as your own.’

You will not want to be compared to Gomer; but that is where I found my strength and determination. It has taken me through the hardships—until now. It has allowed me to endure the slings and arrows of disapproval—the censure of my mother, the cold shoulder of others at my church where you never come, the whispers that now swirl around my name wherever I go.

You have turned your back on the life we built together. I am a man abandoned. Just one trace have I found of you, your berth on the ship to Melbourne. Why have you gone there when we have just returned? None of our friends have heard from you. You are a ghost.

I thought that if I held nothing back, if I loved you even in your state, that God would reward me in the end, that it would turn out right. Yet you make a mockery of my good intentions, of my forbearance.

WHERE ARE YOU? WHERE ARE YOU? WHERE ARE YOU?

Tom was churned up reading it, suddenly placed in the presence of his anguished great-grandfather, and learning that he, Edward, was not George’s biological father. No Lamond blood ran through Tom’s veins, nor any of the family.

Had Edward loved George as a son? Or resented him every day, the cuckoo offspring of another man? Alice suddenly seemed so very selfish to Tom. He wanted his grandad alive again, not to be angry with him for everything he had hidden, but to try to heal him, unburden him of the shame he should not have had to feel.

Until now, the quirks and secrets, illegitimacies and abandonments he had uncovered in his family history research had only ever seemed interesting. But this was not interesting; it was devastating. He could feel its force a century later. He had come to a new understanding of his grandad, of the shame and strict morality sent down the line to Tom himself.

‘Who’s Gomer?’ Kristen asked.

‘You don’t learn about her at Sunday School,’ Tom said. ‘She was the prostitute the prophet Hosea was told to take as a wife, to symbolise the prostitution of God’s people.’

‘Edward’s kind of pious and holier-than-thou about it, isn’t he?’

He bristled. ‘I don’t think that’s fair. He went against convention and against all the people around him to marry her because he loved her—and wanted to help her. And then when she abandoned him—he raised her child as if it was his own.’

‘Still… the way he talks about it.’

He let the subject drop. They would come to no agreement here, and he would only be hurt.

They looked through the notes toward the unfinished encyclopedia. It was difficult to read—verbose and preachy. The first article was on “Architecture”, and Edward spent pages critiquing architects Tom and Kristen had not heard of and praising others who were equally unknown to
them. The second article was on “Axes”, and it felt padded out, as Edward made a rather strained effort at arguing not only for the importance of axes but also their ‘beauty’.

‘He must have liked chopping wood,’ Kristen said.

‘Well my dad does. Maybe it runs in the family.’

There were drafts for articles on ‘Bible, The’ and ‘Books’ and ‘Bridges’. Even if the writing was not gripping, he felt an affinity with the man, and a sadness that he was not his biological great-grandfather. He suddenly wondered how often that was true, whether anyone of a certain surname truly bore the genes of their namesake—if one went back far enough, would there always be some transgression, some illegitimacy or unknown act of adultery?

He let Kristen take the whole crate away, wondering queasily if he would ever see it again, but not wanting to be mistrustful.
Chapter 6

Tom had to let go of Edward Lamond; it was Sinclair Morgan he was to be focused on for the next year. If there were more to be discovered about Edward, it would be Kristen’s task.

Checking what had already been written on Sinclair Morgan, Tom was surprised to find very little. Somehow, Morgan had largely escaped the attention of historians. There was, at least, an entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

MORGAN, Sinclair James (1837-1942)

Sinclair Morgan, miner and library patron, was born on 15 June 1837 in Adelaide, the only child of Joseph Morgan (d.1849), footman, and his wife Emily (d.1842), nee Drake. Little is known of his early life, although he is recorded as having unsuccessfully stood for mayor in Geelong, Victoria, and by his own report, spent a couple of years working as a clown in the Moore Brothers Circus in the 1860s. He married the former Martha Jones (1855-1912) in Melbourne in 1883, with two sons following—Sinclair Robert (‘Robert’) (1884) and John James (‘Jack’) (1885). In 1886, they migrated to Western Australia and Morgan established a profitable general store in West Perth.

The greatest success story of the 1890s gold boom in Western Australia, he staked an early claim in Coolgardie on what proved to be a rich deposit. Morgan often boasted he had a ‘nose for gold’ and by 1895, he had made many more highly successful claims and incorporated Morgan Mining. By 1898, when he returned from the goldfields to rejoin his family in Perth, he was the richest man in Western Australia.

Back in Perth, Morgan seems to have longed for acceptance by the Perth establishment, throwing a number of lavish parties, the likes of which Perth had not seen before. Yet contemporary commentary indicates he only seems to have cemented his ostracisation as a ‘pretentious t’othersider’. He was denied entry to the exclusive Weld Club.

Morgan devoted himself and his wealth to the collecting of books. In 1900, he recruited the deputy librarian, Alice Greene, from what was then Western Australia’s Victoria Public Library (later the State Library of Western Australia). Particularly under Greene’s wise guidance, he acquired a staggering array of rare books and manuscripts, taking trips to auctions around Europe and sending back his prize acquisitions. His ambitions grew, and he dedicated the rest of his life to establishing his own library, the Sinclair Morgan Library.

Built between 1900 and 1902, the library dwarfed the other buildings in Perth, standing ten storeys high with a statue of Morgan on top of it. Indeed, its height was only to be surpassed in the 1980s when a new boom hit Perth.

Morgan’s two sons both died young—Robert in the Boer War, 1902; Jack from pneumonia in 1917. After Jack’s death, Morgan retired from public view, and spent the rest of his long life in seclusion within his library. He died in 1942 at 105.

The next day, with trepidation, Tom resigned from the State Library. By most measures it was a rather foolish thing to do, especially as Sinclair IV was surely insane, but his life had grown numb,
and this was what he needed to do to start feeling again. His boss agreed to let him serve out another week wrapping things up before finishing on leave.

During the week, he rang to check on his dad. He would sound him out over his reaction to the discoveries about Alice, decide whether it was time to tell him of George’s unknown paternity.

‘I’m fine,’ his dad said. ‘It’s not a big deal. These things you uncover in your research—even this—they don’t change who we are. The past doesn’t affect our day to day lives.’

‘I suppose not,’ Tom said, but he disagreed. How could they live in ignorance of where they had come from? Of the lives their ancestors had lived?

‘Perhaps my grandmother was still alive when I was a little boy. If she was living interstate, the chances of me seeing her were very small anyway.’

‘I’m glad you’re not upset,’ Tom said, but half-wished he was, half-wished his dad felt the injustice of the lie and the enormity of the discovery.

‘Sometimes I think you’re trying to find the meaning of life in your ancestors,’ his dad said.

‘Not exactly,’ Tom said, squirming, knowing where his dad was pushing. ‘I’m under no illusions. I don’t expect to find the answer to everything.’

‘God still loves you, even if you’ve stopped loving him.’

Tom was annoyed now. ‘I’m amazed you know so much of what he’s feeling.’

He decided to say nothing of his new discovery.

On Saturday, the day after Tom finished at the State Library, he went to the Sinclair Morgan Library to report for duty. Kristen sent him a text message; she wanted to know everything he saw. Sinclair IV had left a note on the door of his chambers to find him in the first floor shelves.

‘What are you doing, Mr Morgan?’

Startled, he looked up and took a moment to realise who Tom was. ‘Lamond! The barbarians have begun their invasion!’

The old man pointed at the spine of a book with a red dot on it. ‘The dots of death! This Throsby woman is sending out library assistants—unqualified library assistants—to choose books for destruction.’

‘And what are you doing?’

‘I’m taking the dots off, of course!’

‘Do you think that’ll stop it for long? Wouldn’t you be better off just removing them from the ones you want to save the most? Then they might not notice.’

Sinclair IV considered this. ‘Mmm. Perhaps you have a point.’

He started by giving Tom a tour of the library—it was important he see all the floors before Danielle dismantled them. The old man led Tom through the intricacies of each maze of shelves, showing him books significant for their content or history; he knew where each of them was located. He also took Tom into the abandoned workrooms, some of them cleared, others jammed
full with backlogs of books for cataloguing or repair. For the decades of Sinclair IV’s reign, individuals and libraries around the world had sent all their unwanted books to the Sinclair Morgan.

They got to the ground floor, home of the 000s, Generalities, when Sinclair IV said it was time to go back up to the top.

‘What about the basement level?’ Tom asked.

Sinclair IV seemed to twitch at the question. ‘The basement is a health hazard! No-one is to go down there, do you understand?’

Tom smiled to himself; did Sinclair IV have secrets in his basement like Tom’s grandad’s cellar?

Taking the lift back to the tenth floor, Sinclair IV showed Tom his new office. It was tiny, just enough space for Tom to sit at his desk and close the door at the same time. The smallness of it was comforting; he would inhabit the entire space, a boy in a cubby grander than any he had made as a child, a cubby with city views.

The Morganalia Collection—the archives of Sinclair Morgan and the library—was a massive room on the tenth floor, the entry down the corridor from Sinclair IV’s chambers. At the front was a desk piled high with index cards, papers, boxes and photographs; behind it, a huge sorting shelf reaching all the way to the ceiling and it too a chaos of material.

Showing him through, Sinclair IV said sadly, ‘The truth of the matter is that I was planning to get the archives in order so I could go on to write the biography myself. Instead, I won’t even finish organising the archives before I die, let alone begin the biography. I’ve had to bring you in to harvest the seeds I have sown.’

There was a wall of photographs, large framed prints: Morgan in various poses; the library under construction; its grand opening; a great function, the lobby of the library filled to overflowing; and two photographs of Alice at work at her desk. After Alice was another woman in black and white. ‘My mother, Ursula Morgan-Manning,’ Sinclair said proudly. ‘Head librarian before me.’

Sinclair IV was wearing white cotton gloves and he held out a pair for Tom. Past the sorting desk was a solid cabinet with locked glass doors; inside it were elaborately bound folio volumes, uniform and untitled. Gesturing towards them, Sinclair IV said, ‘You will be reading your way through the great journals of Sinclair Morgan. Few biographers of any man have ever received such a precious gift. They record every day of his life. They are the scriptures on which you will build the biography. Almost everything you could possibly need to know is within them. Before you ask me any questions, I want you to master them. And more than that, I want you to treat them with respect.’

‘You want critical history, though, don’t you? Not a hagiography?’

‘You do what you must!’

‘I will be respectful—but I don’t think I should be uncritical.’
‘I’ve trusted you, not Linda. Now do what you must!’

Morgan took a key and, fumbling, unlocked the cabinet and brought out the first volume for Tom to take. Just as he handed it to Tom, Mrs Staer came in to say there was a call for Sinclair IV. Sinclair IV, flustered, muttered, ‘All right, all right!’ and started to relock the cabinet, only to decide against it and hurry off to take the call.

Was the answer to the mystery of Alice Greene somewhere in here? It could be months before he would have anything to tell Kristen. He noticed that the volumes were not all entirely uniform; the first twenty were, but the ones after that were slightly different, the leather a different hue. He put the first volume down and took out, while he had the chance, the last of the old volumes.

It started in late 1916; he was tormenting himself—the truth of Alice could be in his hands, but Morgan would return any moment and object to him starting here. He flicked through. The entries were not daily; they were sporadic, the writing spidery, indecipherable. There were a number of them from April 1917, and then a blank page. The next entry was from 1926, and in a child’s handwriting began with ‘Now that it is my ninth birthday, I am carrying on the diary, because I am Sinclair Morgan too.’

This seemed strange, given Sinclair Morgan had not died until 1942. There was nothing from 1918, the year Alice Greene had disappeared; it seemed Kristen’s holy grail was not what she hoped.

Sinclair IV came up behind him saying, ‘What are you up to?’ He took the journal from Tom and said, ‘No sense putting the cart before horse. You start at the beginning!’

Returning the 1916 volume to the cabinet, Sinclair IV instructed Tom in filling out the register on the desk. Each day, he had to sign out and then sign in whatever volume he was working on. Tom looked back over the other entries in the register; most were Sinclair IV’s, with his elaborate looping signature. On the previous page, some were signed ‘Linda Murchison’. He wondered who she was and how she’d fallen out with Sinclair IV.

Tom carried the first volume back to his office. To hold it in his hands, even with gloves on, seemed dangerous, perhaps desecratory. He kept expecting Morgan to appear behind his shoulder and tell him that he wasn’t to actually touch it. He was overwhelmed by the miracle of the journal’s existence, the strangeness of pen marks made across paper in a different century speaking to him. And touched, too, by its vulnerability: an original document, irreplaceable.

The first entry was dated on the original Sinclair Morgan’s ninth birthday.

15 June 1846

My far-sighted Pa has given me the gift of these journals to record the rest of my life. Twenty books to write my adventures. I promise to write in here every day and tell of what happens. If you do not write about a day, it is gone forever and only God will know what happened to you. Sometimes I think of all He is remembering, and am glad someone is keeping a record.
At school I learned of Vasco Da Gama and some more on fractions.

Uncle Fergus and Aunt Mary and the cousins came to dinner. Grandma made a cake and there was roast beef. There was a strong W wind and \( \frac{1}{2} \) inch of rain.

From the start, Tom thought, Morgan had his eye on making his mark on the world, on striving for permanence. Pushed by his father, it seemed. It was remarkable that a working class man would hand his young son twenty blank books of a thousand pages, elaborately bound, and tell him to begin recording his life.

He waded through the young Morgan’s preoccupations. Each day, Morgan recorded the weather, his school test scores, and any money he had made or spent. In brackets, after the date, he recorded the number of days already passed in the year and the number to come. The entries were tedious and could not bring those days back for Tom one-hundred and sixty-one years later; they evoked very little except the drudgery of existence.

He’d had his phone off all day as he worked; he turned it on at half-past six after Sinclair IV came to check on him and make sure he was going to return the journal. There were missed calls and texts from Kristen wanting to know if he’d seen the journals. Waiting for the lift, he wondered what to do. Even if the journals didn’t answer her biggest question, her need to see them was genuine and urgent. And yet to get her access to the volumes she needed would involve deceiving Sinclair IV.

He was still weighing up what to say to her when he saw her in the lobby.

‘I’ve been waiting for ages! Did you lose your phone?’

‘Won’t Sinclair IV see you?’ Tom said in a whisper. Half of him was anxious by her presence; the other half thrilled this beautiful woman was waiting for him.

‘Have you ever seen him leave the tenth floor?’ she said, and laughed when he nodded. ‘You worry so much about everything!’

It was dark and he was hungry, but she wanted to go for a walk along the river.

She put her hand on his shoulder, and said, ‘Now Tom, you have to tell me everything!’

He described the archives, the backlog, the locked cabinet, the size and feel of the journals. He told her there were no entries from the critical year Alice disappeared, and about the young Sinclair IV taking up the journal in 1926.

She absorbed the news and finally said, ‘It’s just what I thought—all this bullshit about the journals not being ready yet! He just wanted his biographer to have exclusive access!’

‘Are you sure he even knew what he was doing? He gets quite confused.’

‘He knows, he \( \varepsilon \) knows.’

She was walking quicker and he hurried to keep up with her. He needed food and didn’t want to be trapped in her problem any longer.

‘There’s nothing from 1918?’ she suddenly said.

‘Not that I could see.’
‘I thought he kept it every day! It’s meant to be in there! It’s meant to tell us what happened!’

She sat down on a bench looking over the river. She was crying softly.

‘I’ve only got three weeks, Tom! The letters we found in your cellar throw everything open. They’re exciting—but they’re not enough. I don’t know anything. I don’t know where she was in 1956, what made her leave her children behind…’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said quietly.

‘Won’t you help me? Even if there’s nothing for 1918… the journals will tell me so much about her years at the library.’

‘I’m trying! I have such limited access. Maybe I can get Sinclair IV to agree to let you see them… but I need more time…’

‘I don’t have time!’ she said, and she started furiously back to her car.
Chapter 7

As Tom was waiting for the lift the next morning, a shelver came up alongside him, pushing a trolley. She was a thin, pale woman, thirty-something with brown curly hair like Kristen’s, only cut shorter. Her black-framed glasses were almost the same as Tom’s. Unsmiling, she looked at him longer than was comfortable. Feeling awkward, he smiled, but she looked away. He could smell her perfume and it reminded him of high school, the memory of a girl wearing the same scent.

In the lift, she was closest to the buttons and she said, ‘Ten?’

‘Yes…’

How did she know what floor he worked on? As the lift moved up the floors, he felt tense; her tongue was moving slightly in her mouth, hesitating to form syllables. Then others got into the lift and the moment passed.

He wondered how Kristen was. He sent her a text, hoping she was better and she texted back, *Sorry for hissy fit yday. u rock + im fine.* Relieved, he turned his phone off, wanting to immerse himself in the journals.

3 July 1849

I am tonight an orphan in this world. Pa was taken up into glory at a quarter after three in the afternoon. He died at peace, with Uncle Fergus and me at his bedside. His final admonition was for me to pursue a profitable life, and to spend my time well. He hoped I would be blessed by our Heavenly Father to live to a better age than him.

My parents have so little to show for their time on Earth. When you die the world should at least be different because you lived. Their furniture is to be sold off to help pay for my upbringing. I am to move in to U. Fergus and A. Mary’s house. They will prob. make me leave school and find work.

I have decided to have three ambitions in life. (1) To live to the age of 100 years. (2) To become rich (greatly). (3) To never be forgotten.

It was a remarkable entry—a twelve year old setting his sights on certain achievements upon his father’s death and going on to achieve them all.

A few hours later, he came to some sketches of statues. Morgan had spent a Saturday in the city centre, recording these enlarged men in their expressions of grandeur. At the end, he had written:

I should like my own statue to be taller than these. One that people can see from a distance. It is also important that it go up before I die—that way I will have an opportunity to enjoy it. But first I must do things worthy of a statue.

Tom got down every word of this in a shivery sense of breakthrough. He had found a key to Morgan’s life, a way in.
At lunchtime, someone called his name out as he was walking across the tenth floor. It was the
shelver from the lift, standing in one of the rows.

‘I’m Linda,’ she said, keeping her voice down. ‘You can’t let Sinclair IV see me talking to
you.’

She led him deeper into the shelves where they couldn’t be seen.

‘Why not?’

‘At the moment, I’m a library assistant. But I’m actually your predecessor. I have a Masters in
history and Sinclair IV hired me to write the biography. He probably didn’t tell you?’

Tom shook his head, ‘I’m afraid he didn’t. But… he mentioned your name— in passing.’

‘We fell out—he’ll be furious if he sees you talking to me. I should warn you—I’m working
on a paper about his father—Jack Morgan. It will really change everyone’s perspective on the
Morgans. I suppose in a way, it makes us competitors.’

‘Why did you fall out with Sinclair IV? If you don’t mind me asking.’

‘He’s insane. Have you picked that up yet? And he has dementia. He doesn’t want to know
the truth about his grandfather—or his father. He wants a hagiography. You’re a novelist, that’s
why he hired you and not a historian.’

Her tone was gaining intensity; Tom felt attacked. ‘I’m researching the book properly. I’m
not going to fictionalise it, if that’s what you’re saying.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I shouldn’t be blaming you. You’re just the poor sucker who’s fallen
into his trap.’

‘It’s not that bad, is it?’

‘Noticed anything strange about the journals yet?’

‘Actually, I have—they don’t seem quite right. Do you have a theory about them?’

‘We really should talk properly.’ she said. ‘You’re not as bad as I imagined. I thought you
might be arrogant, being a famous writer and all. Could we meet later? The Heirisson Pub, at
five?’

‘Okay,’ he agreed, walking off to lunch feeling grazed by the awkwardness of the interaction.
He could sense her troubled life and he already felt slightly burdened by her.

On the way to the pub, he saw the new head librarian, Verity Throsby, coming out of the lift. She
was talking to one of the library staff, and half-smiled at Tom, but Tom looked away. He
remembered her from the State Library; she’d been a manager for a couple of years, before
moving to a different library.

Linda was waiting for him in the pub. Powderfinger were playing loudly; they always made
him think of Anita, who had loved them. In the hours that had passed since their previous
meeting, Linda had changed into a dress, put make up on, done her hair. He found her nearly
attractive but not quite—her make up too heavy, her dress slightly daggy, the strap of a worn bra peaking out.

She insisted on buying him a drink. As she brought back two glasses of Sauvignon Blanc, his phone beeped—he saw it was a message from Kristen but he didn’t read it.

‘So,’ Linda said, ‘we were talking about the journals?’

‘You don’t trust them?’ he asked, wondering if he should read the message.

‘No, I don’t.’

‘In what way? You think Morgan misreported? Falsified events?’

‘More than that. I think Sinclair IV wrote the journals himself. He is so obsessed with his grandfather he recreates every detail of his life. And now he wants it legitimised with a biography that regurgitates it.’

‘Really? But the journals look genuinely old—older than Sinclair IV. And the detail…’

He was incredulous, but even as he said it, the idea meshed with things he’d noticed—the coincidence of the goals Morgan set in childhood all being neatly achieved; the feeling that some of the things written were too precocious for a child.

‘Come on! Hardly proof of authenticity. He probably found blank journals from the nineteenth century—Forgery 101. By the way, it doesn’t mean I think you should go saying this to Sinclair IV, because as you can imagine, he doesn’t take being called a hoaxer kindly.’

‘That’s what got you fired?’

‘Part of it. Do you want to know the truth?’

‘Of course! You have me fascinated. I noticed something strange—I don’t know how this fits in—there’s relatively few entries for 1917, and then suddenly in 1926, it’s Sinclair IV writing as a nine year old.’

She made a kind of scoffing noise in a way Tom didn’t like and said, ‘You don’t know anything yet, do you? Like when Morgan really died?’

‘I guess not.’ He glanced down at the phone, enough to take in the message—Kristen was trying to find him; she’d seen his car and so was sure he was still around. He had to excuse himself and call her. What would she think of him sitting in the pub talking to this woman?

Before he could say anything, Linda’s face tightened in slight admonishment and she said, ‘Sinclair Morgan didn’t die in 1942—he died in 1917. But he was crazy and his greatest desire was to live to one hundred—that much is true—and so he wanted his son to take over from him and become Sinclair Morgan. Of course, Morgan’s first son was actually named Sinclair— but he always called himself Robert. He died in the Boer War but by Sinclair IV’s count, he was Sinclair II. Then in 1917, when Morgan actually died, Jack Morgan faked his own death and became Sinclair Morgan, the third, if you like.’

‘Why did he do that?’

‘That’s what I’m researching.’

‘Have you worked it out?’
‘I have a theory.’
His phone was ringing; she stopped. ‘You better get that,’ she said, as if he shouldn’t. He felt paralysed; turning away from her, he answered it.

‘Where are you?’ Kristen asked.
‘I’m in the Heirisson,’ he said.

Kristen laughed. ‘That’s not like you. You’re not seeing someone, are you?’

‘Um… we’re talking about the biography…’

‘I’ll come and find you.’

‘Actually——’

‘See you soon!’

Linda was looking morose. ‘Who’s that?’

‘My friend… Kristen—it’s probably good if you meet her—she’s researching Alice Greene—’

‘Kristen Hall!’

‘Yeah… you know her?’

‘I didn’t know you were working with her!’

‘I’m not exactly—it’s kind of a co-incidence—she was looking up my family…’

‘So basically, anything I tell you is just going straight to helping her PhD?’ Linda asked, and took a gulp of wine.

‘It’s not a competition—can’t we pool resources? We’re each writing about someone different.’

‘People like her cruise through life, like it’s all one big party. Do you think she actually cares about you?’

Tom saw Kristen at the door as Linda was saying this. Linda noticed him looking and turned too. She took another gulp of wine, trying, it seemed to Tom, to get to the bottom.

Kristen was beaming; Tom realised at once that she wasn’t jealous at all.

‘Hey!’ she said, laughing, and she held out a hand to Linda. ‘I’m Kristen.’

Linda shook her hand, reluctantly, and said, ‘I can’t stay—I was just leaving. You’ve forgotten me—we were at uni at the same time. Well, actually, I was your tutor. My name is Linda.’

‘Linda? But Sinclair IV keeps thinking I am you! This is so strange—it must be you. Do you know him? Did you upset him, more to the point?’

‘I used to work for him.’

‘Tom said, ‘Now she’s working on a paper about Jack Morgan…’

Linda glared at him. ‘I’ve got to go,’ she said.

When Linda was out of sight, Kristen said, ‘Why would Sinclair IV think I’m her? I don’t look like her, do I?’
‘Not really,’ Tom said, but he could see the similarity of their faces, and having seen it, he was finding similarities in their voices and mannerisms. Linda could be Kristen’s much older sister. ‘Not unless you were senile.’

‘She doesn’t like me for some reason. Maybe she was my tutor in first year, but I don’t remember her. I think she might be a bit unstable.’

‘A little,’ Tom agreed. ‘But she was just about to tell me something important, I think. Only she’s worried about us… well, you, in particular, stealing her discovery.’

‘Huh,’ Kristen said. ‘I wouldn’t do that!’

Tom felt annoyed at Kristen; he wished she hadn’t interrupted. He also had a strange reaction to the similarity between them—Linda was making Kristen seem less attractive to him.

‘We shouldn’t dismiss her,’ he said. ‘She has a theory about the journals which might be right.’

‘Have you thought of a way to get me access?’ she asked.

‘Look, I’m sorry, I can’t see you getting them in time for your report. Even if you had access right now—it’d take months to digest it all properly. The material on Alice would be spread over years of entries.’

‘Oh, so what do you think I should do?’

‘Maybe before Blanning can suspend you, you should suspend yourself? It would give you more time to access materials.’

‘Gee Tom, I didn’t think you’d be telling me that. You think Blanning is right?’

‘Of course not. I just think with all the pressure she’s putting on you, your options are limited.’

Kristen sighed. ‘I’m sorry. I’m asking too much of you.’

That night, as he tried to sleep in the dirty sheets he kept meaning to wash, his thoughts were stuck in a loop. After a charmed start, two upsets with her in a row. They shouldn’t be lovers; they couldn’t even get on as friends. She was kind of demanding. Maybe Linda was right and Kristen was using him. But it wasn’t like that; he was the only one who could help her. The last thing he wanted to do was to disappoint her, yet he was sure the journals were an impossible prospect in her time frame.

The headache he woke with the next day was disturbingly intense. The pulse of pain sat behind his right eye. His vision had turned speckled as if the world was a badly-tuned television station. In the shadow of the tumour, he could no longer judge headaches—each one seemed a harbinger. But this was surely worse than normal. In his mind’s eye, the tumour had returned overnight, a dense and gristly alien seed, sprouting rapidly.

He felt so very alone. He thought of calling his parents, but he didn’t want to worry them. He turned on the television, let it fill up the old house, the same television his grandmother had
taken to watching in her last years of life. Breakfast television through the speckles, the comforting smatter of stories, a bite of politics.

He’d been waiting for the sickness to return; should he be surprised it was now here? But a part of him had felt, perversely, that rather than bringing it on, his vigilant worry and his pessimistic expectation had been warding it off. He had wasted the last few years. He had not enjoyed the health he had been given, and now it was being taken from him.

In the packing box of his belongings he found expired prescription painkillers and swallowed some. It was too early in the morning to make an appointment but he got out the number of his doctor for later.

Even though the television was cheerily disseminating Hollywood gossip, he was going to die this time. He would hold the pain at arm’s length. He would work harder on the biography. He would woo Kristen—not dragging her into his sickness, but into a brief, passionate affair, such as he had never had. This would be the living of the life he had always missed out on.

Or, it was just a headache, brought on by stress, by the way he’d slept, compounded by his neurosis. It was a headache and it would pass and he would go on to live, if only he would allow himself to. Life was a mind game he couldn’t win, because the people who won were those who didn’t let mortality get to them, who didn’t live their lives obsessed with death.

There was a text from Kristen saying Sorry yet again I was stressed and pushed u 2 hard. That was enough to cheer him slightly. He wrote back conciliatorily, daring to write ‘miss you’. He was going to have sex with Kristen, that was what he was going to dedicate the rest of his life to, the unveiling of her perfect flesh.

At the library, he greeted Sinclair IV without hinting at anything Linda had claimed. But as he tried to read the journal from behind the headache, the idea of it being a fabrication nagged him. If Linda was right, there was no point to him reading the journals—what historical value did they hold? It was, perhaps, the last thing he was to do in his life, and it was useless.

He read each sentence with two lenses: as authentic record, as later fabrication. He was alert to evidence this way or that. The handwriting looked more like an adult’s than a child’s. The pens used changed frequently—but they almost seemed rotated—was this an argument for or against authenticity?

If Linda was right, he had given up his job at the State Library to work for a charlatan. And even if she was wrong—how soon before he fell out of favour with the capricious Sinclair IV?

He wished his knowledge of nineteenth century history was better. At the age of twelve, Morgan described his teacher as ‘looking like John Forrest’. Yet this was 1849 in Adelaide, and the John Forrest Tom knew of was—a quick check showed—two years old and living in Western Australia. An anachronism, indicating a forgery? A different Forrest?

Then there was the feeling the young Morgan used too many words beyond the vocabulary of a child. And events were set up too perfectly. There was so much detail about the weather and
current events—the premier did this, such and such was happening in England, everyone is talking about a murder at the port. Would a boy care?

He came to an entry from 1853:

V. hot day. Caught the train to Glenelg and swam in the ocean. I saw a crab and got burned on the arms.

Tom was certain it was a tram that ran down to Glenelg, not a train. He had no internet access in his office, and so to test the state of the railways in the Adelaide of 1853, he was forced out into the shelves. It seemed a more solid discovery anyway, to find what he needed in a hardcover book which had sat in its place for years waiting with its information. According to the book he found, there had indeed been a train prior to the tram, but no railway line to Glenelg at all for another couple of decades. Another indication Linda was right.

With growing suspicion, he looked up the statues Morgan had sketched and found them in a pictorial history of Adelaide, all erected in the 1880s and 1890s. It seemed there were no statues in Adelaide when Morgan had been a boy!

His headache subsided. He wondered if he should cancel the appointment for the next day. His doctor would grow sick of him if he came in wanting to be tested every time he had a headache. But he didn’t want to call again to cancel; it was easier to keep his appointment. Focus on Morgan, on solving the puzzle.

He stopped just after four o’clock, paralysed with questions. The door of the archives was open and the lights on; he stepped in and found Sinclair IV asleep at the desk, snoring softly in the chair, a stack of catalogue cards in front of him.

It was his chance to check for material on Alice. He walked softly over to the card catalogue. There was a single card named “Greene, Alice”; it recorded correspondence with Jack and Sinclair Morgan and gave a box number. There were two folders listed—one 1898-1915, the other 1915-. How far did the second open span stretch? Past 1918? Perhaps the reason there was no end date was that she was still alive, the world’s oldest woman, and Sinclair IV was still faithfully adding the letters she wrote to him.

The markings on the shelves were inconsistent, but he finally found the correct box. The thrill of the discovery electrified him and his heart was beating hard. He couldn’t fail now.

When he took the box down, the folders were both listed on the label, but only one folder was inside the box—the earlier one. Disappointed, he took the thin earlier folder of letters to the copier, glancing over at Sinclair IV. He was still asleep. Forcing himself to slow down and be careful, he began copying the letters, tantalized by glimpses of his great-grandmother’s handwriting. The maddening photocopier slowly flashed its light along the length of each page and he couldn’t help but stare into it, as if he could make it move quicker; instead, it only blinded him.
He had the copies in his backpack and he was at the shelf putting the box back when Sinclair IV called out, ‘Lamond! What are you up to!’

Tom helplessly held out the box to him. ‘Correspondence—between Alice and Jack. I know it’s jumping the gun. But it was the end of the day… I was curious.’

The old man stared at him; Tom wondered if he was trying to unnerve him. He was sure he knew he was helping Kristen. Finally Sinclair IV said, ‘Well, curiosity is good in a man, in a writer. But you put in a request to me or Mrs Staer if you want to see anything. We’ll get you whatever you want.’

‘I’m sorry… I will…’
Chapter 8

City Beach was foreign to Tom, more opulent than his grandparents’ quite prestigious but much older suburb. He was scared of her dad; he wished for once he had a better car. Momentarily, his own values felt secondary to impressing this man. He parked his car down the street. Her dad’s house was huge, anonymously contemporary, but lacked, thankfully, the imposing gates and security systems of others around it. As he feared, her father opened the door. He was still in his suit, a tall, imposing man, mostly bald.

‘Mr Hall? I’m Tom Lamond—a friend of Kristen’s?’ Tom held out his hand; her dad shook it, saying, ‘Don’t be scared—I won’t eat you till after you’ve been waterboarded.’ Her dad laughed loudly. ‘You want to see her? Perhaps you could take her off my hands.’

Kristen came down the stairs in her running clothes, a loose t-shirt and shorts. ‘Daddy!’ she called out. ‘What are you doing to poor Tommy?’

Even though she wasn’t expecting him she sounded pleased to see him.

‘We were having an adult conversation, Krissie.’

Kristen grabbed Tom by the hand, leading him inside and toward the stairs. ‘Well enough of that!’

Her dad called after Tom, ‘And what do you?’

‘Librarian, mainly,’ he answered over his shoulder, avoiding ‘biographer’.

‘No money in that,’ he said. ‘Perhaps you’re made for each other.’

Tom was heading up the stairs behind her, enjoying the softness of her hand in his.

She took him into her bedroom, even closing the door, the intimacy thrilling Tom. She sat down on her desk chair and gestured for him to sit on her bed. Above her desk was a framed portrait of Alice, and he felt a sense of pride to see a photocopy of Edward Lamond next to it. A huge print of Klimt’s The Kiss gave the room an eroticism. An entire wall was given over to framed photos of her life, an intimidating kaleidoscope of friends and adventures. She had travelled far, seen amazing things and posed enthusiastically hugging far more people than Tom ever had. Her room was immaculate, airy and looked out to a patch of the ocean.

‘Your dad seems okay.’

‘I’m afraid, despite the jokiness, he won’t approve of you. Not ever, unless you stop being yourself.’

‘I’d like him to approve of me.’

The corners of her mouth lifted slightly when he said this; she wasn’t discounting the possibility of couplehood.

‘He doesn’t approve of me, so why should he approve of you?’ She looked to the photocopies in his hands and said, ‘Enough about him—you have something for me! What is it?’

‘Letters—from Alice.’

She shrieked and kissed him on the cheek. ‘Have you read them?’
He shook his head. ‘I wanted to read them with you.’

They sat together at her desk so they could read them simultaneously.

6-7-00

Dear Jack,

I must say that I was quite surprised to receive your letter! It was not an unpleasant surprise, but I am unaccustomed to corresponding with schoolboys. (I understand you have a private tutor, but let’s not split hairs: a schoolboy is what you are, while I am, let us be frank, practically an Old Maid.)

I, too, enjoyed our conversation the other night. You are right when you say there are too many bores in this world, but you shouldn’t consider your father to be one of them. He’s actually one of the more interesting people I know. Which is why I agreed to come and work for him. (That and the chance to spend his money on spectacular old books.) The other thing to bear in mind is that you are going to have to deal with boring people all your life, so you should learn to suffer them now. Consider dinner parties training for this!

You certainly have the darkest mind of any boy I’ve met. Whence this obsession with death? Do not misunderstand me; I thought it quite charming the way you redirected conversation to ghosts and cremation at different points in the evening.

I admire your ‘collection’, as macabre as it is—possibly, I admire it because it is so macabre. I don’t care to ask how you procured those skulls, but they are most fascinating. (However, I can’t help thinking I’m not so sure I would like my skull to end up on someone’s shelf.) Perhaps your father should not just be building a library but a museum, and you could be the curator—if you were willing to broaden your interests a little. (You must wonder what you are going to do with your life, and that would surely be a good choice.)

As to your kind invitation to take me dancing, I must decline.

Yours faithfully, Alice.

9-2-01

Jack,

I received your letter, and I want you to know that I am the one waiting for an apology from you. You can think what you like about what I owe you or what you think you should be able to expect from me. I owe you nothing, and I don’t consider your actions those of a friend.

While your father is in Europe you know very well that I am under your brother’s thumb. Unlike you, I do not have Morgan blood running through me; I cannot do as I please. I am working hard to ensure that the library is not strangled to death by your penny-pinching brother before your father returns. If you think the best way to achieve that is to show contempt for him like you do, it only indicates how much growing up you have to do.
I was picnicking with him as a business associate. I have not taken you picnicking because you are not a business associate. I tell you, if I find you spying on me in the bushes again, I shall beat you to an inch of your life. How many other times have you been spying on me? I thought it only buffoons who showed the kind of jealousy you are showing. I thought that you were no longer a schoolboy but an adult off to Oxford?

A. Greene.

9-2-01

Dear Sinclair,

I hope you are enjoying your sojourn in Europe and have spared a thought for us stuck back in the Antipodes. Really, you must hurry back because your boys are behaving atrociously. Jack has taken to spying on me and playing the part of jealous husband, even though he has no such claim on me. As for Robert, he still considers the library a waste of money and cuts every penny he can, even as you are over in Europe buying up new treasures. You realise that if you leave him in charge of your business affairs when you are gone for good, every book you have bought will be promptly sold off and the library building turned into a bank?

Fond regards, Alice.

12-8-02

Dear Jack,

By now the sad news about your brother would have reached you in England. I know you had your differences, but you must be grief-stricken. I myself have been weeping much. I write to you to confess, even if really I should be confessing to your father.

Over the last year before he set off to war, your brother developed a passion for me. I can't say it was unprovoked; I thought that kindling his affection might make him less hard-headed about the library. Especially when your father goes off on trips and leaves him in charge. Alas, he grew soft on me, while remaining hard on the library.

Your brother was rather worried that he was cowardly for not heading off to fight the Boers. I hate war and fighting; I think it a stupid thing to go and do. I could so easily have told him that every sensible man has stayed in Perth, but did I do that? No! I thought it a rather soft war, without much danger, and I told him it would be good for him to go. I didn't expect him to do so, but he did. I just wanted him out of the way! I never, ever wanted this!

Please don't blame me, Jack. I think he would have gone anyway. When has he ever done anything I asked him to do?

Your father is inconsolable. I go in to see him and all the curtains are drawn; he lies on his bed, barely caring to even eat his blasted apples. Oh, this is a dreadful business, and coming just before he's due to open the library. It's as if he doesn't even care for the library any more, in the wake of this.

Yours always, Alice.
31-8-02

Dear Jack,

I cast these letters out to you, knowing I'll probably see you in person before you actually read them, but it almost feels like I'm talking to you.

Your cable advising of the delay in Capetown reached your father the day before the opening. He was disappointed, but it is you who truly missed out.

The opening of the library was the greatest spectacle you can imagine! Your father brought himself out of his misery in order to defy death and, I suspect, defy God.

I believe all of Perth was there to see his greatest moment, even the stuffy old colonials who have tried to stop him every step of the way.

Yours always, Alice.

20-10-07

Dear Jack,

I was rather surprised by your letter. (Why didn't you come and knock on the door of my office? Never mind; I suppose it's because you are, in your own way, so terribly shy.)

Or better still, leave what you had to say unsaid. What concern is it of yours—or the rest of Perth's—if I was spotted in the company of a man? They are all so eager to see me marry someone. The truth is that this city can't seem to handle the idea of a woman who neither wishes to marry nor to be made a cloistered spinster. But I thought you might understand.

Without a doubt you're jealous of Alfred. Well, if it's any consolation, I have no intention of marrying him. But I would rather you stayed out of my private affairs. I shall see whichever man I wish. I would appreciate the newspaper not reporting it and you not commenting on it.

Alice.

12-2-15

Dearest Jack,

I will not forget tonight, your passionate plea. I am flattered, and more than flattered—I take you seriously, as a dear friend. If it's any consolation, if I was ever going to marry, you would be on my list, and near the top. But you might as well be asking a nun for her hand in marriage.

My dear boy, I've been telling you the same thing about all this for so many years now. You ask me how I can go around with 'all these men' and not you. Well, perhaps you know less about my private affairs than you think.
You say you’ve been waiting on me, and that’s why you are still a bachelor ‘at your age’—I say, enjoy your present state. But if you think marriage so wonderful… go, marry someone. It won’t be me; I don’t share your enthusiasm for the institution.

Do you really think our marriage could be different to all the others you see around you? Marriage desiccates; I would have thought you would be in agreement with me on that.

As for ‘alternative arrangements’, well, why besmirch what we have? Besides, I find you very disturbing—I have told you this before as well.

I suspect you are like me—marriage would never suit you. Do you think any wife would stand for your Museum, for one thing? You’d find your precious exhibits sitting in the dustbin a week or two after the honeymoon.

Love, Alice.

Hearing Alice’s voice, seeing these letters in her hand thrilled Kristen. The biography was alive again.

‘Tom!’ she said, ‘come here,’ and taking hold of his shirt, she pulled him toward her, and kissed him. His chin was soft, like he barely shaved, and he kissed back reticently. She opened her eyes; his were screwed tight. She giggled and put her hands on his waist. ‘Open your eyes,’ she said. ‘You have kissed before, haven’t you?’

‘Ha,’ he said, and kissed back harder; she could feel his passion, which she had known was hiding inside him. When they paused, she reached up and delicately removed his glasses, folded them, and placed them on her desk.

‘I’m glad you’ve dropped into my life,’ she said.

‘So am I.’

She took him down to her bed and they lay kissing gently, their bodies only lightly touching. He suddenly asked, ‘Is this because I’m Alice’s descendant?’

‘Don’t be stupid! I’m not a groupie.’

‘Does it jinx us, to kiss so soon?’

‘Too many questions! We’re hardly getting carried away, are we?’

Or not any more, she thought. They just lay there a long while after that, the kissing over.

She asked Tom to take a photo of her holding up the letters, and then she took one with her arm held out of the two of them kissing. He left soon after, just as she was going to suggest going out for drinks to celebrate the find. But he was off, probably worried he might not be in bed by ten.

With him gone and the photocopies left on her desk, the find had diminished. At best, the letters gave her more of a sense of Alice’s voice and some details of a previously unknown friendship with Jack Morgan. They were interesting, but they didn’t add much to what she already knew. If only the other box wasn’t missing.

She could picture Jack Morgan, even though she didn’t have any of his letters. An introverted obsessive. She liked him less than Alice apparently liked him. But maybe Alice didn’t really like
him—it was her boss’s heir; she was obligated to humour him. She may have been a little fascinated by him, as another outsider in a conformist society, but that was all.

She posted on Facebook the photo of herself holding the letters with the caption, ‘My Indiana Jones brought me precious letters by Alice today!’ Then she posted the photo of the kiss without any caption. It made her smile, seeing the moment there for the world to see.

The next day, she went looking for more about Jack Morgan. Soon, the old newspapers would be digitised and she would be able to search across every word of them from home. But for now, the Western Australian newspapers were only on microfilm, and it was only by looking laboriously through annual indexes she could hope to discover anything. A couple of hours of searching uncovered a notice in *The Western Mail* three months after Alice’s rejection letter.

The engagement is announced of Ursula, third daughter of Geoffrey and Enid Crowley of Dalkeith, to John, son of Sinclair and Martha (dec.) Morgan of Perth.

She found marriage and census records for Ursula. She had been twenty years old, a library clerk at the Sinclair Morgan—she would have been working under Alice! A rebound marriage. He’d taken Alice’s advice; perhaps she’d even picked out his bride.

It was an unusual name, and she remembered that the head librarian of the Sinclair Morgan after Alice and before Sinclair IV was an Ursula. She looked it up—Ursula Manning. Perhaps she’d remarried after Jack’s death? If it was the same woman, Ursula had been both Alice’s successor and Sinclair IV’s mother. If only Kristen could find out what Alice had thought of this woman, who had married the man Alice had spurned.

Next, Kristen looked up Ursula’s father; he was frequently indexed, a well-known solicitor and state politician. One of the old colonials who disapproved of the Morgans? The newspaper notices gave no hint at the bride’s parents’ view of the groom’s family; it just recorded the usual, unremarkable details.

She’d reached another dead-end. It was Linda’s fault—she’d probably taken the letters from the archive box, just to stymie everyone else. She looked in vain for Linda on the internet, in the telephone directory. There was a cached Facebook profile without a photo, but the page was gone. Her master’s thesis was listed on the library catalogue; otherwise, she was a ghost. Kristen could wander the Sinclair Morgan Library hoping to run into her. But that was no good—it didn’t matter what Kristen said, she wouldn’t be able to convince Linda to help her. Kristen had to hammer out the interim report and some draft chapters with what she had.

The birth certificate for Tom’s granddad arrived in the post. She took the unopened envelope around to Tom’s house in the dusk. She wondered how long he would go on living in his grandparent’s house. It suited him, but surely it encouraged his morbidity. It was a dark house,
dwarfed by great trees, the paths covered in leaves he never swept up; in the recent rain, they had begun to rot and there was a faint smell of compost.

‘You’ve found me cooking sausages,’ he said. ‘But I hate sausages. Do you want some? I’m ashamed this would be the first meal I cook for you.’

She giggled; he was so quirky in an unaffected way. ‘Why are you eating something you hate?’

‘I’m eating my way through the freezer of things I bought for my grandad. Monday nights were sausage nights. Granny used to have a strict routine of meals.’

‘I would love to eat sausages with you! But first, speaking of your grandad, I thought you’d want to see this as soon as I did.’

Sitting on George Lamond’s couch, she tore the plain government envelope open and let Tom pull the document out.

George Edward Lamond’s date of birth was listed as 3 January 1917, which meant he was born four months early. His birthday—the birthday Tom’s family had always celebrated—had not been his birthday. The listing of his parents revealed little—‘Alice Lamond, 38 years of age’ and ‘Edward Lamond, 54 years of age, Engineer’.

‘Do you think that really was her age?’ Tom asked.

‘Maybe, maybe not. I doubt she needed to prove it for the certificate. There’s so many questions.’

Tom looked distant, dour.

‘Why are you so glum today?’ she asked him.

‘I wouldn’t say I am.’

‘I would. Has something happened?’

He hesitated and then smiled, saying, ‘I’m fine.’

She stayed for sausages, and got him talking about the writers Borges and Perec, whom she had only ever heard of, and he cheered as she basked in his passion.
Chapter 9

Returning to the library from a scan at the hospital, Tom’s head ached. He could feel the tumour clearly now, it was the size of a cricket ball, and tomorrow the doctor would tell him it was inoperable.

But it would not be like this, it would be a slow leaking out of life, an operation that robbed him of the ability to read or speak, and then a long recovery before a sudden relapse. A drawn out death over ten or fifteen years.

It was the worst time for the tumour to return. He couldn’t bring Kristen into this. Nor could he get her out of his head since they’d kissed. Was she toying with him? She was beautiful and intelligent with much of her twenties still to go; what did she want with a gloomy librarian about to turn thirty?

What could he hope for from her? He had a right to hope Anita would stay with him through the storm, but they’d been engaged and already together for years. From Kristen he could only hope for a brief romance before things got too hard. Knowing that made it seem wrong to him.

He was coming through the foyer of the library and he ran into Verity Throsby. He looked away, but she said, ‘It’s Tom, isn’t it?’

‘Yes… Verity?’

She smiled. ‘You were at the State Library—but now you’re working on Morgan’s biography?’

‘I’m surprised you remember me.’

‘Maybe I should be trying to second you for the library. I’ve only got one other librarian working for me, and she’s in her seventies. Besides her, it’s the conservation team and a couple of assistants. Most of the volunteers left when Sinclair IV retired.’

‘Should I be glad I didn’t get your job?’

‘Oh, I’m not complaining. It’s exciting. Bad luck on missing out.’

‘No, it’s fine—I didn’t actually want to be the one culling the books.’

‘Change can be hard.’

‘Doesn’t it bother you?’

‘Good question. Why don’t we have a cup of tea?’

I might be dying, he wanted to say, so I can’t do any cups of tea. Reluctantly, he followed her to her ninth floor office.

She had a bare desk, just a couple of papers in her in-tray. Once she’d made tea for them, she returned to his question. ‘I believe this library has an identity crisis—it doesn’t know whether it’s a treasure library or a universal library. From what people tell me, back when it opened, it was a treasure library—rare manuscripts, vellum editions, codices, a Gutenberg Bible. I think that was Sinclair Morgan’s original vision.'
‘But then, he’s a contradiction, because you don’t build a ten storey library to house a few thousand rare books. When Sinclair IV took over from his mother, his emphasis was on quantity over quality and he started bringing in everything he could get his hands on.

‘Now, it’s sad, but the fact is that a ten storey warehouse of every book and serial Sinclair IV could get his hands on isn’t viable. Things have to pay their way. I see my role as restoring the library to a treasure library, and using the new space to generate income to support that.’

Tom had the strange sensation of his certainty suddenly drying up. She sounded so reasonable, and he could see the situation through her eyes, the same situation he had previously only seen through Sinclair IV’s eyes.

‘But…’ he finally said, ‘There’s enough money to keep things as they are… for all those books to have a home…’

She smiled slightly; he sensed she quite liked setting him straight on this. ‘Two things, Tom. Firstly, I’ve been looking at usage stats, and we’re spending $500 running this library for each time a book is used. We can’t justify that. Secondly, the tide will turn on the printed book. A lot of librarians are still being sentimental about this, but if we look clearly, we can see how things are going to go, and it’s electronic. Have a look at what’s already happened to academic journals. The next couple of decades—every book is going to be digitised. The printed book is going to be left to enthusiasts, not everyday readers. A place like this can remember and celebrate the days of the printed book by housing treasures. If anyone needs content—and let’s face it, at the core, that’s what books really are—it’ll be electronic.’

Maybe that’s all they were for her, but not for him. He found it a sad prediction. He’d heard it before, of course, but he had been certain readers would never embrace ebooks, that it was a fad or an exaggeration by those enamoured with technology. Yet listening to her it now seemed inevitable.

‘We can’t be sure,’ he said. ‘There’s a couple of ways it could go.’

‘My job,’ she said, ‘is to make an intelligent prediction. I’m fairly certain about what I’m telling you.’

He went away with a heavy heart. She hadn’t even mentioned the tensions between her camp and the Sinclair IV camp. If she’d treated him with hostility he would have come away with a renewed sense of purpose, a determination to fight off her desecration of the library. Instead, he felt an energy-sapping ambivalence. He had to carry on along his course, but without certainty his side was right.

When he went into the staff-room that afternoon, Mrs Staer was at a table with an elderly woman he hadn’t seen before.

‘This is the chap,’ Mrs Staer said, pointing at Tom. ‘Tim—I mean Tom.’

‘I’m Joan,’ the woman said.

‘Joan volunteered here for what—about forty years, didn’t you Joan?’
‘I won’t have a bar of this new woman,’ Joan said. ‘They’re tossing all the books out! That’s what we spent all our time doing. She has no respect for Sinclair IV, even though he’s a man of such vision. To think Perth could have such a splendid library. He took all the books he could. There were thirty or forty of us at the peak—more than half of us volunteers. In our best years we would get two thousand books onto the shelf a week. I hope all this is going in your book.’

‘Well…. I’m actually focused on the original Sinclair Morgan—just his life.’

‘That’s a pity. But you’ll still need to speak to my aunty.’

The thought of this woman of eighty or so having an aunt still alive was disconcerting. ‘Who is your aunty?’

‘Miss Helen Fee. She worked here longer than I did. Not a volunteer, mind—she was a library clerk from age fifteen.’

‘How old is she now?’

‘About to turn one hundred and one!’

Tom calculated quickly in his head. She would have been born in 1906 and had started work in 1921 or 1922—after Morgan had died, although while Jack was posing as him. She would have worked with people who had known Morgan and Alice.

He told Joan he would like to interview Helen for the book; Joan was thrilled and promised to set up a time. Her excitement spooked him and he explained that whatever Helen said, only the smallest amount could possibly make it into the book, and if the book ever even came out it would inevitably disappoint them.

The next morning, the doctor told him the scan was inconclusive; more tests were required. Not a reprieve, but more uncertainty. He told the doctor he didn’t have time, he was immersed in his job. He expected the doctor to be angry or insistent, but he was nonchalant, telling him it could wait a couple of weeks—the situation was a little concerning but not urgent.

Fighting the headaches, Tom read on through the journals twelve hours a day, hoping he could come to a point of proving or disproving Linda’s theory so that he could know whether he should even proceed with the biography. He drank too much coffee, felt perpetually anxious and time conscious, a man racing against an invisible clock in the unhurried silence of the library. Sometimes in an elaborate suit, other times in a dressing gown, Sinclair IV would stop by Tom’s office daily to urge him on or demand to hear something Tom had written. Tom would feed him a sentence or two from his notes which he thought would not cause offence, but even these sometimes resulted in a blustery correction or admonition. Every couple of days, Sinclair IV would call Tom in to his chambers for a ‘consultation’, which meant listening to a rambling, circuitous monologue; Tom would sit in seething frustration, feeling overwhelmed by Sinclair IV’s madness.

The journals revealed Morgan to be a relentless self-promoter, always embarking on some new scheme which would make him wealthy or popular. Yet beneath his vanity, he seemed sad,
disconnected from other people. It was these things that Tom wanted to convey in his biography, if there was going to be one.

20 July 1864

I happened to stop by Vine’s store this morning; he had brought some books in on the last delivery, and there was one which leapt out at me: *The Art of Longevity and Health, or, How to Live 100 Years*, by Dr Robert Culverwell. This London doctor is of the same mind as me. There are not enough of us in the world striving to live to 100 years.

One hundred years is the sort of span required to see the world change. To read the great books. To do some great deeds. To see generations of descendants carry on the dynasty.

In the antediluvian days, the great men regularly lived to several centuries. (It has always seemed a pity to me that none of them reached 1000—that would be a milestone of milestones. Imagine being Methuselah and living to 969—you would begin to believe you were immortal. Perhaps he had begun to long for what came next.)

I say all these things, but what I think would be most fair is if everyone had an allotment of years and could live knowing they were to see out all those days—even if it fell short of 100.

21 July 1864

I have finished Culverwell’s brilliant guide. I shall be reading it over and over until I have absorbed its advice. Culverwell has learned the lessons of science, and those with ears to hear, such as me, shall benefit. Barring accidents, the man following Culverwell’s instructions should be almost certain to reach his century.

Ossification is the problem. Man begins life in a gelatinous state and ends in a bony, osseous state. It is the earthy deposits building up which kill a man from the inside, drying him out until his heart will not beat.

“Hence to sum up: the most rational modes of keeping physical decay or deterioration at bay, and thus retarding the approach of old age, are avoiding all foods rich in earth salts, using much fruit, especially juicy, uncooked apples, and by taking daily two or three tumblerfuls of distilled water with about ten or fifteen drops of diluted phosphoric acid in each glassful.”

Now that I have learned the secret of a long life so early, I am ready to march on to a full century of life! I shall watch the sun rise on 15 June 1937.

Alas, it is so far away! There is no second chance with living to one hundred—I will make it on the first attempt, or not at all.

Tom looked the Culverwell book up; it certainly existed, but the listings in both library catalogues and online antiquarian bookstores had the first edition two years later. The book fascinated him; but he doubted Culverwell had any advice about what to do in the case of a brain tumour. What’s more, the book had not worked, not even for its greatest fan—Morgan had not really lived to one hundred and five.
He went to find the book, but although there was a card for it, it was not on the shelf. He asked Sinclair IV about it, who lit up with excitement and returned with the book a few minutes later.

‘I keep it in the Morganalia Collection, you see. It is the very first book of the library!’

Sinclair IV opened it carefully and showed him the accession number ‘1’ on the front page.

‘It wasn’t the very first book he owned. But it was one of the first and it was the most important. So he requested that Alice accession it first when she began cataloguing the library.’

Tom had thought he would be left to study the book for a time, but Sinclair IV took it away with him. It didn’t matter, he decided; maybe he would look at it later, when he had resolved the question of the journals’ authenticity.

He read on; Morgan now added a daily tally of green apples eaten. He would go to great lengths to secure apples as he journeyed from place to place in search of success. Surely no-one could have fabricated such repetition?

The awkwardness of his meeting with Linda in the pub had not left him and he was dreading running into her. The moment finally came as he was looking for a book on the second floor. She was just ahead of him in the aisle, shelving a book and he turned away as if he had not seen her.

‘Hello Tom,’ she called out. ‘Are you avoiding me?’

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘hello Linda.’

‘I’m reading your novel,’ she said abruptly. ‘Is it autobiographical?’

‘Everyone asks that.’

‘You don’t want to talk about it.’

‘It’s okay—it was just a long time ago.’

‘Naked baby photos?’

He laughed. ‘A bit like that.’

‘Making progress on the fake journals?’

‘I’m still trying to work them out. I found some letters from Alice in the archives. I didn’t realise she had such an intense friendship with Jack.’

‘There’s a lot you didn’t realise. Did they help your girlfriend?’

‘The most important ones are missing—you don’t know where they are, do you?’

‘No. The archives are a mess. The old bastard has had fifty years to get it in order, and yet it’s a disgrace.’

‘If you can help at all… I really hope you will…’

‘I am helping. You didn’t know about Jack posing as Sinclair, did you?’

‘No—I didn’t.’

Kristen sent him a text, Hey u we’re not hanging out enough. Know ur busy but will u come out 2 dinner 2nite? I’ll pick u 7. xxoox K
He texted back, enthusiastically agreeing.

When she picked him up, she said, ‘I’m so glad you could come. There’s heaps of my friends I want you to meet.’

‘But I thought it was just you and me?’

‘No, it’s a whole lot of us.’

He was quiet, before eventually saying, ‘I’ve got so much to do… if we were going to go out— you and me—I’d jump at it… but can you take me home? I’ve just got too much to do. And you need to be doing your interim report.’

‘Tom! I know you’re a complete hermit… but it’s just dinner. It’s not like I’m dragging you out clubbing. You have to eat.’

‘I really can’t.’

‘Fine,’ she said, in a tone he hadn’t heard from her before, and changed lanes, turning off toward his house. He tried to explain some more but she told him to leave it. His guts felt wrenched about. He’d lost her, as suddenly as this. This early in a relationship, before it had even started, there wouldn’t be a recovery. He’d broken some rule of hers, shown himself unworthy. She’d written him off.

She dumped him in front of his house, saying only, ‘See you,’ before driving quickly away.

He spent a miserable night, not getting the sleep he had felt in such need of and imagining Kristen with her friends. In the middle of night, he sent her a text message saying sorry. He woke again before dawn and checked his phone. There was no message back; he resisted the urge to text again.
Chapter 10

The world had turned bleak with suppressed dread and heartache. He forced himself on with the research. But what did it matter when he had lost at love again? With a heavy heart he read his way through Morgan’s years on the goldfields. There were many events which were verifiable—typhoid outbreaks; a visit from the premier; the taking out of new claims. He checked them against history books and newspapers, feeling momentarily like a real historian. Everything had happened but the dates were often out, which was strange, given the accuracy of the dates of the earlier events in the eastern states. He recorded what he found with the hope a pattern would eventually emerge. There would be no biography; he was only trying to crack the nature of the forgery.

Then, at the end of the goldfields period, he came to a breakthrough, or at least the clues to one, if only he could decipher the truth behind the text.

20 January 1898

Returned to Perth for good on the train. These years on the goldfields have been the greatest of my life, and I fear that whatever comes next cannot hope to live up to them. Nothing like a train ride to get a man thinking too long on life. And then there was an encounter that has shaken me up no end.

At Merredin, the banker Archibald Hughes boarded. He’s a lean, tall man with a sharp nose, always peering from the eyeglasses he wears. He had a secretary with him, carrying all his luggage. He was superior in manner, pretending to not even recognise me. Truth is, I didn’t recognise him at first. Then I heard him speak and I remembered that voice, always the edge of nastiness to it. I remembered who he was and what’s more, I remembered I outbid him on a claim a few years ago which proved to be very lucrative. A gentleman shouldn’t hold onto these things, but I’m certain he has. If I have the better nose for gold, he has no right to resent me for it.

He introduced himself and remarked that he’d never seen me at the Weld. I told him I wasn’t a member; he said, ‘Well they don’t let everyone in.’ He began to interrogate me. Where was I born? Where had I gone to school? What had my father done?

I make no apologies for being a self-made man. Yet I found myself adjusting the edges; wanting too much to be liked by the man, and wanting him to say at the end it was about time I was brought into the club. Instead, he said, ‘Afraid to say, I’m not convinced you’d be a good fit for the club.’

I thought that would be the end of the conversation, but next he launched into a sermon of a kind, asking me did I know what Western Australia needed? And he told me what it needed was to rid the land of the natives and to drive all the t’othersiders back over the Nullarbor. Was he aware I hail from the east myself?

‘Everyone’s come from somewhere,’ I told him. ‘What’s more, I believe those blacks have more harm done to them than they do.’

He puffed up like an adder and listed every murder and robbery committed by a native since settlement.
After that, the cad pulled out a journal and began to write in it. He told me he kept a record of every day of his life; showed dismay that I did not. ‘You’ve let your days disappear, Morgan!’ he said, triumphantly. ‘There’s no getting them back now!’ Felt that keenly. He’s right—I can give no account of my time here on earth; all those days gone by and I no longer know exactly how I spent them.

All this put me in a most melancholy mood for the remainder of the trip. When the train came into Perth station, I suppose I wanted some fanfare to welcome me back. It just would have cheered my soul a little. But what I found instead was Martha, looking older than ever, and old Mills who had driven the cart up. Sinclair Jr—I do wish he would get in the habit of using his given name rather than ‘Robert’—had sent a note with Martha welcoming me back and apologising for his absence—he has very early starts at the office, he wrote. No such note, of course, from Jack, who I am sure remains indolently in bed as long as he can each morning.

21 January 1898

Dinner as a family, all four of us around the table. (A paltry number; I should have had twelve sons like Jacob, and before I die, they would in turn each have twelve sons, and there’d be a great number of us around the table.) Sinclair Jr seems to have been doing good work in the office. He cares a lot about spending money carefully and making more of it. Who can criticise that? Yet he has no instincts; he’ll never make a new fortune like me. But perhaps he is what is needed to carry my business interests into the future.

What of Jack? I still have no idea what that boy will do with his life. He is insular, an island unto himself. Itching to get away from the table. If Sinclair Jr won’t go to university, I want to send Jack. A degree will give the Morgan name what my money has not been able to.

Much of the day spent pondering my future, what to do with the rest of my allotted years. Assuming I live to the age of 100 and no more, I have 39 years left. (If I keep up the apples and phosphoric-acid water, I can be reasonably confident that I have this long, barring typhoid or a lightning strike.)

The expectation is that a man retires in order to wind down and die. I defy this expectation! I shall not go out as an invalid, sitting on the verandah all morning and napping all afternoon.

What I need is a new project, something to make good use of the time I have left.

22 January 1898

I walked to the Causeway and out onto Heirisson Island. There is a certain magic to islands and especially this one, sitting on the edge of town and yet feeling so very remote. I should like to own it, build some kind of monument on it.

25 January 1898

Not even a week back in Perth, but I have already resolved I shall be leaving soon. I have some Business to attend to and I shall be gone a considerable time. The Business shall occupy all my energies. I shall be following the trail of my life so far, revisiting each place
I have known. It is a secret Business; there is only so much I can write of it here. The trail, the pilgrimage is not the Business, but it is connected to the Business.

Morgan had slipped up in reporting the conversation on the train, and maybe now Tom would get to the truth.

He rang Kristen, wanting to share his excitement. She was cold, saying, ‘I still don’t understand why you wouldn’t meet my friends.’

‘I’m sociophobic… I don’t have your energy with people...’

She was quiet a few beats, and Tom was tempted to further his explanation, but she said, a welcome teasing note in her voice, ‘So when are you fun to be with?’

‘I don’t know. Probably never. I’m a librarian with a fixation on death and a love of old things. Who did you think I was?’

‘Hmmm,’ she said. ‘I don’t know. I’m going to go, because I’m still kind of pissed off.’

‘Wait! I’m onto something.’

He read her the journal entry about Morgan’s encounter with Archibald Hughes on the train.

‘What’s your theory?’ she asked, her coldness vanished.

‘I’d better not say it yet,’ he said, deciding at the last second it was too soon to tell her. ‘Do you know this Hughes?’

‘I’ve heard the name—I think he’s infamous for being a terrible racist.’

‘I’ll let you know when I’ve got this figured out, okay?’

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Bye.’

‘And I really like you, Kristen!’

She was gone; he didn’t know if she’d heard him or not.

Who was he to think Kristen Hall would love him? He was Jack and she was Alice, and she had better options. No—he shouldn’t think like that. If she didn’t like who he was, if she couldn’t respect his solitude, he didn’t want her. But her tone had softened; she was still interested in him. He hadn’t blown it completely.

He tried to trigger a determined mood which would carry him through, keep him from thinking about Kristen and tumours. It was a few days until the delayed test; he wanted to at least solve this before then.

Some of Hughes’s journals were held in the archives of the State Library. Tom decided to keep reading through Morgan’s journals until the end of the ‘Business’, then seek out Hughes’s journals. He hoped so much the right volume was there and he would be able to read what Hughes had written on the train as Morgan observed him.

In volume six of the journals, Morgan travelled to Adelaide, and wrote of seeing the city for the first time with a rich man’s eyes. His mysterious Business was progressing well. Then, suddenly, the rest of the volume was blank. Volume seven began the next day. There was no good reason to have left half a journal blank overnight.
Morgan revisited old haunts, all of which Tom remembered from earlier in the journals—schools, places of work. He wrote of arranging a ‘suitable memorial’ for his parents. It sounded like they had originally been buried in unmarked graves.

Sometimes one flags of the Business. One realises one is only doing it to reach the end, and that when the end is reached, it may not even mean that much. This is the most dangerous period of the Business. It could all come apart. It could be left incomplete.

Knowing the situation, the wise man grits his teeth and decides again and again that nothing will stop him, that the days must be redeemed, that life must be remembered.

Tom began writing an account of what was going on. Linda had been pulling at a thread, and she was right in thinking that the journals were not quite what they seemed, but she’d jumped to her conclusion too soon.

At two in the morning he took some cushions from a couch in the corridor and slept on them on the floor of his office. The cushions were imbued with ancient tobacco smoke. He could touch the door on one side and his desk on the other. He dreamed of Anita; he told her he was sick again, and she should show mercy and return. She was angry, telling him he was still so selfish and she started kissing her new partner, whom Tom had never met in real life. When he woke, he made coffee and washed his face, and then set out for the city, in time to be at the door of the State Library when it opened at eight. He felt the headache worse than ever, and now he was dizzy too, a tingling dizziness which made him sway.

He ran into too many staff he knew and he disliked explaining his new job, so he was stingy in detail, bordering on unfriendly. Libraries were best when one was anonymous. He feared he would never be able to return to the State Library silently, unnoticed.

He requested Hughes’s journal for 1898. In contrast to Morgan’s journals, it was a small book with a sewn fabric cover. The paper was fragile and the writing showed through from the other side. He read with amazement the same encounter recorded in a different hand. It was much briefer, of much less significance to its writer, and yet it was a point at which two dedicated journalers crossed paths.

He started writing his explanation of the journals, and the words came out with an intensity he hadn’t known for so long, a spring gushing in the desert. Even if there was no brilliance to the words themselves, just the flow itself was a great encouragement. Maybe he was yet a writer; fiction had been the problem, he had just needed to turn to non-fiction to write again. The library closed and he had to return home to finish. At ten o’clock, he drove to Kristen’s house with some of what he’d written, a draft page of his biography. He felt manic, invincible, not caring about Kristen’s dad or the stupid argument with her, he was elevated high above his own petty insecurities. He could hear the ocean and the world was a beautiful place he wanted to grasp with everything he had. Kristen answered the door and she already had one eyebrow raised, a half-smile on her face.

‘I didn’t think you ever stayed up this late.’
‘I want to show you what I’ve got,’ he said.

She took him up to her room; they passed the noise of Lateline Business and the back of her dad’s head. Her room had a different scent to it, something sweet. A drawer was open and he caught sight of her pristine underwear. He handed her a sheet of paper.

The prominent banker, Archibald Hughes, kept a journal from a young age, missing very few days throughout his life. His journals ran to at least eighteen volumes, but only twelve found their way safely into archives after the death of his widow in 1928. The fate of the rest is unknown, censorship being a possible explanation.

One of the surviving journals corroborates a suggestion in Morgan’s own journal that it was Hughes who gave Morgan the original idea of keeping a journal. Both men record a chance meeting on a train travelling along the Kalgoorlie line in 1898. Hughes writes that he ‘put that t’othersider Morgan in his place’ and ‘told him he should keep a journal’ but he was ‘less than certain the lucky brute can even write’.

The discrepancies in Morgan’s journals already mentioned are best explained if this meeting in January 1898 planted the seed for Morgan’s journal keeping. Returning to Perth after life on the goldfields, Morgan found himself bored. In all likelihood, he couldn’t get Hughes’s words out of his head; he needed to ‘preserve the days’, to ‘not let them be forgotten’; ‘if a man does not record what happens to him each day, who else will do it for him?’.

Always taking things to an extreme, Morgan decided on a trip to retrace his early life and fabricate journal entries for each day of his life from the age of nine until the present day. Morgan’s mysterious ‘Business’ during 1898 and 1899 was the writing of his unrecorded past. The nature of Morgan’s journals means they are best considered a memoir of his early life—at times misremembered, at other points deliberately altered, but still a valuable historical record.

He began in Adelaide where he was born. Seeing the city for the first time as a rich and successful man, he stayed in the finest hotel, the Ambassador, though he was ill at ease with the luxury. Each day he would walk over to the library and read consecutively through the newspapers of his childhood, perhaps trying to spark feelings and memories; perhaps simply lending authenticity to his fabrication. Not willing to let his research go to waste, he peppers the journals with otherwise puzzling details of current events—crimes, court appearances, controversies, international incidents—as well as mundane recordings of the weather.

His travels over the next year follow the trail of his early life, through Melbourne, Ballarat, and around the country with the circus. He returns to the goldfields, but his accuracy in verifiable dates falls down here; perhaps he could not access the newspapers of this period.

Morgan returned to Perth with an unbroken record of his life from age nine to the present day.

‘Good work,’ Kristen said, after reading it. ‘A breakthrough, huh?’

Her tone was flat. He’d been wrong to assume she’d be excited when it didn’t help her biography at all. He decided not to let it affect him, to remain on a high. They talked a while about
their biographies. Her interim report still wasn’t coming together. He invited her to interview Helen Fee with him and she agreed.

Finally he said, ‘Kristen! I really like you.’
She smiled. ‘I guess I still like you too.’
‘Where do we go from here?’
‘What you really wanted was a romantic dinner, huh?’ she asked.
‘Exactly.’
‘That is kind of sweet. I am totally up for that. Friday night?’
‘What’s the catch?’
‘Saturday night, you’re socialising with me. I have three parties to juggle, and you will be my beau.’

It usually would have seemed daunting, but he was still on a high, and it didn’t worry him at all.

They kissed on the bed, their bodies close, rubbing against each other, his hands ending up inside her shirt, taking in the shape of her encased breasts. Eventually she said, ‘Settle down Mr Lamond!’ but she was into it, he could tell, and she followed him out to the car, kissing him through the window before he left.
Chapter 11

Remarkably for a centenarian, Helen still lived on her own, in a plain duplex a half-hour drive into the northern suburbs. The garden was made up of unpruned bushes, weeds green in the late autumn rain and sun-cracked pots with no plants in them.

Helen answered the door quite quickly, beaming, ‘Hello, you two!’

She had been expecting them—possibly all week. One hundred years old seemed a fairy tale age; such a person was meant to be confined to bed with tubes coming out of them, but Helen looked no more frail than Tom’s grandmother had in her eighties.

She had made scones, thickly coated in margarine. The shelves and mantles of her living room were crammed with photographs, the frames mismatched, snaps from holidays and school photographs and functions. A photographed life, Tom thought, like Kristen’s, but less focused on herself and less exotic. She had no children; Tom wondered who the people were.

Tom set the recorder on the table and they began the interview.

She explained that she had left school to work at the library in the middle of 1921; the pay had been good, but it had just been a job—she had never been much of a reader. Tom winced; he had met too many people working in libraries who didn’t even like books. It had never been her intention to stay on working there fifty years; she’d never married and the years had just kept going by. It was something to do, and it kept a roof over her head.

Sinclair Morgan had still been the boss when she started, but the only time they heard from him was an occasional memo sent around with his signature. He lived in the basement, it was said. One of the girls had claimed to see him, but Helen never did.

Kristen asked if she was sure he was actually still alive at this time; Helen said he certainly was—there was a cook, who made him food and put it through a slot for him to eat. He was a voracious eater—there was no doubt he was real. Or at least that was what happened until the late 1920s, when it was said he had been moved to a hospital. No-one was surprised; it was so rare for someone to be alive at such an age that a hospital seemed the most likely place for him. It didn’t feel so old to her now, though.

There were rumours floating around; she took them all with a grain of salt. Some maintained that Mr Morgan had grown grossly fat and was crippled in a wheelchair. And that he was allergic to light. Some had said just what Kristen was suggesting, that he wasn’t alive at all, and it was a trick to do with his inheritance.

The main person running things was actually Mrs Manning—Ursula. She was only an honorary consultant, officially, because she was a married woman with two sons from her first husband, Jack, but she got away with it, and people took their orders from her. There were whispers and grumblings, naturally. She should have been at home with her children, but you didn’t expect things to work like normal at the Sinclair Morgan.
Kristen asked her if people were still talking about Alice Greene when she started there. Oh, Helen said, they certainly were! It was never clear what had happened to Alice. Some said she was dead, but others maintained she had run off with a man—or even, Helen heard once, been sent to prison for poisoning someone. Helen had looked at her portrait many times and wondered about that woman. Most of the library policies and procedures Alice had put in place were being used right up to when Helen had retired; always ‘A. Greene’ at the end. People said there never would be anyone to match her, though Mrs Manning had her strengths, and Helen was also so very fond of Sinclair IV, who even if he wasn’t the most organised man in the world had made the library so very big and interesting.

Her answer had a wrapping up tone to it and although she politely tried to answer a few more questions, she didn’t seem to have anything to add. Before they left, Kristen wanted a photo of her, which she agreed to readily, as long as Kristen would send her a copy.

Tom was sullen on the way home and Kristen asked him what was wrong.

He wondered if she could understand the feeling which had entered him. ‘Visiting her… kind of depressed me.’

‘Why? She was a pleasant woman, remarkable for her age, and she’s the closest thing to an eyewitness we have.

‘I felt she was… vacant. I know I’m horrible. But I just feel depressed that you can live a hundred years and not have much to say. It makes me wonder about the point of life.’

‘You’re right, you are horrible. And you’re always wondering that anyway.’ She laughed, extravagantly; she didn’t hate him for it, even if she meant it.

The next day, Tom was at the hospital. He read trivial magazines in the waiting room. He let himself be sucked into the CAT scanner. He tried not to think, but just to exist. Another second passing, and here he was still alive.

He still told Kristen nothing. He wanted to live as if it was not a part of his life.

The dinner and the parties clarified nothing.

Initially, their conversation at the trendy Thai restaurant sparkled, and he felt charming and witty. He lost his clumsiness and his inhibition and everything he said seemed to hit the mark like the perfectly balanced bottle of rose they were sharing. But the evening went suddenly wrong. It was just after he looked out the window and thought he saw Linda. He was being paranoid—she wasn’t a stalker. Kristen wanted to talk about his novel, all the details of the process, his year in the spotlight. It had always been her ambition, she revealed, to have a book published, and here was someone who had achieved that. But he didn’t want to talk about it. He half-despised aspiring writers.

‘You’re just like your grandad—full of secrets.’

‘Don’t bring him into it! It’s not like that. There is no big secret.’
‘I don’t get it,’ she insisted, ‘what made you give up writing? You had the world at your feet! You were ready to be the next big thing.’

He suddenly felt angry.

‘You don’t know what it’s like! Do you think celebrity is a gift no-one should ever refuse? Do you think success is always good? It’s all bullshit. You should see that world. I wasn’t one of them, I was too shy at the launches and awards to ever talk to anyone. If you haven’t got anything new out, they stop talking to you. It was all conceit. I wrote to be famous—that’s the only reason I ever wrote. And that’s despicable.’

She was looking away from him, concentrating on her glass of wine.

‘What?’ he said.

‘Intense, much?’ she said.

‘Yeah, I’m intense.’

He got up to pay; his anger began to dissipate. He could never stay angry. He wanted to be right with everyone, with Kristen especially. In the car park, he said gently, ‘I’m sorry. I’m just bitter because my career didn’t work out. There’s no big story. Sometimes writers only have one book in them or else it takes them decades to write the second one. I suspect, sadly, that I’m the former.’

‘I believe in you! You can write another one. You’ve just got to not give up.’

‘Please don’t say that,’ he said. ‘My mum has been saying it for years. Believe in me if you will, but not about that, it’s something you can’t know.’

He didn’t think he’d done enough to reconcile with her but she nuzzled up to him.

‘Tommy,’ she said, ‘you are even more interesting than I thought.’

‘There was more,’ he said, and he nearly told her about the brain tumour, but instead he said, ‘I was engaged to a girl named Anita. We had a terrible break up six months after the book came out.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘Have you even been out with anyone since then?’

‘No… not really.’

‘Time you forgot about Anita,’ Kristen said, and smiling, she kissed him.

At the parties, Kristen introduced him as her ‘friend’. He was intimidated by all the men she knew, by their confidence and the fact they were all better dressed and better toned than him. Well maybe, he told himself, my intelligence intimidates them. But he found this unlikely.

On the way to Scott’s apartment in Subiaco she told Tom all about him—he collected art, was in a band, and, although only Tom’s age, was already head of staff for a state MP.

‘Liberal Party?’ Tom said incredulously.

‘Don’t be so partisan,’ she said. ‘You need good people on both sides.’

At the door, Kristen hugged Scott extravagentely in greeting. His apartment felt like the interior of an ad. How could someone so young have such a tasteful, mature home? Scott was
welcoming, attentive to Tom, seeming genuinely interested in his project, which only made Tom more uneasy. Scott knew all about literature, too; his mother was a literary agent, his aunty a Miles Franklin winner. Kristen was telling Scott about her PhD; he was fascinated, and wanted to see some chapters as soon as she’d written them. Tom felt like telling Kristen to forget him—Tom—and just pursue Scott; Tom could never compete.

He found parties an ordeal. Either he felt left out, or he would talk to one person too long, with too much intensity, and feel drained at the end. But Kristen was bouncing around, in her element, taking photo after photo and seeming to know every person. It certainly made parties better being with her, having her to introduce him to people and lend him the social ease he lacked.

By the end of night, he resolved that he would learn to like parties, or at least not to dampen her enjoyment. It was a small price to pay to be with her.

The result was in: he had a tumour. But the surgeon was optimistic—it was accessible, he was confident of getting it all. In all likelihood, Tom was going to be fine. Tom asked him if he could have more time; the surgeon said a few more weeks would do no harm.

‘I might need longer than that,’ Tom said.

‘We don’t want to leave it too long,’ the surgeon said. ‘You shouldn’t be fearful—you’re going to come out just fine. A few months afterwards you’ll nearly be back to normal.’

He now had something definite he needed to tell her. It was not just a hypochondriac’s worry or a routine test. It was a looming operation. But he said nothing.

Linda came to his office and declared, ‘I’ve finished your novel.’

‘Oh,’ he said, thinking he should have written under a pseudonym.

‘I feel like I know you now. I’m sorry—I know it’s a bit crazy. But sometimes when I read a book, I feel connected to the author. I felt it with yours. And I actually know you.’

‘I know the feeling—it’s an easy mistake. Most writers are awful, grumpy people.’

‘I don’t think you are!’ she said.

He said nothing in response and so she continued. ‘I know I’m interrupting you, and I need to get back to shelving, but I was going to ask you something.’

‘What were you going to ask?’

‘I might be able to get you Alice’s missing letters.’

‘Where are they?’

‘I said “maybe”. But if I could, would you do me a favour?’

‘Depends what it is.’

She was looking at the floor. ‘I’m too embarrassed to ask now.’

‘At least say it. Then I can tell you.’

‘Would you take me out to dinner?’
He felt queasy, put on the spot; she was practically asking him to prostitute himself.

‘I’m kind of dating Kristen, you know.’

‘It’s not a date. I wasn’t asking that.’

There were tears in her eyes. He could feel her fragility; she was like a glass ornament he was juggling, and any moment he would drop her and she would smash.

She said, ‘You don’t have to. It was just an idea—a stupid one. I felt we probably had a lot in common.’

He was offended; he didn’t want to be in the same category as her.

‘We really don’t know each other,’ he said quietly.

‘You don’t have to do it. If I find the letters I’ll bring them to your office some time.’

‘I’m sorry—I’ll do it.’

There was a cursory knock on the door and Sinclair IV burst in, saying, ‘Now, Lamond…’

He caught sight of Linda and said, ‘You’

‘Hello Mr Morgan,’ Linda said.

Sinclair IV was breathing hard. ‘Are you in league with this woman, Lamond?’

‘No! No, I’m not—we’ve only spoken a couple of times.’

Linda said to Sinclair IV, ‘I’ve only tried to help you see the truth!’

‘I don’t agree with her about the journals,’ Tom said, and Linda glared at him.

‘Get out!’ Sinclair IV commanded Linda, and she did. ‘I trusted you,’ he said to Tom. ‘I trusted you, because I thought you were not allied with her.’

‘Mr Morgan, please, she came to me… there are some problems with the journals—but not what she thinks. I know you didn’t write them——’

‘The cheek that she could even consider such a thing! I trusted you, Lamond! Your family line goes right back with mine. That should make for unbreachable loyalty. Now where, may I ask, is your loyalty?’

‘The journals are even more interesting than they seem. Your grandfather did write them—but haven’t you ever noticed anything strange about them? They are… they are one of his immortalties!’

Sinclair IV considered Tom’s words a moment, but seemed to have trouble making sense of them, and he made a low, long grunt as he tried to respond. Finally, he turned away, saying again, ‘I trusted you!’

Tom leapt up with a printout of his reconstruction of the creation of the journals, making Sinclair IV take it with him as he walked away in anger.

When Tom took the journal back that evening, the archives were locked. Mrs Staer said in a cold tone, ‘Mr Morgan is very unhappy with you.’

‘It’s a misunderstanding… this woman, Linda, who works in the library now—I’m not ‘in league with her’.
‘Oh, I know about Linda,’ Mrs Staer said. ‘I don’t think any of you care about him, as a person.’

‘I do—very much! He wants me to write his grandfather’s biography, and that’s what I’m doing.’

‘He doesn’t want his family’s reputation dragged through the mud. He doesn’t really know what he’s done, bringing you in. He thinks you’ll be loyal because you’re descended from Alice.’

‘What makes you think I’m not loyal?’

Her lips quivered, and he was disturbed by how upset she was. She said, ‘It’s not only Linda—I know you went in to talk to that Verity woman as well.’

‘Just because I talked with her doesn’t mean I agree with her! You’ve got me wrong… I care about the past, and I care about Sinclair Morgan. That’s why I took this project on.’

‘Hmmm…’ she said. ‘Well, I am glad you went to interview Miss Fee. That’s something at least. But I warn you, Mr Morgan takes his grudges very seriously. You might not be around here much longer.’

‘But he hasn’t revoked my access to the journals, has he?’

‘Not yet, anyway. I’ll open up for you so you can sign it back in.’

The next morning, there was no sign of Sinclair IV, and it was Mrs Staer who fetched the journal for him. He felt angry at Linda for coming to his office, and for her crazy proposal. He felt angry at Sinclair IV for his insanity. The biography had just been coming to life. The journal entries after the Business were revealing and well-written; Morgan had learned how to write and Tom felt he was discovering so much about the man.

Kristen’s interim report was due today. He’d taken her flowers the night before and refused to stay so he wouldn’t distract her. He felt anxious for her; she’d been upset over Blanning and the sources, but now that it was crunch time she seemed too easygoing about it, keeping up her busy social life.

He had his own problems and he had done what he could for her. He read furiously, worried that at any moment he would be sacked as biographer. If that happened, he would continue as the unauthorised biographer, and he would tell the truth without fear of Sinclair IV.

Laden with a trunk filled with his recreated journals, Morgan returned to Perth in March 1899:

On the train today—my long sojourn is over. The Business has taken a year of my life. A funny transaction, spending life in order to preserve it. I return with my precious harvest, a restored man. I’m in the seventh book of the twelve Papa gave me at nine; I suppose that means—if there is to be poetic justice—I am seven-twelfths of the way through my life. That would mean I’m on track to follow Culverwell all the way to my centenary.

I have been wondering about the possibility of publishing the journals—a private print run, testament to the life of Perth’s richest man? There would probably be some who would pay a considerable sum for such a book. They would hunt through it for the secret of my success, as I hunt through Culverwell for the secret
of longevity. Of course, I can offer no formula for success as scientific as that of Culverwell's for longevity.

Yet perhaps this is not quite the done thing. I cannot imagine it's something Mr Hughes would do.

Also, it's important my journals be read—you, reader, please take note—by a reader of the right kind. Not the reader who cometh to steal, and to kill, and to destroy.

Morgan longed to see some tangible benefit from the journals—at the very least, an uncritical reader who would accept them as they were written. He records a few days later paying Jack to listen to portions of it, an ongoing arrangement that extended for at least the next year. Morgan was still unsure what to make of Jack—he always has such a beastly grin on his face—that or a scowl to set one's teeth on edge; 'he is doing this just for the money, I'm convinced of that now'.

In Morgan's absence, Martha had quietly established herself in polite society. She was friends with Mrs Beatrice Pilkington, wife of the well-regarded parliamentarian, Charles. Unlike her husband, she was willing to blend in. No objections were raised when Mrs Pilkington nominated her for membership of the exclusive Karakatta Club for ladies.

Morgan was deeply envious of his wife's social success and particularly her club membership. He records in his journal a new goal, already suggested a year earlier when provoked by Archibald Hughes on the train: he was going to gain membership of the Weld Club.

In the autumn of 1899, the Morgans held two extravagant garden parties in their Adelaide Terrace mansion. A newspaper reported on the 'hundreds of Chinese lanterns', 'the free flowing wine', 'the myriad of cakes'. Morgan 'delivered a lengthy toast to the future and to Federation to a mixed reception'. He was unaware he had misstepped, with only a minority of those present in favour of Federation. He was trying to win the favour of the establishment but barbed hints in the newspaper reports suggest he was only reinforcing the perception of him as a 'crass t'othersider'.

In July, he invited Archibald Hughes and his wife Ethel to dinner. Remarkably, the Hugheses accepted. Hughes records in his journal:

That fool Morgan has invited us to dinner. I would never accept, but E. is curious to see inside their house! It would have been less painful to trot along to one of his garden parties. I shall ask the congregation to hold us in their prayers Monday next.

Morgan did not initially realise how badly the evening went. He records:

After a pleasant dinner prepared by Mrs Bridge and the soothing fiddle music of Pietro, I took Archibald and Ethel on a tour of the house. Although he seemed most impressed, he teased me affectionately over the lack of books in the study. I told him I was now a dedicated journaler, and that I would be building up my library now that I have the time to give to it. I did point out that I had quite a collection of works on longevity; I even gave him some free advice about eating green apples to avoid ossification.

On the way out, I told him of my hope that he might sponsor me for the Weld. He said it was a messy business, but he would see what he could do.

Hughes's account of the evening—which he undoubtedly relayed to everyone he could within Perth society—was quite different:
Dinner at the Morgans is the stuff of farce! Too much money and not enough class. There was Morgan himself, thumping his pulpit about this and that, a man barely literate thinking he should hold forth on any and every matter. We were fed quails practically still flapping their wings—all blood and feathers; what a waste. The finest goblets money can buy couldn’t disguise that the wine was practically vinegar. All the while, a tuneless gypsy screeched dreadful fiddle music in the background. Morgan took me on a tour of his pretentious abode; I was most interested by the ‘library’. I believe I counted two dozen books—all of them on mining or longevity, his two obsessions. To cap all this off, he expects me to sponsor him for the Weld!

Morgan was more inclined to blame his failure to be admitted to the Weld on a scandal which hit a few weeks later when Jack was expelled from Hale School. The incident was reported, briefly, in a newspaper column:

The headmaster of Hale School, Rev. Hugh Turner, has described as ‘disgraceful’ the behaviour of expelled pupil, John Morgan. After the dissection of a corpse in a fifth year science class, the second year student was found with the ears and fingers of the cadaver in his satchel. Master Morgan is the younger son of gold miner, Mr Sinclair Morgan.

Morgan wrestled with his son’s actions, vacillating between justification and fury. In one entry he understood the boy’s curiosity, railing against the injustice of it—the cadaver was ‘in no state to mind’. But then in his next entry, Morgan was outraged that he had a son who was so perverted. His biggest worry, of course, was about the effect on his bid to enter the Weld Club; he felt sure ‘they will use it to deny me’.

Whether this was a factor or not, Morgan could not find a sponsor for the club. By October, he was sure that the Perth establishment had turned on him. He wrote that he could hear them ‘muttering on every corner’ about his lack of books and education, that they despised him for the way he had made his money.

He considered returning to Adelaide or Melbourne, ‘towns where a man would not be judged so unfairly’, but he felt he had his best chance of ‘making his mark’ in Perth.

This is the town where they’ll be talking about me in a century or two. This is the town which’ll never forget my name.

To answer the charges that he was not a learned man, he was contemplating making a considerable donation to the fledgling Public Library. He liked the idea of a library ‘where the everyman could go and read, no matter what his stripes’.

Fatefully, he set up a meeting with Ernest Smith, a member of the library board but also a friend of Archibald Hughes. The meeting went disastrously, with Smith perhaps assuming that Morgan was angling for a seat on the board, and making several derogatory remarks about Morgan’s lack of education. Morgan left furious, recording in his journal another tirade against the Perth establishment, and deciding on a new project to answer their disdain: he would assemble the finest collection of books in the city and upstage the public library.

Kristen sent off her interim report a few minutes before midnight the day after it was due. She also sent a copy of the draft chapters to Scott, thinking he could be a very useful person to have interested in her work, especially if he was willing to recommend her to his mother, the literary
agent. Tom had been haranguing her, telling her she shouldn’t be socialising at all until it was done, which infuriated her. He was kind of like Matt in his criticisms—although she granted that Tom was more sensitive. Maybe Tom was partly right, but she had got it in, and she still had so little material to go on that she thought it was as good as it could possibly be.

She rang Tom to tell him. The phone rang a long time before he answered, groggily.

She said, ‘You should turn your phone off if you don’t want to get woken up, Tommy.’

‘Have you got it in?’

‘I have. That’s why I’m calling. I knew you wouldn’t be able to sleep until you knew.’

‘That’s very considerate,’ he said. ‘But I am glad for you. I’ve been nearly as worried as you.’

She smiled. ‘I know, my friend. That’s because you’re so sweet.’

A week after their rupture, Mrs Staer told Tom that Sinclair IV wished to meet with him. ‘But I’m afraid,’ she said, ‘that he’s in the bath. I’ve told him he shouldn’t be receiving visitors in the nude, but he takes no notice.’

He thought it would be comical to be dismissed by a nude man. Or perhaps Sinclair IV had changed his mind. He wondered how often Mrs Staer saw him in the nude and whether they had ever been lovers. He had been thinking of Sinclair IV as essentially sexless, but perhaps he was completely wrong.

She led him through to the bathroom; from it came the sound of Sinclair IV humming extravagantly.

The walls of the bathroom were covered in a replica Roman mosaic of a great banquet. Sinclair IV lay in an ancient claw-foot bath, a steaming cup of tea resting on a stand.

Tom stood in the doorway.

‘Lamond!’ Sinclair IV called, ‘Come right up and gaze upon my nakedness! You are my biographer; how can you write a biography of someone you have not seen in the nude?’

Was Sinclair IV getting himself confused with his grandfather? Tom decided it was best not to ask. He was close enough now to look down into the old man’s nakedness, his white, hairless, flabby body and the surprise of his penis. Perhaps he should take notes; the biography might have to include the life of Sinclair IV, the continuation of Sinclair I. And it should have an appendix, offering a picture in words of the old man’s body, its contours and features that would never otherwise be known. Probably Sinclair IV would love to have a map of his body as another appendix, marking all the moles and scars and hairs. These were details that were lost; who now would ever know the particulars of Tom’s grandad’s body?

‘I have been doing some soul searching,’ Sinclair IV said. ‘Your theory was hard for me to bear, Lamond. Very hard indeed. But I think you may be right. We must see it not as a hoax, but as a work of art! A man recovers his days, retraces his steps, records what he missed the first time. There is no shame in that.’

‘You’re right,’ Tom said.
‘You mustn’t allow yourself to be poisoned by this woman, though. She breathes out lies about my father. Leave him out of this. Jack Morgan need not be a part of this biography.’

‘Is it true, at least, that it was really your grandfather who died in 1917?’

Sinclair IV turned a tap on suddenly before saying, ‘Yes, that would be correct. Just not the other things. Now carry on, my boy. You write this thing; I want to read it before I die.’
Chapter 12

Kristen was summoned to the office of the postgraduate co-ordinator, Hubert Cook. Cook was a scholarly, gentle man in his sixties, passionate about medieval Europe.

‘Kristen… sit down. Look, I’m afraid your interim report wasn’t quite enough.’

‘Enough what?’

He considered this with the curious faint gurgling with which he seemed to consider everything. He looked down at the report. ‘Enough substance, mainly. Your problem is a lack of substance.’

‘My problem is that Blanning hates biography!’

‘Now Kristen… if there’s a clash… well, it really is unfortunate Neville moved on. You know the state of the department; we don’t have anyone else in Western Australian history.’

‘That doesn’t matter! Maybe you could supervise me?’

He put his hands together. ‘Even if we change supervisors, we’re still left with the same central problem. You need to take some time—widen your topic, find some substantial material.’

‘Are you suspending me?’ she said quietly.

‘In the circumstances… think of it like this: we’re giving you three months to reassess. Come back in three months and resume your scholarship with a fresh approach. Just make sure you have something solid when you reapply, and that you’re on time.’

She spent the afternoon in the campus tavern drinking first champagne and then vodkas with friends. This led to an evening convalescence in front of the television. She was glad her dad was away on business; she needed to keep this from him. Tomorrow she’d have to look for a waitressing job to keep the board paid. She texted Tom the news and he came by and cooked dinner for her.

‘This isn’t so bad,’ he told her. ‘You’ve got three months to find what you need. There won’t be as much pressure now.’

‘I haven’t had enough time for it as it is! Now I have to work all the time on top of that. And they’re taking all my money away, Tom, don’t you realise?’

‘You’re going to get through. I’ll make sure.’

He held her close on her dad’s leather couch and it felt good to be in his arms.

‘Are you going to put me to bed?’

In her room, she said, ‘Take your shoes off.’ When he had fumbled them off, she said, ‘And your jeans, they’re uncomfortable in bed.’ She looked him up and down in his underpants and then nimbly unbuttoned her own jeans.

‘Can’t I do that for you?’ he said, and then he looked embarrassed.

She was still tipsy; she kissed him and he said, ‘I smell vodka.’
‘It’s a wonderful smell, isn’t it?’ She wished he’d been drinking. ‘Do you want to make love?’ she asked.

‘Yes…’ he said, but his face was pained. ‘But maybe it’s too soon.’

‘Are you playing hard to get?’ she said, her exasperated tone half-true.

‘Not deliberately,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry.’

They lay cuddled in their underwear, and she had drifted into sleep when he kissed her on the cheek and whispered goodbye.

Tom drove away unsettled. He was infatuated with her so why had he turned her down? It hadn’t seemed right; it was a proposition borne of drunkenness.

He was frustrated with her, too. She hadn’t worked hard enough on the interim report; she didn’t have the single-mindedness she needed. Nor did she realise how good she had it. Her dad was giving her cheap board; if she lived frugally, stopped going out so much, she could work a day a week and spend the rest of the time researching.

He should feel more sympathy for her; she was his girlfriend. He’d read her work and thought the university was harsh to suspend her. She wrote well, with a slightly witty intelligence, albeit rarely as carefully as she should for academic writing, which was probably what Blanning picked on. It now seemed to him they were trying to squeeze her out and that if she were wise, she would either find a new university or write independently. But he wasn’t going to tell her this; he’d tried to be honest earlier, when he told her to suspend herself, and that hadn’t done any good.

An image of her undressing came into his mind, banishing his irritation, and filling him with hunger instead. He wanted her so much, her beauty, her cheer, her whole self.

He arrived in the journals’ twentieth century. Morgan’s entries were obsessed with the books he had acquired. A few times a day, Tom would get up from his desk to find one of the books mentioned. A couple were missing, no record of them in the card catalogue. An early King James Bible was in a display cabinet, permanently opened to Ecclesiastes and a film of dust over the glass. Some were in the Rare Book Room, which he didn’t want to ask Sinclair IV for access to. A good number of the others were on the open shelves, waiting for him. They had carried on through ten or eleven decades or more—so many of them having a history before they even came to the library—outliving people, and he could turn the same pages Morgan had turned in 1900.

Was the fine, white strand of hair between the pages of a Lewis Carroll Morgan’s? In Bleak House, he found a shopping list written on a slip of paper used as a bookmark. The reader—perhaps Morgan, although he was unlikely to have done the shopping—had apparently not finished it. A hundred years or so ago he or she had intended to buy a packet of tea, apples, a bar of soap, a pound of flour and a ‘Tatler’—whatever that was. Tom loved the survival of something so ephemeral.
Morgan had wanted more than anything for his remains to survive and for an epigone to re-create his life from the traces. But what could Tom write of this process in the biography? He contented himself with the experience, which he saw as a kind of communion with the dead man. He imagined it flavouring, infusing the biography with the melancholy joy he felt.

It seemed at this stage Morgan had no intention of creating a library—he was intent only on building up a private collection better than any other in Perth. But he wanted to show it off to the world, and he began to plan an open day where he would lead people through his collection, which had come to fill an entire wing of his mansion.

It was in Morgan’s account of the open day that Tom found, with a sense of discovery, the first reference to Alice.

A banshee of a woman, Miss Alice Greene, deputy at the Victoria Library, invaded my open day. It was nearing closing time, and she pushed her way ahead of the queue, saying it was a matter of professional courtesy that I let her straight in to survey my collection. She was wearing a blue silk dress, had black curly hair, a rather dark complexion and an outrageous hat. She isn’t like any woman I have ever seen in this city.

She certainly took her time, working her way slowly over my collection. I wanted to know what it was she was thinking and eventually I made my way over to her and asked her what she thought.

She said, ‘The first thing that comes into my head is to wonder what your collecting principles are.’

I told her, crossly, that I buy whatever I like the look of—whatever speaks to my soul. I thought this a good answer, but she practically sneered at me. She told me it seemed to her that I’ve been ‘grabbing’ anything with gilt lettering, anything old and anything big. She said I had to ask myself whether I wanted a magpie’s nest of things that have caught my eye, or whether I truly hoped to build a library. So I said to her that I had never intended to build a library.

I hoped she would leave after that, but she did not. When she eventually made her way toward the door, she said, ‘Now Mr Morgan, don’t look so glum—whatever criticisms I might have, this is the finest private collection in the state.’

I suspect she is a spy for Battye, filling his ear with all kinds of lies about me.

Martha said to me, ‘You mean you haven’t heard of Alice Greene? She’s the talk of the town—and you’ll do well to steer clear of her. Scandal follows her round like a puppy dog.’ It seems the ladies at the Karakatta like to natter about this woman. She truly is outrageous, so it doesn’t surprise me one bit. I wonder what Mrs Battye makes of her working for her husband?

Tom’s own family line had crossed into history: here was his great-grandmother stepping onto the stage of Morgan’s life. He carefully photocopied the entry, a key moment in both his biography and Kristen’s. Every piece was helping her; she would get there yet.
He cross-checked the newspapers of the period. Morgan had taken out a large advertisement for the open day in *The West Australian*, yet the paper had not reported the event at all. *The Sunday Times* carried an article which Morgan mentioned in his journal with a mixture of hurt and pride:

Although arranged a little too haphazardly and showing the need for the ordering hand of a good librarian, Mr Morgan's collection is both extensive and impressive. It must rank as one of the finest private collections in the Southern Hemisphere and puts the paltry public library to shame, at least in terms of its treasures. What a pity Mr Morgan's library is, for 364 days of the year, only for his own enjoyment.

It seemed it was Alice and the anonymous reporter who had planted the idea in Morgan’s head to turn his collection into a library. She visited him again a week after the opening, and Morgan’s opinion of her grew more positive. He wrote of her ‘grand ideas’, and began contemplating the idea of building ‘the world’s greatest library’ with his money.

I have resolved to stride ahead with the Library! My fortune and my remaining years I shall pour into a grand institution to set this city apart.

It shall rise above this city from Heirisson Island, one hundred storeys high, the world’s tallest building. It will take time, but before I die, I wish to see a copy of every book ever published on its shelves. It will be the Tower of Babel, but it will not fall: the Library of Babel, a mortal making his claim on immortality.

Men will travel over the seas and deserts for their chance to visit the Library. It will take them a full day just to walk the stairs. Scholars will wish to spend the rest of their lives deep in its stacks.

From the top of the library shall rise a great statue of me. Not so much as a matter of pride, but as a symbol that any man can do anything he wants, if he puts his mind to it.

I shall appoint Alice Greene to the post of head librarian. She is a forthright and composed young lady, a far better librarian than Battye—she shall overtake him! She has a nose for books like I have a nose for gold. She will seek out the greatest treasures of the world and bring them into the greatest library.

Tom tried to imagine the library Morgan had wanted. Surely even he could have known he was being too ambitious? Not even his wealth had been that great. He wrote of his disappointment when Alice rejected his initial offer; at first offended, it only took him a few days to come around and offer her more money.

Purchasing Heirisson Island from the Road Board was an expensive process. There were legal battles over the building permit and various regulations; Morgan's enemies were at work against him. Yet the tide had turned—Morgan had friends from the goldfields who now had influence in the city. For the 'othersiders' and the more progressively minded, Morgan was a visionary. Construction of the library began, and Morgan, by turns, rejoiced and lamented over progress.
Tom was reading through *The West Australian* in tandem with the journals, as there were regular updates on the library’s progress. The Sinclair Morgan had no microfilm; he read *The West* on glorious paper, the yellowed newsprint no simulacrum, but the actual physical object which had rolled off the press on the date which bore its name. Articles in it claimed Morgan’s library was threatening the viability of the public library. Why, some politicians were asking, do we need a publicly funded library when our most successful businessman is building one out of his own pocket?

In a heated exchange in the newspaper, Battye had written a letter stating, ‘Not all libraries are equal. Mr Morgan’s library is a monument to himself and will by no means be a repository of knowledge for the general public. It will be the precise opposite of the purpose of a public library.’

There were more glimpses of Alice. ‘AG secured me the codex from Cairo today—a major acquisition’ and ‘Miss Greene to dinner again tonight. The woman is a dynamo. Martha is not so taken with her, says I spend too much time with her.’

Paragraphs of the biography came to him, rarely chronologically.

Morgan’s relationship with his elder son, Sinclair Robert, was a complicated one. While Morgan was on his ‘Business’ trip, Robert assumed much responsibility for the company, despite being only eighteen years old. Morgan seemed to trust him completely. He dearly wanted Robert to succeed in life, not least because he bore Morgan’s name.

However, Morgan also regularly clashed with him. Robert had a hard-headed, no-nonsense approach to business, and was opposed to Morgan’s ‘folly’—first the collection of books, and later the building of the library.

Without Robert’s restraining hand, the library may well have been even grander in conception and failed. If he had not died during the Boer War, the library probably would have been less well-funded and Morgan Mining might have flourished for much longer.

His mum kept leaving messages, asking what he was going to do for his thirtieth birthday. It was only weeks away, and it filled him with a peculiar dread. It wasn’t a dread about aging but about his own failure, ahead of time, to commemorate properly. It had loomed in the future for years, a milestone and dividing line demanding an appropriate event. Real life could not match his unspeakable expectations. The only path was to wait the time out, to not even attempt to celebrate. He couldn’t articulate any of this to his mum. He sent her a text—so much less room for explaining—saying he wasn’t planning to celebrate, didn’t want to be reminded of getting older.

He’d been avoiding Linda. He told himself it was to avoid upsetting the delicate balance of things with Sinclair IV, but it had more to do with anxiety about her proposal. It felt *wrong* and *strange*, and he couldn’t even tell Kristen about it.
He had pursued a number of girls in his time without thinking it might be a burden on them to be the object of his affection. Had those women in the past felt like he did about Linda?

As he walked up the stairs one morning he thought he saw her down one of the stacks, shelving, so he hurried on. A few minutes later she sent him a text: *Tom did we reach a deal? If u don’t want to, tell me & I’ll just give u the documents.*

She was giving him a way out, and yet he couldn’t even seize this: he felt sorry for her, and obliged to give her what she wanted. He called her and they set up dinner for that night, which at least gave him less time to stew over it.

He dressed as well as he could because he knew she would. His headache had flared up. They ate at a noisy Italian restaurant on the other side of the Causeway, the din bad for his headache and for conversation.

Tom asked her, ‘What did you say about Jack Morgan that made Sinclair IV hate you?’

‘Do you think I should just tell you my theory, do you?’

‘Only if you want to.’

‘Maybe when I’m nearly ready to publish.’

The conversation moved on. She told him about her abandoned PhD. She’d been looking at the conscription debate in Western Australia during World War One. She’d had depression and it had deepened. Research was a lonely task and, in her state of mind, had seemed futile. She’d been married; her husband lost patience and left her. She dropped out of the PhD. Life since then had not got much better.

He felt sorry for her but wished she didn’t carry her disappointment and sadness so obviously. He got the sense she had once been a far more normal person, but years of bitterness had twisted her.

As the waiter was clearing their plates, Linda left for the toilet. Tom was dizzy, the restaurant swirling around him in a speckled tumult. He could feel the pressure inside his head. He was going to topple, and he felt a deep sense of shame and weakness. He had a vision of his exposed brain quivering in the air as the surgeon sliced into it. His whole skull was an eggshell about to be cracked open. He clutched the side of his chair to keep himself anchored and then when that wasn’t enough he put his head in his hands.

Linda returned, asking, ‘Are you all right?’

‘Sorry,’ he said, and tried to sit up straight.

‘You’re not well, are you? Is it my company?’

He was weak, tearful. ‘I have a brain tumour,’ he said. Looking around to make sure the whole restaurant wasn’t looking at him, he told her the story. She reached out and put her hand on his. He had told himself before he started the night to be vigilant about her touching him, but now that she did this, he didn’t stop her.

‘I can’t believe I’m telling you this,’ he said. ‘Please don’t tell anyone. I’ve been… keeping it to myself.’
‘I won’t tell anyone,’ she said and he liked her tone and the kindness in her face. Why had he told her? Why had he not told Kristen? It was only because Linda had asked him at a certain moment; he’d done it without even intending to. And because Linda was a broken person who could understand.

She tried to insist that she drive him home, but the dizziness had eased and he didn’t want to have to pick his car up the next morning. He walked her to her car. She put her arms around him and hugged him tight. He was surprised by her warmth and the hunger her bony body aroused in him. To his relief, she didn’t try to kiss him; instead, she took a folder from the backseat of her car and handed it to him.

‘These will make for interesting reading,’ she said. ‘I’m afraid you’re in for a shock.’

As soon as she had driven off, he opened the folder. He could barely read by streetlight.

There were, as promised, copies of the missing letters.

1-6-15

Dear Jack,

You asked me if I was jealous, and I’m certain you want me to say I am. Frankly, that’s a stupid game. I told you that you should go and get married, and you have done just that. I hope the petite blonde creature you find yourself with makes you truly happy. (I sincerely doubt you will be able to make her very happy. But then she is an unusual girl.)

You get on with the business of procreating and building a nest; I shall tend to higher, bibliophilic activities.

Love Alice

18-2-16

Dear Jack,

It is customary in these cases to blame Eve. On the other hand, you finally had what you wanted. Could you have gone to your grave without it?

Consider this your belated wedding gift. I simply find you more desirable when you are not proposing marriage to me constantly, when you do not think I am about to crack and marry you anyway.

You say it must stop, and I know it must, but it must also NOT stop. It is simply a case of which ‘must’ is stronger.

Ursula is little more than a child. This needn’t concern her.

You claim I make a habit of this kind of thing, but you are wrong. I’ve avoided so carefully the happily married, if that’s what you are. There have been less men than you think, anyway. But you should know I have given so much more of myself to you than any of them. I have risked so much more. If you wish me to spell this out for you…

Love Alice.

1-5-16
Jack,

I can only repeat, again and again, what I have already told you. This was no plot, no cruel trick to destroy your matrimonial bliss. (How blissful could you have been, committing adultery in the first year of marriage?) It simply happened—blame God, blame fate, blame our carelessness—but do not put it all at my feet.

I am quite aware of what you would do for me. But it is your lot to stay with Ursula. You would suffocate me; it would be disastrous. The worst thing in the world.

I have a plan, and you will learn of it soon enough. You won't like it, but it's not about me choosing him over you, it's about the fact he will know how to not suffocate me. And most importantly, this way I can eventually return to the library, and we can live on without being consumed by infamy.

In memory of love, Alice.

Tom lurched his car from traffic light to traffic light, impaired by the tumour and the shock of what he'd just read. In truth, it seemed, he was a Morgan. Or at least, Jack was his biological great-grandfather.

At home, he took out photos of his grandad, looking for clues of Morgan blood. Now that he knew Sinclair IV and his grandad were half-brothers, he could see it. But would he have suspected it otherwise? He doubted it.

Had his grandad seen this coming? He'd done what he could to prevent it—warning Tom against working at the Sinclair Morgan Library, telling him to burn any letters in the cellar.

He got back in his car and drove to the Sinclair Morgan Library. There was a single lit window on the ninth floor. Probably Verity working diligently all night. His security pass allowed him in. The library was sparsely lit and eerily quiet. He made his creaking way up the floors in the lift, not sure what he was going to say to Sinclair IV, only knowing that he had to say something.

He half-expected Mrs Staer to be at her post, but she was not. The door behind her desk was locked but he could see lights on beyond it, inside Sinclair IV's chambers. He banged on the door, calling out for Sinclair IV. Eventually, Sinclair IV stirred, and came out in a dressing gown looking furious.

‘Lamond, what the blazes do you want?’

‘You never told me that you’re my grandfather’s brother! Were you just waiting for me to find out?’

‘Bah! I gave you hints, didn’t I?’

‘No, you didn’t.’

‘Come into my office,’ Sinclair IV said.

A light shone on the armchair, with the book Sinclair IV had been reading left open.

‘How long have you known for?’ Tom asked.

‘I’ve never known! You think these things are black and white? You think something like this is ever said out loud, heralded for the world to hear?’

‘Alice’s letters seem clear enough.’
‘Your grandfather wouldn’t have known. He might have suspected. But Edward Lamond wasn’t going to tell him, was he?’

‘Did you know my grandfather?’

‘My brother Charles and I used to play with him. Edward would bring him into the library while he worked on his encyclopedia. We didn’t know George was our half-brother. But my father was always giving us both presents—my father lived in the library, you see. One day Edward stopped coming to the library—perhaps he found out about my father’s affair with Alice.’

‘Did you meet my grandfather again?’

‘From time to time. Perth was a much smaller place back then. We were the same age. We had to run into each other. But he wouldn’t speak to me, not a word! I only understood much later.’

‘What else haven’t you told me about Alice?’ Sinclair IV thought a moment. ‘You don’t know about Jonny yet, do you?’

‘No,’ Tom said, feeling unable to absorb anything more. ‘No I don’t.’

‘Early 1912, I think it was. Come back in the morning, I’ll find it for you.’

‘Who is Jonny? And tell me why she disappeared?’

Sinclair IV looked confused. Finally, he said, ‘You expect me to remember everything? Just hold your horses; what is written is written and nothing more.’

Sinclair IV was too old. If Tom had got to him five, ten years earlier, could he have provided the simple truth of the story? Probably not; Sinclair IV was a product of the cover-ups, even more so than Tom’s grandad. He had never attempted to unravel it all—he had been as interested in the myths as the reality. Maybe he didn’t even have dementia; maybe he had never been quite sane. There were people in their thirties, forties who were maddeningly erratic, unclear.

What were the chances Sinclair IV would remember in the morning, would have the details right even if he did?

He returned home, slept fitfully and was up early to find out who Jonny was.
Chapter 13

1 March 1912

At dusk I was walking around the library square, as has become my custom, when a native came toward me, wanting to speak. I assumed he was begging, and made to shoo him away, but he was articulate and insistent. His name was Jonny Greener and he had a great secret he wished to tell me. I told him I had no time for secrets. He said I had no choice but to hear this one.

He claims he is Alice Greene’s son. I told him Miss Greene is not married—did she bear him out of wedlock? He said his late father was married to Alice a full year before he was born. His father was an Aboriginal man and Alice is the child of a white father and an Aboriginal mother. Alice’s father sent her to a boarding school, but she came back to the mission, mistreated.

He went on: he says his father died soon after he was born, and Alice wanted to live in the white world, not the black one. He—Jonny—was much darker than her, and she would never pass as a white woman while she had such a dark baby. And so she left Jonny with her parents who raised him.

There is a teacher at this mission who has transformed the lives of many—he gave Alice such education and reading that she could talk her way into the job with Battye (and me). And this teacher brought Jonny up to be a spokesman for his race. He intends to bring their plight before the whole country.

He came over looking for his mother and went to her house yesterday night. She received him, but would not do as he asks—that is, to tell the world of her origins. So now he intends to make sure the world knows anyway.

My blood was boiling; I could hear no more of this. I told him he had the wrong woman, and to stay away from the library. He told me he was going to stick around until I did something about it.

I have now been pondering this for several hours and expect it shall be churning in my head and my stomach well into the morning. There is not even a soul on this earth to talk it over with! Jack is in love with the woman. Martha, even if she were alive, was never someone I could mention Alice to. And so it is to you, dear diary, that I turn—but you, of course are silent. You also—whoever you are, reading this in the far-flung future—dear reader, tonight you are no help to me at all either.

What am I to make of his claim? He has given no proof; but what proof do I require when my eyes tell me he speaks the truth? Look at her with fresh eyes—forget how she talks, the clothes she wears. If she appeared, stripped of all of that, what race would you think her?

I have never asked Alice much about her background; she has never been forthcoming. Is this the story that has lain hidden from me?

Imagine what Hughes would be saying about me, if he learned my head librarian was a native! I feel I have endured enough of that man’s contempt for one lifetime.
2 March 1912

If Hughes believes that the Aborigine is little more than an animal, standing in the way of progress, then I will take the opposite stance! My best worker is one; there is nothing wrong with her mind.

Jonny was hanging around the library this morning. Indeed, he was at a reading desk in the 100s, a volume of Kierkegaard open. I called him into my office and asked him what it was he wanted. He said he wanted his race to stop being ashamed of itself—starting with his mother. I told him he couldn’t turn back time. Did he want his mother unmasked in the newspapers? Hounded out of town? Would that help his people?

An idea came to me on the spot. I told him his enemy wasn’t his own mother; it was men like Archibald Hughes. I gave him Hughes’s pamphlet to read, and he was ready to tear it into pieces.

I put my proposal to him: I will pay him a good wage to write a pamphlet rebutting Hughes’s views which I will then have printed. He is to stay away from his mother until she’s ready, and he is not to reveal her identity to anyone else.

Tom looked down at his own hands, his Aboriginal hands it now seemed. How could he be Aboriginal and not even know it? His skin, if anything, was on the pale side, like his mother’s.

Had his grandad known and concealed it? How could he keep such a thing secret? It seemed self-hating, self-denying, racist.

What did it mean for him now? If he found his great-grandmother’s people, his second cousins, would he have some sort of kinship with them? Would there be a bond created by genes? He doubted it. What did blood count for? Something, if it was known. But when it was unknown—then it didn’t seem to count at all.

It was going to blow open Kristen’s PhD; she’d be thrilled, would tell him once again he’d saved her PhD, which he liked doing, but he didn’t like the way it would further confuse their relationship. When he stopped finding these things which kept her thesis going, what would she think of him? And if she knew he had a brain tumour?

Then there was his dad. Tom wasn’t sure he would want to know. But it didn’t matter; he was going to tell him first, even if it didn’t change his day to day life. He rang his dad’s mobile, but it went through to voicemail.

Deciding on a walk, he headed to the lift. Outside the library, he craned his head up at the statue on top. Morgan had known. And just as Tom, the journal’s unknown reader, had been silent, unconceived, as Morgan pondered what to do in 1912, Morgan’s statue was now silent in 2007 as Tom pondered what it meant.

He remembered Anita’s scorn about his obsession with family history. He’d been delighted, back then, to find a Jewish ancestor and had gone on about it in too many conversations. She reminded him he was still fifteen-sixteenths white-bread Anglo, and she said it was an annoying affectation to emphasise something so remote. He told her she didn’t appreciate the past enough; she started calling him ‘Jewboy’.
This was just the same, he suddenly thought. Another exotic ancestor to make himself feel more interesting. But he cared about his ancestors, and he genuinely wanted to know about them.

He came to Yagan’s statue and paused before it. Now he knew what had inspired Sinclair IV. Whether out of his own conviction, or whether to further the agenda of the original Sinclair Morgan, Sinclair IV had shown himself on the side of Aboriginal recognition long before it was fashionable. And it had been sparked by the secret achievement of Tom’s great-grandmother, an Aboriginal woman excelling as head librarian.

The second Aboriginal statue next to Yagan with the missing plaque was dressed in European clothing with his fist raised defiantly. It was Jonny Greener, it had to be! Jonny Greener, Tom’s great-uncle, his grandfather’s older half-brother. He couldn’t get his head around it; his grandfather, so very white, half-brother to an Aboriginal activist. Had he known? How could he have kept that from the family? How could he not have stood up and fought for his mother’s people?

What about his grandmother? Had she known anything? She’d come from a line of conservative farmers, and had been unhappy when Lauren had dated an Asian. What would she have made of her husband’s background?

He walked around the square, staring at the cracked paving bricks, imagining the fateful moment when Morgan had been approached by Jonny Greener. He and Kristen were always seeking moments of connection to their subjects; was this one now, for him, echoing Morgan’s daily walk, his mind full of the same secret which had shocked his ancestor? If it was, it offered no solutions. Around him were seagulls and a few loud tourists.

He returned to his office and kept reading the journal, past the entry and away from the great discovery, back into a sea of details.

His dad called back, and Tom shared what he’d found, a little defiantly, steeling himself for his dad’s failure to be moved. This time his dad went silent a long time before saying, ‘You keep finding things, don’t you? I wonder if anything is as it seems.’

‘You wish I wasn’t trying to find the truth?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with the truth. I just don’t know to respond. I already get the sense I have to look back at everything differently now. I don’t know… this really is a surprise.’

His dad was, in his own way, affected, and now Tom had an opposite urge for it not to hurt him too much, for him not to lose his equilibrium.

‘I still don’t think Grandad was a bad man, Dad. It must have been so hard on him, his mother abandoning him before he even knew her. I’m just hoping that’s what the secrets were about, and not shame at being Aboriginal.’

Hughes’s pamphlet was an innocuous buff colour. Tom knew the kind of thing to expect in it, but it still shocked him. It was a strident call-to-arms to the white settlers to end the ‘problem’ of the
natives once and for all, through a combination of sterilisation, relocations to Rottnest Island and simple ‘extermination’, whenever the natives threatened white property or safety.

Jonny’s pamphlet sat next to it in the pamphlet box. Morgan, to his credit, had published it well, on thick paper, and its pages were crisp in Tom’s hands. It was an earnest, passionate rebuttal, appealing to the equality of the Aboriginal race, their use of the lands for centuries before the whites, and decrying the unchristian genocidal hatred of Hughes’s pamphlet. It was repetitive at times and overly rhetorical, but it made Tom proud and sad reading it. His great uncle, the Aboriginal freedom fighter.

Tom was waiting for Kristen as she finished her shift at the café. She smiled when she saw him. ‘It’s good to see you! God my legs ache.’

‘You have to cancel all your plans. You won’t believe what I’ve discovered!’

‘Now you have me excited,’ she said.

Tom said it was better if he showed her the documents rather than explaining and so they walked down the street to the State Library. When they found a desk, he gave her the photocopies and watched as she read them.

‘Alice is even more amazing than I realised!’ she said. ‘She must have had a brilliant mind—to work her way to head librarian with a mission education… this makes everything so much bigger, so much more complicated… We need to find out what happened to Jonny Greener. Didn’t Sinclair IV tell you anything else?’

‘He was unclear last night, and worse this morning. I don’t know how he managed to stay focused enough to find the entries.’

They searched for more on Jonny Greener. Kristen was the first to find something, a brief mention of him in a book on Aboriginal activism, noting that he’d been killed in the Supreme Court Riot—a violent clash between Aboriginal protestors and a group of ‘concerned veterans’ outside the Western Australian Supreme Court in 1918.

‘We’re getting so warm!’ she said. ‘Alice’s unacknowledged son dies in Perth the year she disappears.’

They went looking through microfilm and found newspaper articles about Jonny’s fateful visit to Perth.

ABORIGINAL SPOKESMAN IN PERTH

Aboriginal spokesman Mr Jonny Greener arrived in Fremantle yesterday, ahead of a public lecture tonight entitled “Dignity and Equality for Today’s Aborigine”. Mr Greener, from Banderok Mission. He has previously attracted controversy in Melbourne, with speeches calling for Aboriginal voting rights and compensation for the displacement of Aborigines by white settlers. A spokesman for the Volunteer Guards says that Mr Greener is here ‘to stir up trouble’, amidst high interest in the outcome of the trial of farmhand Mr Daniel Thomas, accused of fatally shooting a trespassing Aborigine on a farm in Cannington.
PROTEST OUTSIDE SUPREME COURT

A group of protestors angry at the acquittal of Mr Daniel Thomas for the murder of an Aborigine gathered outside Supreme Court late yesterday afternoon, calling for an end to 'prejudice against natives.' Speeches were made by Aboriginal spokesman Mr Jonny Greener, and a member of the dead man's family. Volunteer Guards assembled to oppose them, with Mr Archibald Hughes Esq. delivering an address. Angry words were exchanged between the two groups. The protestors vowed to return tomorrow and each day until a new trial was ordered.

FATAL CLASH OUTSIDE SUPREME COURT

The second day of a protest outside the Supreme Court over the acquittal of Mr Daniel Thomas has ended in fatality, with Mr Jonny Greener of the Banderok Mission in Victoria, shot dead. Mr Greener's death occurred in the midst of a melee between the protestors, many of them Aboriginal, and the Volunteer Guards. A police investigation is continuing.

Incredibly, the matter disappeared from the newspaper. A few days later, there was a short notice of the burial of Jonny Greener, and that was all.

Searching for more on the Supreme Court Riots, Kristen found an article in a journal.

As if the murder of Ned Smithson and the acquittal of Daniel Thomas were not egregious enough, this saga culminated in the murder of Aboriginal activist Jonny Greener and a subsequent police cover-up.

Greener was a promising young activist, a remarkable pioneering voice for Aboriginal rights; Peterson and Foster write 'he was at least sixty years ahead of his time, a harbinger of the kind of Aboriginal political activism which was not to properly emerge until the 1970s.' He was born and raised at Banderok Mission in Victoria. In 1910 the Victorian government attempted to reclaim some of the farming land given to the mission. At just eighteen years of age, Greener led a campaign to keep the land and gained the support of influential parliamentarians and the missionary society which had originally established the mission. The attempt to resume the land was successfully thwarted; Greener had begun a career of advocacy and protest which was to be cut short nine years later in Perth in the aftermath of the Daniel Thomas trial.

Greener's connection to Western Australia is unclear. His first trip to Perth had been in 1912, and it was probably here that he gained the support of eccentric gold miner and library founder, Sinclair Morgan. In 1913, Morgan financed the printing of a pamphlet written by Greener entitled, 'A Reply to the Racial Hatred of Mr Archibald Hughes, by an Aborigine'. Morgan's motives may not have been altogether pure; Hughes—discussed below—was a vocal opponent of the construction of the Sinclair Morgan Library a decade earlier.

According to Mick Mears, an eyewitness interviewed in 1963, Greener's second fateful trip in 1918 was at the invitation of a group of Aboriginals (including Mears) and their white supporters who hoped to start an advocacy group resembling the one Greener had established in Melbourne. Greener was to address a number of public meetings to generate support, as well as advising the group organisationally. Although the trip was planned well in advance of the trial of Daniel Thomas, the coincidence added impetus to their hopes and a specific focus for what was meant to be the genesis of an organisation.
The formation of the Volunteer Guards in the same period is an interesting counterpoint to the embryonic Aboriginal advocacy group. A contemporary editorial in the socialist newspaper claimed that at the core of the Volunteer Guards was a coterie of wealthy fascists, harnessing and manipulating the anger of disaffected World War One veterans. Although this claim was exaggerated, some of the men who began the group were wealthy and had extreme right-wing views.

The most prominent of these was Archibald Hughes (1858-1923). Hughes was a powerful figure in Western Australia in the decades either side of Federation. An influential banker, he was one of the richest men in the state and owned a number of businesses. The sheep on one of his farms were persistently hunted by Aboriginals, but neither this nor any other incident can explain Hughes's hatred of the Aboriginal people.

Throughout the early months of 1918 the Volunteer Guards had held a series of meetings in town halls, calling for higher pensions for injured servicemen and for action to crack down on Bolsheviks, ‘dangerous’ immigrants and ‘hostile’ Aboriginals. The guards held a Saturday afternoon drill on the outskirts of the city, readying themselves for action. The protest outside the Supreme Court gave them the chance for action for which they had been waiting.

Greener, Mears and others in the prospective advocacy group had been in court for the trial. On the morning of 24 May, the jury returned its verdict of not guilty after only half an hour of deliberation. The group was furious and immediately began organising a gathering outside the court. By evening, the gathering had grown to about twenty and they had unfurled a banner calling for justice for Ned Smithson and the Aboriginal people. A number of police were watching them, and Mears believes it was only Greener’s convincing negotiations that prevented them from breaking up the protest.

The Volunteer Guards arrived en masse at dusk the next day and marched on the protestors. Mears was standing in the middle of the protest group as the incident unfolded:

The guards were lined up in front of us. The police did nothing to stop them—they were off to the side. The guards were yelling at us to clear out. We said we wouldn't. The police came in behind us and tried to move us away before there was trouble. I saw Jonny walk toward the guards. He yelled something—I don’t know what. Archibald Hughes was at the front of the guards with a rifle. He shot him, just like that, straight in the heart.

Newspapers reported that Jonny was shot in the midst of a melee ‘by a person unknown’; this was also the conclusion of the police investigation. In stark contrast, Mears remembers clearly—albeit forty-five years later—that the melee was caused by the shooting of Jonny.

Five of the protestors were arrested, charged with public disorder and eventually sentenced to short prison sentences. None of the guards were charged. After initial articles on the incident the next day, the murder of Jonny Greener dropped from sight.

In different circumstances, these events might have catalysed the advocacy group, carrying it forward in outrage. Instead, the spirit of the fledgling group was crushed. There were attempts by members of the group to raise awareness of the murders of Smithson and Greener, but these led to nothing. Mears saw a conspiracy:
The police, the government—they were all in the pockets of Hughes and his lot. That’s why no-one ever cared. That’s how two men were murdered and no-one went to jail for it.

‘What about this theory?’ Kristen said. ‘Jonny comes to Perth for a second time and pleads with her to join the cause. But she turns him down again. His death fills her with guilt. She decides to return to her homeland, live again as an Aborigine. She leaves your grandad, George, in the care of Edward Lamond, who brings George up to think his mother is dead. But at some stage, she starts writing to him, and your grandad learns the truth—which, for whatever reason, he finds unbearable.’

‘It fits the letter Alice wrote to Edward,’ Tom said. ‘But it’s hard to prove—unless there’s some record.’

‘Let’s focus on Banderok Mission.’

They hunted through maps, checking indexes for mention of the mission. It was strange in the age of satellite maps showing the detail in everyone’s backyard to not even be able to find the location of a place where hundreds had lived for decades. It wasn’t on any of the current maps. They looked at older maps, many of them lacking indexes, leaving them to read the map square by square in the hope of coming to it.

They had grown disheartened, wondering if the newspaper article had been wrong, when she found Banderok Mission on a map from the 1960s, a few kilometres out of a small town in northwestern Victoria. It gave them no further clues about the place.

Next, they found a record in the national library catalogue for a pamphlet about the mission. It was sixteen pages long and ‘produced for the 100th anniversary, 1981’. The catalogue listed just one copy, held in the State Library of Victoria. He clicked through to it; its status on the SLV catalogue was ‘missing’.

‘Missing?’ Kristen said.

‘Probably misshelved. It could be lost for years to come—if it’s ever found.’

‘It’s cruel. It might say nothing—but now we’ll never know.’

‘I’ll head back and check the Sinclair Morgan card catalogue. There’s a big Aboriginal history collection.’

They went together, finding a copy of the rare pamphlet in a dusty pamphlet box on the shelf. It had even escaped a red dot, at least so far. One of Verity’s $500 uses of the collection; but he would have paid that amount just to have access to this flimsy pamphlet.

It had four pages of photographs in the middle, which they turned to first.

A white missionary, smiling benignly with rows of serious black faces.

Mr James ‘extraordinary teacher of three generations’, a kind looking, befuddled and bearded man in front of a blackboard.

An Aboriginal man in a suit standing at a pulpit, one arm raised. It was labelled, ‘Jonny Greener: leader and advocate’. The likeness to his mother wasn’t apparent, although his hair was curly.
Group portraits. One from 1966 for the eighty-fifth anniversary. In the middle of the group: an old woman, her hair white but still curly; in her old age, Tom thought he could see his grandad in her face. The names were listed below. Not Alice Greene: ‘Adelaide Greener’. The text recorded a sunny version of the mission’s history, brief highlights, mentions of key people.

In 1887, the young teacher Thomas James (1865-1940) came to Banderok, home of his grandmother, Betty Thorpe, to dedicate himself to the teaching of the mission’s children. He taught for fifty-three years until his death, and gave the mission a reputation for having the best-educated children around. He imparted to many students his passion for learning and self-improvement, as well as a message of pride in their Aboriginal heritage.

Further down, there was a heading ‘The Brightest Flame Burns Fastest’ and a paragraph on Jonny Greener.

One young man of Banderok refused to fight a war he didn’t agree with, and persuaded a number of others to follow his lead. Jonny Greener (1892-1918) was an early voice for justice for Aboriginal people. He travelled around the country, giving speeches on the plight of his people. In 1918, while in Perth, he was killed by a group of counter-protestors, leaving behind widow Penny and three children. At the time of his death, the mission welcomed home his mother, “Aunty Addie”—Adelaide Greener (1876-1976). She continued his work in her own way, tirelessly advocating for Aboriginal people around the region.

There were a couple more mentions in the rest of the pamphlet of the contributions of Aunty Addie. She taught at the school alongside Thomas James, taking it over when he died until her retirement in 1960. She established ‘the best-stocked lending library known to any mission’.

On 12 May 1976, the mission and many people from around the district gathered to celebrate the one hundredth birthday of Aunty Addie. She blew out a cake with one hundred candles on it, and, remarkably at her age, stood up to give a short speech, ending with a joke. She died peacefully in her sleep a few weeks later.

‘She only died a year before I was born!’ Tom said. ‘I could nearly have met her. She should have been at my parents’ wedding, but she didn’t even exist to Dad. I can’t believe she lived to one hundred—she did what Morgan dreamed of.’

‘Are you going to come with me?’ Kristen asked.

‘Where to?’

‘To the mission! I need to see it, photograph it. There must be more there!’

He hesitated. ‘Okay,’ he finally said. He would have to postpone the operation. But he needed to go. His grandad should have gone, and he would go instead. ‘Do you think we can go straight away?’

‘Yes! As soon as possible!’
Chapter 14

It always humiliated Sinclair IV when Danielle summoned him to her office. Putting off the summons as long as he possibly could, he braced himself for the blow she was sure to deliver.

‘Uncle Sinclair,’ she said, ‘thank you for coming in.’

He grunted. She would drop the ‘uncle’ in a moment or two, he was sure of it. She had no books in her office, just corporate art, fresh flowers and fresh paint.

‘Just thought I’d let you know,’ she said cheerily, ‘that we’re doing some moves. Obviously in your emeritus role, the tenth floor is not quite the place for you any longer. So we’re making a new office for you and a new home for the archives in the basement.’

A great lump of fury and fear rose up from his stomach and his heart and into his throat.

‘You can’t move me! The basement? Not the basement!’

‘Sinclair,’ she said, ‘there were some on the board who wanted the archives sent to the State Library and for you not to have an office at all any longer. But I value your contribution, and I fought to make sure you kept it.’

‘I can’t go in the basement!’

‘Why not?’

I live there in my nightmares, he thought, but he couldn’t explain that to her. ‘I have a fear of the underground! That basement is a health hazard. No-one should be going down there!’

‘We’ve got to use all the space. I hope you’ll be able to adjust.’

‘What kind of Morgan are you? I tell you this is a war you can’t win!’

She stood to dismiss him. ‘There’s no war, Uncle Sinclair. It’s just a pity you seem intent on spoiling your legacy by standing in the way of progress.’

He spluttered. ‘Doublespeak! What a load of rot! It’s going to kill me and you’ll be rejoicing.’

‘What did she want?’ Mrs Staer asked on his return.

‘Nothing,’ he said briskly. ‘You must give me some time to myself.’

He didn’t look behind him, and willed her not to follow him. He locked himself in his study and poured himself some port. He wasn’t much of a drinker—it stopped him reading—but right now he needed to steady his nerves. He felt shivery all over. Taking off his clothes, he put on his dressing gown. There, that was far more comfortable. He sipped the port. Perhaps Danielle knew, perhaps that’s why she was sending him down there. Her henchmen had got to the basement, started throwing out his precious backlog of newspapers and they’d uncovered Jack’s secret chamber. Her cruelty was so great, so calculated that she was making him pay at the end of his life for something he did so many years ago. She did have Morgan blood—Jack’s blood, and this was her revenge. It should have been young Lamond as CEO; he was the only one of his generation who appreciated the past. And he had Alice and Morgan’s blood in him.

There was a knock on the door, gently insistent. He called out, ‘Give me some time, Mother.’
No, it wasn’t Mother. Decades out, how stupid of him! The door turned; he was so old and feeble he couldn’t even lock a door properly anymore!

Mrs Staer carried tea in his favourite cup. She shook slightly as she walked; she was getting old too. ‘I see,’ she said, her voice higher with disapproval, ‘you won’t be needing any tea.’

‘She’s moving us to the basement!’

‘That slattern!’ Mrs Staer exclaimed. ‘Who does she think she is?’

He gulped more port. His face was pale.

‘I can’t do it,’ he said. ‘I can’t move down there.’

‘What is it with you and the basement? You’ve always been so terrified of it!’

She was taunting him. She could read his thoughts. She too knew all about the Museum and what happened to Jack, and now she wanted him to confess. He wouldn’t give her that satisfaction.

‘I have a fear of the underground. You’re aware of this—I’m certain I’ve mentioned it before.’

She smiled like she didn’t believe him. ‘Is there anything we can do?’

He stared into the air. He had never felt so powerless. There was nothing he could do. He had only a few old volunteers left, plus that Lamond, who was probably in league with Linda.

‘No, there’s nothing we can do. We will lie down like dogs and take this!’

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘you are very dramatic.’ She laughed slightly.

He wouldn’t take such insolence from anyone else, but she had a great power over him that she probably didn’t even comprehend. She hated him, he suspected, for never marrying her. But it had been a far more productive partnership this way.

He needed to distract himself from all this. ‘I am going to write in my journal and then have a bath,’ he declared. She left him alone, and he opened the great book to where he’d left off. His grandfather would be proud; he was midway through the fortieth volume. It would be his last, he was fairly certain of that; he was a tattered old paperback split at the spine and all his pages were coming out. There was no repairing him; he would need to be thrown out soon. But he should at least finish this journal, get to the final page to complete it neatly. He was not going to write about what had happened, but about books instead.

The gaps in here grow wider, just as at the end of my grandfather’s life. There was a time I was a disciplined man, with the strength of an ox. These days I am not even ploughing through a book each day. My resolution last month to henceforth read only works published in the year 1917 has eased my sense of being overwhelmed. Not only does it put me in communion with Sinclair—that one year our lives touched—it also freezes the world of books. I shall spend the rest of my life coming to know at least one year of books so very well. I am making those 365 days exist again, I have summoned them out of oblivion. It gives me two posthumous (the most poignant kind of book of all) Henry Jameses; it gives me the pulp delights of Conan Doyle and Burroughs; it gives me a slice of Yeats, a slice of Eliot. What a representative feast to finish my life on.
If I’d died a few years ago, I would have died a happier man. It is my curse to live on too long, long enough to see everything I have worked for dismantled. I think when I’m lying on my deathbed, Danielle will dynamite the statue, and that will be the last thing I know.

He stopped; he was getting back to what had just happened. He probably should record it, but not just yet.

This made him think of recording the whole sordid story of the basement and of Jack. There should be some record of it, surely. Perhaps writing it down would leave him feeling absolved. It would be a confession to posterity.

But he remembered his anger at Linda as she had made her accusations. He’d been furious to hear part of his secret put into her words. If he confessed, it would spread like a bushfire and it would be all anyone remembered about the Morgans.

He wondered if he should tell young Lamond. Yet he would rather not be judged by him, after all the history between their families. It wasn’t relevant to the biography, not truly. It was an epilogue, a horrid one. He thought of his grandad’s ghostly face in preserving fluid, and the evil of his father, and he put his pen down.
Chapter 15

The surgeon argued with Tom when he tried to postpone the operation. Tom stood his ground. He didn’t even care if going to Victoria killed him; it was a necessary thing to do. He would do it and then they would cut his head open. They agreed, finally, on the first day of September. It was the day after his thirtieth birthday, which seemed apt to Tom. His thirties would be a twilight before the darkness.

He was thinking about Kristen a lot. Going through the supermarket, he watched himself drop a packet of condoms into his trolley, and at home he stuffed them in his travel bag. They were proof of an intention he didn’t even articulate to himself.

He had lots of money and she had none, so he was paying for the whole trip. He had to take the envelopes of old hundred dollar notes to the bank. The teller conferred about him out the back. When she returned, she smiled, giving no explanation. Perhaps he was now on an organised crime watch-list.

On the early morning plane, she slept with her head on his lap, and then he fell asleep too, and when he woke with her for the descent, he felt a sweet closeness and rightness about the world that was so elusive to him. He would be whole-hearted about her. He would hold nothing back, not living in fear that she would tire of him or doubting she was the right girl; he would live like a winner, confident and optimistic. If anything defeated cancer, it was probably that. If anything kept a woman, it was also probably that.

The silver hire car was new, and it made him feel accomplished to drive it out of Melbourne with beautiful Kristen at his side. She took a snap of him driving and he smiled for it. No-one knew about his tumour in Victoria; he could live here with her, free of it.

The suburbs thinned out and his headache set in again, pounding behind his eye, as loud as someone yelling inside his head. He wished he could escape his head, his malignant cells. He should pull over and ask her to drive, but it felt like admitting defeat; he just kept going. He wanted to be the character in that novel who drove on and on back and forth across America immortally, not the fragile, sickly man he was.

A couple of hours out of the city, they stopped for the night in a shabby motel stuck in the seventies.

‘A double room?’ he asked, and she smiled widely. ‘Yes.’

The room was dark, faintly musty, and he could see all the couplings which had ever happened in it and everything which had ever been said. He was very dizzy and static was running across his vision. His hands were tingling. Not a brain tumour, he told himself, sex. As soon as they had put their bags down, he started kissing her. He led her onto the bed urgently.

She said, ‘I like this side of you.’

She was suddenly naked, and then he was. This before him was the full story of the body she carried around with her, the secret self he’d imagined so many times. Before too long he was
inside her and he no longer had any choices to make; he could not undo the sex, right or wrong. He felt clumsy, uncoordinated; he should tell her: I’m usually better at this.

When it was over and he lay naked and dizzy, she said, ‘You were waiting—what changed?’

‘I changed,’ he said, and he felt empty.

He clutched her, and he was ashamed of the tears running down his cheeks. Perhaps she hadn’t noticed; she held the camera up and took a photo of them entangled. He felt a sick horror at the gaze of the camera, wishing he could tear it away from her and erase what it had seen.

In the morning, Kristen woke excited. Today she would see where Alice lived out her life. There was a deliciousness to the newly shared bed, and she watched him sleeping by the faint light coming in through the dusty velvet curtains. The room smelled of cheap motel and of him.

She woke him making coffee from an instant sachet and UHT milk. He seemed groggy, sad.

‘Hey, mister.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘What for?’

He came up to her and kissed her forehead and then her cheeks and rested his head on her.

She would ignore the misery in him and bring him out of his darkness.

‘I’m not well,’ he said. ‘I have this terrible headache. Maybe you could drive?’

‘Of course.’

The photocopied map was hard to follow. They got lost and asked at the tourist bureau of the nearest town. The woman hadn’t heard of the mission. She examined the photocopied map and said, ‘They changed the road a few years back,’ she said. She gave them a tourist map and marked a spot. ‘There’s some sort of camp right here—maybe that’s where it was.’

As they drove toward the camp, Tom was thinking of the realignment of roads, the way not even these were dependable landmarks. The past was always receding, fading, destroyed.

A painted metal sign hanging from a tree proclaimed, ‘Nurra Holiday Camp’. Kristen turned the car down the gravel road.

He had déjà-vu; in a life he hadn’t lived, he knew this place well, had come down this road and known Aboriginal aunties, uncles, cousins; he had been one of them. In this life, he knew Aunty Addie and she knew him, her great-grandson, and the past generations did not die, they lived on and on and on. No-one was forgotten. Everyone lived.

They drove through the front gates. Kristen parked in front of a building with ‘OFFICE’ painted on its fibro wall. The place was deserted. Weatherboard dorms with gutters full of leaves, peeling white paint. A swing made of stern pine poles, thick chain, an old tyre. So dry, even now at the end of winter.

Inside the office, an Aboriginal woman in her seventies knitted as she listened to talkback radio.
‘Hello!’ Kristen said cheerily and offered her hand. ‘I’m Kristen and this is Tom.’

The woman put her knitting down and warily shook their hands. ‘I’m Mindy. What are you selling?’

‘Actually, we’re researchers from Perth,’ Kristen said. ‘We’re looking into a woman who lived here in the mission days—Adelaide Greener.’

‘You want to know about Aunty Addie? Well, I remember her, of course.’

Tom spoke up, ‘I’m her great-grandson.’

‘She never talked about Perth.’ Her tone was harsh and she didn’t look at him as she spoke.

Indignation, sadness welled up in him.

‘I’m writing a book on her,’ Kristen said.

‘She’d like that, she was a big reader. She made us a library. Want to see it?’

Mindy led them behind the office to a fibro demountable. ‘LIBRARY’ was painted in a faded arch above the door. A couple of the window louvers were broken. Mindy went through keys trying to open the door. Finally, it creaked open. A bare light bulb lit up the room with its rows of forgotten books. Coarse industrial carpet squares on the floor and overwhelming dust.

‘Hasn’t been well-kept since she died. Now this place is a holiday camp it’s not really needed.’

A library frozen in time, from about the time he was born. He ran his eyes along the books. Most of them were from the first half of the twentieth century, with just a few more brightly covered dust jackets and paperbacks from the sixties and seventies. Could he learn anything about Alice from these choices? He doubted it; she was probably driven by what she could get her hands on and what was in demand. His eyes caught hold of A.J. Cronin’s *Adventures in Two Worlds*. Perhaps she had read the same book he and his grandad had read. A shared experience, in all of their lives, almost a shared memory, even though they’d never all been in the same room at the same time, had never even quite been alive at the same time.

He’d been here before; he had such a strong sense of having lived through this many times. His cheek was twitching. He tried to force it to be still; he didn’t want them to notice. It was just a little twitch, he could hold it down. He could smell perfume, like Linda’s, but sharp and metallic. There was a taste in his mouth too.

Kristen was asking Mindy, ‘When did it stop being a mission?’

‘There were problems in the eighties. Lot of people walked off. We sold the rest of the land, made a trust fund, kept this part and turned it into a camp.’

Mindy was leading them out of the library. He took a last look around it, trying to absorb everything he could see. Alice’s desk, Alice’s chair. Mindy took them into the dining hall. Around the walls were photographs of the mission years. Mindy pointed out one of Alice, a colour photograph of her in front of her one-hundredth birthday cake. There was another photograph of her at the library desk, a pile of books besides her. The photograph that pained him was a third one which Mindy pointed at, saying, ‘That’s her with her grandchildren, great-grandchildren and
great-great grandchildren.’ An aged Aunty Addie on the steps of one of the buildings, with a swarm of faces, her descendents through Jonny.

This was it, he was thinking, this was as close as he was ever going to get to Alice. This was the closest they would come to touching. Except in dreams—he would surely dream about her, jumbled dreams with her and his grandad and other relatives still alive, perhaps dying, perhaps fading away, and he would always watch on, paralysed, unable to touch.

Kristen asked Mindy if she could interview her. She looked hesitant, and so Kristen added, ‘Just the two of us.’

Mindy said, ‘Okay, it’s a quiet day. I never thought I’d be in a book.’

Tom looked wounded, but Kristen wasn’t going to let that affect her. He asked Mindy if he could sit in the library; to Kristen’s relief, she agreed.

Kristen started by asking about Mindy herself, and then asking what she knew about the mission over the years. It gave Kristen a fuller picture of the daily life, the farming and chores and families. After the missionaries left, things had gone well for many years; the community had had its problems, but overall it had been good.

Mindy seemed relaxed, so Kristen moved onto questions about Aunty Addie herself. Kristen learned that Alice had not given up on men altogether, but, according to Mindy, had lived happily with a widowed Aboriginal man named Laurie until his death in the 1950s; they came to be regarded as married, even by the more zealously Christian residents. It was only when Kristen asked, ‘Did she get many letters from Perth?’ that Mindy went quiet, before saying, ‘No-one ever asked about her missing years. We just left that alone.’

Kristen backed off. She wished she could read Mindy’s reaction better. Was it a kind of shame, the same veil of secrecy which George Lamond had worn?

Mindy kept talking; Kristen had avoided offence. At the end, Kristen asked if there were any documents belonging to Aunty Addie she could photograph. Mindy burrowed into the scratched filing cabinet behind her. She muttered as she flicked through folders in the bottom drawer on her knees. Finally, she pulled out a folder full of letters to and from Adelaide Greener. Kristen couldn’t believe it.

Her time was limited; Mindy was going home at three o’clock, and so Kristen forced herself not to read any of it, but just to record as much of it as she could. It was a jumble of correspondence, most of it advocacy letters to politicians, landowners, local councils and mining companies, as well as their replies. They weren’t like the startlingly personal letters to Jack, but they were still an exceptional find, more important historically, a record of how Alice had spent the second half of her remarkable life.

She got to the bottom of the folder at ten to three, and hoped more than anything that the photographed documents would be readable. She got Mindy to take her around to some more sites, photographing the cottage Alice had lived in with Laurie, the chapel she occasionally
attended, the classroom, converted into an extra accommodation block. She came back to the library to photograph it and fetch Tom.

She called out but he didn’t answer. He was slumped on the desk, convulsing. She shrieked.
Chapter 16

When Tom woke properly, he was in a strange bed and there was noise around him. There were other beds, an austere ceiling, white sheets. Someone was by his bed.

‘Kristen?’ he called out, but it was his mum.

‘You’ve had an operation,’ she said gently, ‘but you’re okay.’

He groaned. Realising how tender his head was, he resisted the urge to touch the wound in his skull, the ugly black staples he knew would be there.

‘Is Kristen gone?’ he asked. His voice had turned odd, slow and veering; he was talking down a long, distorting tube.

His mum kissed him on the cheek. ‘Yes.’

‘Did she say anything?’

She had tears in her eyes. ‘She rang us. But she was gone when we got here. Your dad was here till yesterday. It’s been six days.’

He tried moving all the parts of his body. They didn’t respond properly. This was how it was last time too.

‘Did they get it all?’

‘Yes. The surgeon says you’re going to be fine.’

‘Till next time.’

His mum was crying. Please don’t, he thought. She said, ‘Tom, you were so foolish. We’ve been so worried.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said and closed his eyes. Was there any chance he and Kristen were still together? He suspected not.

He remembered waiting so long in the mission library, scanning through Adventures in Two Worlds and other books he recognised for annotations, bookmarks, clues Alice had read them. But if she had, she had left no traces. He had been on the edge, holding out against the dizzy buzzing. He’d been amazed he was still there, that it hadn’t got him yet. And then it must have got him, because Kristen was shaking him.

In the car she kept asking him what was wrong. And finally he said, ‘I have a brain tumour,’ and she’d said, ‘What?’ and the last thing he remembered was her crying as she drove, an angry, restrained crying which chilled him because it sounded like Anita.

He lost track of time; he did not know how long he had been there when he awoke to find streamers and balloons around his bed and his mum and his sister by his bed.

‘Happy birthday Tom,’ Lauren said.

‘I’m sorry… you’re both so good to come all this way…’

‘You’re hard to buy presents for, did you know?’ Lauren said. ‘That’s why everyone always buys you book vouchers.’
‘I need walking sticks and adult nappies,’ he said. ‘They’re the only things any good to me anymore. Maybe copies of Reader's Digest. I can’t hold down a whole book in my old age.’

Later, the hospital clown came in a coloured wig, his face grotesquely made up, with a cake burning with candles and he and a nurse and Lauren and his mum sang happy birthday to him. He was glad when the clown left.

He was well enough to catch a flight home a few days later, but he couldn’t walk properly. His sloppy legs didn’t do what they were told. He was a thirty year old man—with a missing line of hair—being helped onto the plane by a steward and his mum. The one everyone else is trying not to stare at.

Back in Perth, he was placed in his childhood bedroom and his mum watched over him. He couldn’t go back to his grandparents’ house; Uncle Ed and his dad were getting it ready to sell and had taken all the furniture out. He wished he could stop them. It should remain as it was, the final habitat of his grandparents frozen in time as a shrine to them. Far more elaborate and befitting than a plaque in the cemetery garden in a place they had never even known.

Kristen had sent a letter which his mum gave to him with a look he disliked of sympathy and curiosity.

Dear Tom,

I hope you are recovering well. I’m sorry I haven’t come to see you, and I’m sorry, in a way, for leaving you behind in Melbourne. I have been so angry with you, and I thought it better we didn’t see each other. I’m afraid to say, as I’m sure you’ll understand, that things are over between us, irrevocably.

I asked you so many times over the last couple of months what was wrong, and you never breathed a word. I guess, for whatever reason, you find it hard to talk about your illness. It made me feel I didn’t know you at all and that I could never trust you again. I’ve been in a situation like this before—secrets, silences—and it hurt me so much last time I can’t let it happen again.

I found you intriguing—I still do. I’ve never met anyone quite like you. I’ve enjoyed our conversations, your strange passions. But it was always going to be too hard: I can’t live like a hermit, and you can’t not live like a hermit.

All this is to say, it’s not because you’re sick; your sickness really has nothing to do with it. I hope we can be friends and colleagues. If you return to the biography, I want to help you in any way I can. I can never thank you enough for the help you’ve been in my thesis.

Kristen.

It took him aback to see it through her eyes, his actions, her actions recast in different light. Certain phrases repeated themselves with devastating force. Such a cruel word, ‘irrevocably’. There was a coldness about her ‘situation like this before’; he was just one repeated scenario amongst dozens of lovers. You bitch, he thought.
In his head, he began composing a letter in response, tearing her apart in all her self-assured, self-contained cold-heartedness. In his juvenile fantasy, the letter could fix everything, bring her, chastened, back to him.

He did not write it down. These feelings would pass. He had been so stupidly wrong not to tell her. He would regret it the rest of his life. But surely it was forgivable? A big-hearted woman would see him in his sickness and feel compassion.

He was sitting in the lounge irritably watching a TV series box-set when the doorbell rang and he heard his mum speaking to a woman on the doorstep. From the edge of her voice, he thought for a moment it was Kristen, and his heart leapt. Perhaps to say sorry. Perhaps to start the friendship she had promised but he did not think he was capable of.

She stepped into the lounge; it was not Kristen but Linda. He was surprised how glad he was to see her. She bent down and kissed him on the cheek. She was wearing a modest blouse and her curly hair—less extravagant than Kristen’s—was loose. She was prettier than he remembered.

She was awkwardly clutching a slightly battered box of chocolates which she handed to him. He wondered how she had found him; it was probably almost stalking, but he didn’t care.

‘I’ve been wondering how you are,’ she said.
‘About how you’d expect. But thanks for wondering.’
‘Kristen sent me an email. Said you could use a friend right now. I warned you about her, didn’t I?’

Tom felt a renewed ache inside him. ‘What did she say—about what happened?’
‘She was ambiguous—but I guessed she cruelly dumped you. Is that what happened?’
‘I probably deserved it,’ Tom said, keeping his voice quiet, embarrassed about his mum listening in from the kitchen. ‘What’s been happening at the library?’

She stuck her tongue out. ‘Upheaval. I don’t want to be a part of it, but I need a job, and I want to finish my research on Jack.’

‘What sort of upheaval?’
‘The great weed—all the red dotted books are gone now, plus a whole lot more. I thought they’d be selling most of them, but a lot they aren’t. It doesn’t seem well co-ordinated to me—too many are just going straight into skip bins.’

‘Oh no!’ Tom felt upset. He should have been there; he couldn’t have stopped it, but to at least witness it seemed a duty he owed Sinclair IV. His mum had transcribed a brief letter to the old man alerting him of Tom’s illness, but he hadn’t written back.

‘Maybe,’ she said suddenly as if she’d been holding her breath, ‘we could go somewhere soon? Coffee or dinner or a movie?’

She repelled him and she attracted him and he didn’t know what to say. ‘Maybe. Although… I’m not really ready. I’m still too sick. But maybe…’

‘That’s okay,’ she said.
He could see the hurt in her eyes, the courage it had taken to come here and ask that, and she left soon after.

Afterwards, his mum said, ‘So that’s not Kristen, is it?’

‘No Mum, you know that was Linda.’

‘Well, I never even met this Kristen. And it’s just that they’re both historians. And they even have similar voices.’

‘Mum!’

‘She seems like a nice girl.’

He eventually composed a letter to Kristen.

Kristen,

I thought we were embarking on something big together, but we weren’t. I should have told you about my sickness, and I’m sorry I didn’t. But I think you’ve judged me too harshly. Why should that be the unforgivable sin? I only wanted to live a while as if I wasn’t sick. I was going to tell you soon.

I treasured our time together. I’m going to be honest and admit it will take me so very long to get over you. For a few minutes you lit up my life.

Tom.

He assumed she wouldn’t write back, so he had a flutter of hope when she sent him another letter. But inside was just a note saying she was forwarding the enclosed letter, a folded-over piece of writing paper in old-fashioned handwriting.

Dear Tom,

I hope you are well. Dr Kristen said you had an operation and you were getting better. I wanted to write to tell you something I didn’t say. I think it was 1968 or 69, in the summer, a white preacher came to visit the mission. His name was Pastor George. Addie didn’t come to chapel very often, but this day she came and heard Pastor George speak. He was a good preacher, and he stayed with Addie and her granddaughter, Hettie, that night. She told me later who he was and that she was sad she hadn’t brought him up.

I thought you should know, because you came to the mission to find out things like this. It’s hard to think of you as her family, but if you are, you are.

Yours sincerely, Mindy Johnson

His grandad had forgiven Alice and gone to see her before she died! It was the most joyous discovery he had made in all his years of family history. He could not think of a more beautiful thing.
He had to show the rest of the family. They wouldn’t appreciate it like they should, but they had to at least know.

His dad read the letter carefully before putting it down and saying, ‘Well, I’m proud of him. That would have been hard. I remember him going to Victoria around that time for a conference. But he should have told me about his mum, shouldn’t he?’

‘Yeah, he should have.’

His friendship with Linda stuttered on. Every week or two, she would come around; once they went out for coffee and another time they watched a film. It seemed to him she was his only friend, which was proof of his decline in the world. Yet he felt grateful and wished he could overcome his ambivalence toward her.

She mentioned another man once who’d asked her out to dinner on the weekend—a fellow shelver. He went quiet; she said, ‘You’re not jealous are you?’

‘No,’ he said, admitting to himself he was lying. But he wasn’t jealous the way she meant it. He just didn’t want anyone else to have her, which he knew was a horrible way to be, so it wasn’t as if he could explain it to her.
Chapter 17

After the Tom debacle, Kristen’s mind was definitely not on romance. She had, admittedly, thought of Scott and been intending to contact him, but she was embarrassed that he’d never said anything about the chapters she’d sent him. Was it because they were no good?

Now she had the treasure trove from the mission, she was focused on writing her PhD. She had to play her cards right. She wasn’t going to show Blanning anything until it was watertight, brilliant.

Her once immaculate room became strewn with papers, notes and books. At the same time as deciphering the campaigns Alice had waged in the mission documents, Kristen was learning the history of Aboriginals in Victoria, developing the background to Alice’s childhood and the later mission years.

Her dad was grumpy about the mess.

‘You’re just like your mother!’ he yelled at her when he came home late from a bad day at the office.

‘I’m sorry, Dad,’ she said meekly.

He walked off in a huff. Maybe if she kept the door shut he would forget about the mess; he was like that. The next morning, he was still in a bad mood.

‘You owe me rent, Dr Hall,’ he said.

‘You don’t need it.’

‘It’s a life lesson in paying your way. Besides, you have a scholarship and you’re working.’

She wondered whether to correct him. ‘I’m kind of broke, Dad. That research trip to Victoria.’

‘You’re turning into your mother—messy, financially irresponsible.’

‘Leave her out of this. She doesn’t diss you to me.’

He slammed his breakfast bowl on the sink and headed off to work.

Despite a warning email from Blanning that it was her final chance and she had to be on time, Kristen’s deadline passed without apparent incident. She did the dayshift at the café and as she was packing up at five o’clock she thought fleetingly of the scholarship office closing.

A couple of weeks later a letter came from the university advising that as she had not submitted any correspondence regarding her suspension, her enrolment had been discontinued and her scholarship revoked.

The letter stung, and she worked furiously, spending hours and hours not only on the sample chapters but the report and completion plan. In the midst of this, an unexpected email came from Scott. He was sorry for being so tardy; he’d finally read her chapters, and found them so very interesting. Alice’s story was amazing; he couldn’t believe Kristen was having trouble with her supervisor, who should be glad her student had struck such gold! And most importantly of all, he
wrote, was her slightly quirky, engaging prose—such a breath of fresh air compared to most academic writing! Could he take her out to dinner to talk about it some more?

The day after she submitted her application to resume the PhD, she was surprised to receive a call from Hubert Cook, asking her to come in for a meeting. She hated not knowing what a meeting was for.

He let her into his office with a blank expression.

‘Bad news again, Kristen. I wanted to tell you personally. I’m afraid the department doesn’t think you’re cut out for this. It’s no big deal—postgraduate study is not for everyone. There’s no shame in that.’

‘You haven’t even read it, have you?’

‘It’s not just the quality of your work that’s in question—it’s more that you’re… a little too erratic.’

‘It took me a while to find my feet. But I’m so very serious about this. You won’t believe what I’ve got here—this is really, truly significant!’

‘Kristen, I’m afraid we just don’t have a supervisor for you. You had unsatisfactory progress even while you were with Neville. You took a year off, Ira warned you about the problems, and you haven’t budged. She has told me, I’m afraid, that she’s just unable to work with you—and I’m going to have to back her on that.’

‘This is personal… it’s Blanning being a bitch!’

Hubert’s expression hardened and he said coldly and loudly, ‘You’d better leave.’

She hit bottom for a week. Despite unearthing an amazing story, she’d failed. She’d managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. She saw herself becoming a sour, defeated kind of person, taking an uninspiring job, letting herself go, starting to wear Kmart clothes, and feeling jealous of everyone with a PhD.

Then Scott rang.

‘Have you forgotten our arrangement?’ he asked.

‘You don’t want to talk to me. I’m a failure.’

‘You’re most certainly not!’

She didn’t need much more convincing to meet him for dinner. He managed to get them a table at the San Luis Rey, a place people booked weeks ahead. She wore an immodest but classy black dress. He was an impeccable dinner companion. He had a suggestion for her—would she consider starting another version of Alice’s story, a more straightforward narrative uncluttered by academic convention? If she could get a few chapters written and they were strong enough, he would be keen to show his mum—not something he would usually do, but he was captivated by Alice’s story, and saw such potential in Kristen’s writing. If his mum took her on, she had an
excellent record for placing books with publishers. After he said this, she couldn’t stop smiling, as if she’d stumbled into a fairy-tale.

Lying in bed at night, Kristen began to imagine the book. Its cover would form in her imagination as she neared sleep. It would have a print run of thousands and be discussed in every book club around the nation. There would be a book launch and award ceremonies and such glamour. She wouldn’t, of course, allow the fame to go to her head, but she would enjoy it. She was onto something huge. She had always known this, from the moment she discovered that first letter to Alfred Drake, but now it had snowballed until it was the immense thing it now was. What a story! Alice Greene, great librarian, sexual libertine, proto-feminist, white wife, black activist, matriarch of an Aboriginal community. Petty Blanning, petty Sinclair IV; they would come to look so stupid in trying to stop her telling this story. It didn’t need to be a PhD. That was a sidetrack to obscurity. She could do it her own way; she didn’t need to impress Matt.

The story of the uncovering of Alice could be a book on its own, *The Quest for Alice.* This one would be fully illustrated, documented with all the photos she had taken along the way. The salacious story of how she slept—albeit only once—with Alice’s great-grandson in the line of duty. If that was a book she ever wrote, Tom would understand—he was a writer. He would be interesting to write about, the strange product of Alice and Edward and Jack, the great-grandparents he had not even met but who had made him who he was, lapsed-Baptist librarian with a death fixation and a destructive bent for secrecy. His great breach of trust would come out, the dramatic trip to the hospital.

But this second book was more fantasy. A Generation Y fantasy, Tom would probably say, as if being born in the eighties really made so much difference; he’d told her once he was a proud Generation Xer, but if he was any generation it was one much older. Before she considered writing the memoir of the quest, she had to write Alice’s life itself. Unlike the PhD chapters she had written—heavily referenced, each sentence carefully weighted, cautious in not claiming too much—this time she would write without constraint, infused with the passionate sense of connection she felt to Alice.
Six months after the operation, Tom made his return to the Sinclair Morgan Library. One of the things which spurred him to return was a photo of Kristen on the social page of the newspaper. It was in a cluster of photographs with the text, ‘High necks and long dresses were de rigueur for Perth’s finest in response to theme of “1903” for the opening of Morgan Tower, the revamped Sinclair Morgan Library building. The theme honoured the year the library originally opened.’ Kristen looked stylishly prim in a green dress, similar to the one he’d seen Alice in. She was beaming as only she could, and Scott had his arm around her, looking accomplished and at ease in his Edwardian suit and top hat. Another photo featured Danielle Morgan, her date a West Coast Eagle with sideburns. Sinclair IV was nowhere to be seen; had he boycotted it, or been left out? Who had asked Kristen? Danielle, perhaps, or even Scott, with his connections. Were they sleeping together already? Probably. He tried not to picture it and decided to get busy, otherwise the horror of it would overwhelm him.

His mum insisted on dropping him off. He walked slowly, with a stick. The grand old sign above the entrance had gone; the new one said ‘Morgan Tower’, no mention of the library. The foyer had been cleared of all clutter. The ground floor was taken up by shops, two of them bookstores. One, for second-hand books, was called ‘Sinclair’s Book Palace’. On the sign was a drawing of Sinclair based on his most famous photo, staring out with his big nose and wide face. The other bookstore was a red Dymocks. It seemed wrong to him that the Sinclair Morgan should have a franchise bookshop, but this would be the least of his objections today, he was sure. A café was open, business people drinking cappuccinos where the 000s used to live. An upmarket fashion shop was being fitted out, and there was a glittering jewellery store.

He went in to look at Sinclair’s Book Palace. In the window were 1920s English schoolboy adventures, uniformed boys on caravanning adventures. Behind the counter, a bored young woman in a ‘Sinclair’s Book Palace’ cap was sandpapering the edges of a book to make it look newer. She didn’t look up.

Judged on its own, Tom would have liked the shop. It was crammed with books, right up to the ceiling, an interesting range of new and old at reasonable prices. But it seemed so sad to him, pulling out an early twentieth century Thomas Hardy reprint and seeing the library stamp cancelled with a red ‘WITHDRAWN’ stamp. It might have been catalogued by Alice. The accession stamp was dated 1 March 1908; today was the 5 March 2008. The near coincidence was remarkable, and yet there was little he could do with it except to buy the book for $5. The dispersal of a library was surely a kind of tragedy; Sinclair IV was right.

As he paid for the book, he felt invisible to the shop assistant. How quickly he’d passed from being a peer of bookshop assistants with the potential of flirtation to an older, sickly irrelevance.
He went to the lift. A new guide to the floors had many blank spaces; the first floor was listed as 'Sinclair Morgan Library'—ten storeys compacted to one. He took the lift down to the basement.

Sinclair IV's offices were surprisingly well-equipped; Mrs Staer sat behind a new desk with a new phone and new computer, bribes she complained loudly about to Tom because she had only just got used to the previous ones.

Sinclair IV and Tom shook hands feebly, two frail men. Sinclair IV said, ‘You've aged ten years! But I'm glad you're here. I thought we'd lost you. Your brain attacked you?’

‘Once again,’ Tom said. ‘Remember I told you? The first time, I gave up writing.’

‘And what have you given up this time?’

‘This time I lost my girlfriend.’

‘That’s hard luck, Lamond, hard luck.’

Sinclair IV was still hurting over his relegation to the basement. Danielle had moved into his old chambers. The Morganalia Collection seemed to be in an equal state of order and disorder as in its original home, but Sinclair IV felt it had been fatally compromised—he had known his piles of unsorted materials, and now he did not.

Tom went to inspect the changes some more, stepping into the compacted library on the first floor. All of the books were in display cabinets, none of them on open access. It was beautifully arranged, with a bank of antique reading desks, most of them occupied by readers. At the enquiry desk, a uniformed assistant waited for patrons. An ornate sign advertised prices—they were charging to read the books, a scale depending on rarity; they were also offering framed copies of pages from books; classes for bookbinding and book appreciation; and a book valuation service. It seemed wrong that the throng of appreciative bibliophiles were approving this turn of events by their presence; the old library had never looked this busy. Did people want to be charged for everything?

He took the lift to the third floor where the 300s, the social sciences, used to be. It had been walled in, and a receptionist for an engineer consultancy greeted him. There was a small foyer, a copy of The Australian Financial Review the only reading matter in sight.

‘I'm sorry,’ he said. ‘Wrong floor.’

Not knowing what else to do, Tom returned to the journals.

He came to some entries in early 1914 that intrigued him.

2 February 1914

Jack wants even more room to house his infernal ‘Museum’. Not for public viewing, mind—just for his own grotesque titillation. I have long ceased to keep track of what’s in it; it’s better I don’t know. I stay away from the basement, and particularly rooms B4 and B5.
7 February 1914

Today, a team of builders made their way into the library without my permission or knowledge. I questioned them, discovering Jack had hired them. Couldn't find him—he'd slunk away, rat up a drainpipe; he's always disappeared when it suits him.

The plans are already drawn up! He intends to wall off a secret chamber along the back wall of the basement. He thinks he can do this without my knowledge.

When I find him, I shall give him a piece of my mind.

8 February 1914

Jack is refusing to leave the basement. Alice is taking messages between us; he won't speak to me directly.

9 February 1914

A strategic retreat. Against my better judgement, I've told Jack to do what he will with the basement. I'm going to ask no questions; he can have the basement.

Alice’s idea, of course. She tells me it’s the best solution. She says I should want him to establish himself in the library. Thus when I’m gone—not for a few decades yet—he will be sure to remain here and to have the best interests of the library at heart.

Tom went searching for Jack’s old lair. It was an incredible idea—a secret chamber, containing Jack’s ‘infernal Museum’. Was it the development of the collection he had shown off to Alice as a teenager?

He assumed the back wall was the western one, furthest from the entrance. The room numbers seemed to match the ones Morgan mentioned; he came to B4 and B5, which backed on to the western wall.

On both doors were old cardboard signs, stencilled with slight, authentic variation: ‘NO ENTRY—ADMITTANCE TO THE HEAD LIBRARIAN ONLY’. He tried the doors anyway; they were locked. He wondered about asking Linda or Sinclair IV about Jack’s Museum. If either of them knew something, would they even tell him?

Sinclair IV was hunched over a copy of A Princess of Mars. Without looking up, he asked, ‘What is it?’

‘I’m just wondering if you know about Jack’s secret chamber?’

Sinclair IV dropped the book and threw his arms up, shouting, ‘I don’t want you looking into that! You’re not writing about my father! Just the real Sinclair.’

‘It was just a question,’ Tom said. ‘Sinclair mentions it in the journals.’

‘Keep out of there! Hurry up and finish the biography! Stop getting sidetracked!’
Tom left. He already knew Sinclair IV was sensitive about Jack and he’d been stupid to raise it. Perhaps he had to reconcile himself to the fact that there would still be secrets left undisturbed by his biography, that he couldn’t hope to uncover everything.

He returned to the journals. There was no more about Jack’s Museum.

Tom kept on photocopying the entries relating to Alice. The hurt part of him wanted nothing to do with Kristen. He caught himself remembering her nakedness, their single coupling, the way sometimes she called him ‘Tommy’ so tenderly. With the pile of letters she had found at the mission, she was probably less interested in the journal entries anyway. It didn’t matter; he did the noblest thing he could think of, which was to email them to her in case they helped.

His energy levels were low. He grew frustrated with himself; he could no longer put in a full day’s work, let alone the twelve hours he had sometimes done before the operation.

He was getting toward the end of Sinclair Morgan’s life. After everything else, Morgan’s looming death seemed it would be an anti-climax. But there was still much to consider. How did the man who craved immortality face death? What convinced Jack to leave behind his own life and become Sinclair III?

The beginning of Sinclair Morgan’s decline in health roughly coincided with the date he discovered the fate of his mentor and guide in the art of longevity, Dr Robert Culverwell. In 1916, realising it was the doctor’s centenary year, he wrote a letter care of the publishers.

Dear Dr Culverwell,

I am writing to congratulate you on reaching that milestone of one hundred years you anticipated so boldly in your wonderful book, A Guide to Health and Longevity. I am eager to know: how does it feel to reach such an age? There must be a strong sense of accomplishment and fulfilment you can now enjoy.

I myself am approaching my eightieth year and I believe I owe my excellent health to a rigid adherence to the principles espoused in your book.

Over the years I have waited eagerly for a follow-up volume. If you could spare the time, I would dearly like to know any further insights you have gained into health and longevity over your second fifty years.

Your humble servant, Sinclair Morgan

While Morgan awaited a response, he had what was probably a heart attack on the 3 May, recording afterwards that he had ‘never felt such chest pains’. Dr Offenbach tended him and gave him an unwelcome diagnosis: he had a diseased heart which, before too long, would kill him. Morgan sacked Offenbach and brought in another doctor, only to be told the same thing. He reinstated Offenbach, but disputed his diagnosis:

I told the fool it is not fat on the heart which does a man in but ossification! I have not eaten enough apples! Or perhaps it is the quality of them; they have not had enough strength to break up the ossification and now I am to die because of the poor fruit in this state!
Not long after this, Alice eloped with Edward Lamond to Melbourne. She left Morgan just a short note and did not even come in to say goodbye to him:

The woman has never liked displays of sentiment. I suppose she didn’t want to be seen blubbering, showing any of the weakness we associate with her sex.

He writes in one place that he felt he had lost a daughter; but in another he writes, ‘if she was going to make some old man happy in her embrace, why wasn’t it me?’ However, at fifty-four, Lamond was actually a whole generation younger than Morgan.

With Alice’s sudden resignation from the library, Jack was notionally head librarian, but it was not a position he seemed particularly interested in. His wife Ursula had been a senior library clerk when she resigned to marry him; she now returned to the library as Jack’s proxy. Morgan records that she ‘keeps the place going’. There must have been some chaos for the twelve staff, who would not have known whether to answer to Morgan, Jack, or Ursula. The accessions register shows that the new acquisitions fell dramatically. The library entered a period of hibernation it did not emerge from until Alice’s short-lived return in late 1917.

In September 1916, Morgan received a devastating response from Culverwell’s publisher:

Dear Mr Morgan,

Thank you for your letter dated the 19th April addressed to Dr Culverwell. Having no record of Dr Culverwell in our current author list, I have looked back over our archive. I regret to inform you that Dr Culverwell died in 1866. Unfortunately, he did not publish anything further.

Enclosed is a catalogue, should you be interested in some of our other books.

Yours sincerely, D. Noonan, Publishing Assistant.

Dr Culverwell had died at fifty-two years of age—probably before Morgan even read his book. Morgan had built his hopes on falsehood; he had had a

vision all these years of Dr Culverwell walking down a country lane with me a hundred yards behind him. But he was not ahead of me in some country lane; all that time, he has been bones beneath the ground—already dried out and crumbling in a coffin.

Morgan hoped that Culverwell’s death had been accidental, which would then mean it did not invalidate Culverwell’s advice on longevity. However, one of the library staff located an obituary recording that Culverwell had died of a bad heart, a co-incidence given Morgan’s own condition which he felt must have meant something.

After forty diligent years, there is no further mention of the green apples which, up until now, he had believed were sustaining his health. Dr Offenbach must have been a truly patient man, with Morgan’s journal recording vacillations between hatred for him and his profession and a clinging, desperate need for him. He demanded that Offenbach always be nearby in case he took a turn for the worse; it is unclear to what extent Offenbach followed this. The war was still raging, and as a German it is likely he was glad to have a job and some security in what had become a hostile land.

In the first piece of good news for Morgan in some time, Ursula announced her pregnancy in October 1916. Morgan was overjoyed at the prospect of a grandchild. He offered to pay Jack £1000 if the child was a boy and he named him ‘Sinclair’. Jack, who
had regular money troubles, demanded the money immediately, offering to give a daughter the middle name of Sinclair. Morgan accepted Jack’s terms.

In the last months of his life, Sinclair Morgan fought hard against his impending death. In his journal he refuses to concede that he is about to die, and yet his actions suggest he was aware that he was not long for this world.

He had his portrait painted in November 1916, a memorialisation he relished. He writes of his intention ‘to have this done every year’ to record the shifts and developments in his visage. Despite being in pain and it requiring much effort to sit for the portrait, he felt that it was a ‘spiritual experience’ to hold a pose that would be recorded forever. As he sat, he apparently imagined future generations looking at the painting and found great comfort that the moment he was in would never cease.

The portraitist, George Williams, was a commercial artist who painted a number of Perth’s well-to-do early in the twentieth century. In the case of Morgan, he rendered a workmanlike, realistic portrait of Morgan standing in front of bookshelves. Although a lucrative commission, Williams records in a letter to his brother that it was one of his least favourite. He found Morgan ‘bordering on the obnoxious’ and ‘each day bristling with fresh insanities’. The portrait hung in the foyer of the Sinclair Morgan Library for nearly a century, only to be removed in February 2007 as part of the refurbishments instigated by Morgan’s great-great-granddaughter, Danielle Morgan.

Despite his disillusionment with the false promises of Culverwell, Morgan regained some credulity in the last year of his life and showed the only period of interest in religion in his life.

In January and February of 1917, still regularly ruminating on the elopement of Alice, he began entertaining a Christian Scientist named Edna Prinn. For a few days, he seemed on the verge of converting to the beliefs of Mary Baker Eddy, believing that his disease was illusory and could be healed with prayer. There is a gap in the journal and Edna Prinn and Christian Science are not to be found when Morgan writes again; instead, Morgan moved on to a second religion.

An American Pentecostal preacher named Isaiah Youngblood had preached on the South Perth foreshore in a tent for an entire week in the first week of March. Perth was startled by this new form of Christianity; a report by an eyewitness in the Church of England newspaper records the ‘rowdy’ worship and ‘tongue-speaking’, and the promises of healing. It was these promises which attracted Morgan’s attention and he paid Youngblood £50 travel expenses to cross the river and pray over him, with the promise of much more if he was healed. The preacher anointed Morgan in scented oil and prayed over him in tongues, which Morgan records as sounding ‘something like an African tribesman crossed with a maniacal Frenchman’. Morgan felt ‘a great heat in his heart’ and initially believed he had been healed; his belief was strong enough that he gave Youngblood another £200 with the promise of more to come. Yet the next day, the chest pains returned and Morgan showed no further religious interest.

The journal entries after this are sparse; but Morgan does write of his new strategy in his quest to live to one hundred: convincing Jack to assume his identity and live on past the century mark in his place.
Chapter 19

Tom stopped short, leaving Morgan in his last few days of life. This was the way Morgan would have wanted it: he lies on his deathbed, those last days never passing; he remains alive in the pages of a manuscript, his fate deferred forever.

The account of Morgan’s final year had emerged painful word by word. He had hundreds of pages of notes and some sections drafted but a lot of the actual writing was still ahead of him. He was too sick to get it done; time was running out. Sinclair IV wanted to read the biography.

A solution began to form in his head. It was slightly distasteful to him, but it seemed befitting. He would ask Linda to co-author the biography, helping him finish it. It was the best way to make sure the biography was finished. They would have to sort Sinclair IV out, but there were ways around that.

He had almost decided to make his offer to her, but he left it within himself, making no move to speak to her.

Over and over he read Morgan’s last entries. There was a final letter from Alice preserved between the pages. Perhaps it gave him the peace to die.

Dear Sinclair,

I hope this letter reaches you. I wish I was there with you at this time. I know you fear death more than anything. I urge you to find courage.

You are a great man. You have done more in one lifetime than a hundred men put together. You have lived with love and money and success. Do you think there is something more to be had? You have had what is there, and more of it than everyone else. Now accept, if you are strong enough, the simple fact that life ends!

Is death really your enemy? Is it not the fear of dying, the desire to be remembered amidst all the forgetting, that has driven you on?

I put these consolations before you; but essentially, you must face death as all of us must. Perhaps God is waiting for you on the other side. I know both of us are undecided, but given most of the civilised world believes it, you should not be too quick to rule it out.

There is life, there is always life. I have with me here on my knee little George, who makes writing this so hard. (He wants my attention as much as you; you are both babies.) As you lie in sickness, imagine him and the new Sinclair living on, right through this twentieth century; perhaps they will even see in the new millennium. Life goes on, even if it is not us who are allowed to live it.

Love Alice.

4 April 1917
I am old Simeon, waiting in the Temple for the promised baby, and only when I see him can I cry to God that He can now dismiss his servant in peace. The child is now three days old, and I am informed he is in good health. Yet still I have not laid eyes upon him, nor touched him with my hands. If I were to die without having met him, it would seem to me a fundamental injustice had occurred in the world.

6 April 1917

Today, at last, Ursula brought the child to me.

The newest Sinclair Morgan, the third one, grasped my finger and held it tight. I said to him, ‘Make sure you remember me.’ (I suppose if Jack assumes the mantle, this little one shall be the fourth Sinclair Morgan!)

Young Sinclair, flesh of my flesh, I hope you are reading this in the far-flung future with offspring of your own. It would be a good thing to name your firstborn son Sinclair also. It is a way of remembering the dead, enabling them to live on. It is a name which belongs to you as much as me; we are both being remembered.

What has the world done in all the years since? Does our library still stand over Perth? Have you expanded it, maintained my standards, impressed the world?

If you have read your way through the journals to here, you make me happy. In my weak moments, my suspicion is that these pages will moulder away like my body, crumbling to dust with no-one to appreciate them. And that eventually the same fate awaits my great library. But these are my fears—I am relying on you to prevent these things.

9 April 1917

Very weak. The doctor and the nurses around me all the time. This is not the way to march on to my centenary. Still, I have done far better than old Culverwell.

Whatever is to come, I have decided it is necessary to remember all of my life: to recall everything I have seen and heard.

I took my thoughts back as far as they would go, into my earliest childhood. There is so much more in my memory, locked away. My mind should yield its secrets now, while it still has the chance. It is proof, is it not, that there is a life to come, and we will need those memories there? If there was nothing to come, all the memories would bleed out at the end, and I would experience them one last time. There were many memories I had not thought of for years. I wanted to keep them in order but I kept sidetracking as one memory led to another, out of sequence. Eventually I fell asleep in the afternoon sun and when I woke I could not remember how far I had got.

12 April 1917

To my great surprise, Jack agreed to my plan. He shall carry on as me. It will be him—or at least his identity—they bury in the ground. My name will live on an extra thirty, forty years. I shall see in my century. In a manner.

13 April 1917
I dreamed everyone had come back. There was a grand reunion of everyone I had ever
known. It was in a great park, so green, with roses. A multitude, picnicking together, Alice
was there, and Martha, and Sinclair Jr, and even Abigail and our daughter, who had grown
from a dead infant into a young woman.

Five times in the bedpan! The night is long. People come and stare down at me. Who to
tell my last words to? It must be Jack, esp. now he is to carry me on. Can’t decide on
them. Only once do you get to say last words.

The final, undated entry added uncertainty to the picture of Morgan’s death. What day had he
written it? How long before death? There were no accounts at all of his death; his succession plan
had ensured it would not be publicly recorded. But more than that, Jack had not even seen fit to
record his precious last words. They had been said and forgotten. Or perhaps they had never been
said. Perhaps like a man trying to do something in the last moment before sleep, Morgan had
slipped into death before he spoke them.

There was not anything particularly profound he could have said, Tom decided. Morgan had
little to teach anyone about life. Alice had seen that, reading between the lines of her final letter.
Morgan’s inability to face his own death revealed an impoverishment in the way he lived. It would
be a difficult thing for Sinclair IV to hear, but Tom would include this judgement in the
biography.

He had other questions, too. It didn’t make sense for Jack to assume Morgan’s identity. The
journals showed that, unlike Sinclair IV, Jack didn’t care about the Morgan legacy. Perhaps Linda’s
secret discovery about Jack would reveal why. Another reason to bring her in.

A couple of days later, Linda suggested they meet after work at the pub. He hadn’t been planning
to stay the full day, but he found himself looking forward to seeing her. Her contacting him
seemed a sign he should go ahead.

The pub had been refurbished too—it was now the 1903 Winebar, which seemed vicarious
to Tom, given the pub itself dated from the 1950s. Linda looked ill at ease as they sat in the ironic
music, both feeling underdressed. The new wine menu was on rough, recycled paper, all in
lowercase. The house wine was $11; the rest was even more.

‘Stupid mining boom,’ Linda said. ‘Now none of us can buy houses or even glasses of wine.’
‘Ignore the price and choose something you like,’ he said. ‘A bottle. My shout.’
‘You’re just trying to get me drunk so that you can seduce me or something, aren’t you?’
‘No,’ he said. And then he added, deciding to try to go with her humour, ‘Actually yes, but
don’t tell anyone.’

‘I’ll expect a much nicer motel than that one you took Kristen to.’
‘What?’
‘There’s a photo of you arriving at some seedy motel on her Facebook page.’
‘She put that up for everyone to see?’
‘Not everyone—but friends of friends like me can see it. She’s a show pony, but surely that’s not news to you.’

He was disturbed, but he decided to put it aside. Linda was stalkerish; Kristen was exhibitionist—he already knew this. Returning with a bottle of sauvignon blanc, he put his proposal to her, explaining that he wasn’t putting enough time into the biography to finish it; she could make up the shortfall, collating his notes, drafting some chapters, reading all the secondary sources besides the journals. While Sinclair IV kept paying him, he would give her half. They would leave her name off the manuscript copy they gave to Sinclair IV. If the book was good enough to publish, she would get full credit, even if they had to wait for Sinclair IV to die.

It was a breathless speech, and when it was over he said, ‘What do you think?’

‘You really want to know about Jack, don’t you? Is that what this is about?’

He had expected her to be thrilled but her voice was agitated.

‘You see the condition I’m in—it’s a genuine offer.’

‘But why would you choose me?’

He shrugged, feeling despondent. ‘You’re a logical choice. I can’t finish it on my own. I think you would do a good job. If you want to keep your secret—and it doesn’t affect the biography—then do that.’

His tone was annoyed, and her face didn’t brighten at all.

She stood, saying, ‘I’m going to go.’

He said nothing, sick of her, and sat there a long while, downing three glasses before deciding he was incapable of finishing the bottle, no matter how much it cost.

He took the bus home and signed up for Facebook, even though he’d been avoiding it. He sent a friend request to Kristen, and she accepted it almost immediately. Her profile photo was of her and Scott at the opening party. There was a photo album on her profile called ‘T.L.’. It chronicled the months of their romance, from the first photo of him in his grandparents’ lounge, right through to their trip to Victoria. He hadn’t realised she’d taken a photo outside the motel; at least she hadn’t put up the photo she’d taken of them in bed, but he was chilled seeing the final one in his album. Framed by a door, he was a small figure on his hospital bed, oblivious to the receding Kristen taking a final memento. *Get better, boy,* the caption said.

She had other albums of boys, each known by their initials. Before him was ‘M.R.’, a much longer album, and he flicked through moments in the years of bliss between Kristen and her physicist. The final shot of them both at the breakfast table seemed horrific to him—how could they break up so amicably?

There were a couple of earlier albums before ‘M.R.’ and one after, ‘S.T.’, Scott. He’d been collected by this girl. He felt violated, but he supposed that at least she hadn’t forgotten him. He was a sequence of photos, a chapter in Kristen’s life. It was a kind of remembering, not so
different from his own preoccupations. But she stood there in the doorframe, snapping him in his hospital bed, unaware. She had done that and then she had put it online.

The next day, Linda was waiting outside his office when he arrived. He grimaced slightly.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said and she put her arms around him.

He shrugged her off. ‘It was a bad idea,’ he said.

‘I was being a bitch,’ she said. ‘Please, please forgive me.’

‘I just don’t think it would work anyway.’

‘I’m going to trust you, Tom. I’m just so scared of being cheated. I’ve hardly slept I feel so bad. I’m going to start by telling you what I know about Jack, okay?’

‘Okay,’ Tom said. ‘Why don’t you finally tell me what your theory is?’

She took a breath in. ‘My theory is that Jack Morgan was a grave-robber and a murderer. That’s what really upset Sinclair IV—even more than the journals. There’s two more documents I never showed you… I came across them in the Morganalia Collection.’

She took him to her hideout on the yet-to-be-redeveloped fourth floor. The 400s—books on languages—had been cleared from the open stacks, but the shelves remained like skeletons. It was eerie walking through them. In the workroom, empty desks were covered with piles of abandoned books and papers. She had taken an enclosed office and put her own combination lock on it. She told him to look away as she undid it.

She had a photo of Jack Morgan above her desk, just a photocopy, a ghostly and indistinct likeness of the man, his intense eyes bulging out of a bald head, his corpulent body filling a wheelchair.

Telling him to sit down on a stained office-chair, she handed him the two documents.

The first was a page from an oral history transcript, an interview in 1970 with a retired police detective, Lloyd Andrews.

LA:  Yes, there’s one thing. I’m old enough—there’s enough water under the bridge now—that I… well, I feel I can talk about it without fear. It was the strangest case you ever heard of. Back in 1917. It started off when a head had actually gone missing—removed—from a corpse in the care of a funeral home. He was a businessman, wealthy chap. We had a very upset family, but they went ahead with the burial anyway. Everyone was keen to keep it out of the newspaper.

We looked into the employees, as a starting point. One fellow stood out immediately—I don’t know what the undertakers were doing hiring him; he was well known to us—this was Bill Pritchard. Nervous little fellow, with a moustache. Liked to drink, a big family and always money problems.

We interviewed him for some time. He didn’t own up to anything but he couldn’t give us an alibi. We didn’t have enough to charge him—in fact, we even had to check up what sort of charge it would be, anyway.
A couple of days later, Pritchard’s wife comes to report him missing. We assumed he was guilty and had done a runner. But she was persistent. He hasn’t taken any of his money or clothes. On the day he went missing he was last seen at the library on the Causeway.

MS: The Sinclair Morgan Library?

LA: Yes, that’s the one. We spoke with Jack Morgan. He was a bad-tempered man, and creepy. Said he had no idea why Bill came to the library, and he hadn’t seen him. I’ll tell you what made me most suspicious—he had on his wall two paintings about beheadings. John the Baptist’s head on a platter and King Charles getting done. That’s more than a coincidence, as far as I’m concerned.

MS: You think he had a particular interest in heads?

LA: It sounds crazy, but what else can you make of it? I think he had a deal with Pritchard to bring him a head, and when Pritchard was going to confess… who knows?

MS: So why was Morgan never arrested?

LA: Well the next day, the Inspector told us to move on to other cases. That was Reg Lollard—he got done in an enquiry in the thirties. About as crooked as they come. Morgan could have bought him for all I know.

I didn’t care about Lollard. I looked around a bit, found out Morgan had been getting in shipments of specimen jars and preserving fluids—now what did he want with them? I went around to ask him some more questions, and he was very cagey. I had no doubt he was guilty, and I don’t mind admitting I got rough with him.

A week later, he died suddenly. That’s suspicious anyway—he was in good health. There were rumours it was his father Sinclair who died, not Jack—that would explain him supposedly living on to 120, or whatever it was.

The second document was in Alice’s familiar handwriting.

1-7-18

Jack,

Your offer to bring me Hughes’s head on a platter was, in its own perverse way, touching. But please do not attempt to do so. You will be arrested (like you should have been last time) and you will probably hang. And I still would not elope with you. (Also, my friend, you are growing tubby; between that and your bad leg and the fact that you have not left your chambers since you ‘died’, I think if you had an ounce of sanity left you would know that this is not a remotely sensible plan.)

Besides that, I think there’s been enough killing in this world. Granted, if there is anyone in this world full of hate and evil, it is that man. Oh, in my daydreams over the last few weeks, I have hacked him to pieces. But would I ever have done that? Not even if I had the opportunity!

You think Edward a fool, but if there is anything I have learned from him these years of living with him, it is the importance of forgiveness. In between my daydreams of revenge, I try to practise it.
I could feign ignorance of the knowledge of me you claim to possess, but it's obvious how convinced you are. You did not tell me how you know, and I can only guess. Perhaps the boy himself told you, or at least told your father—that’s my suspicion. If you have any decency left in you, if you have any love for me as an old and dear friend, I beg you to never reveal my secret. If nothing else, for the sake of George, whom you can help in this small way if no other.

How about this? I shall keep my silence about your secret Bluebeard’s room of atrocities and you shall keep your silence about the secret of mine you think you have uncovered.

By the time you read this, I will have gone away and I shan’t be returning. I'm afraid I cannot tell you where I have gone or why. I have my reasons, and a duty to fulfil. Please don’t try to find me; only remember our years of friendship with gladness, as I will do.

Please consider this my final resignation from the library. I hope you see fit to let Ursula help you run the place; I realise you probably resent her using the opportunity of your ‘death’ to extricate herself from your marriage—but can you blame her? Despite my differences with her, she is the one who knows what she’s doing.

Love A.
Chapter 20

Tom sat digesting the idea that his great-grandfather was a murderer and a collector of heads. Suddenly he understood Sinclair IV much better.

‘My goal,’ Linda said, ‘is to find Jack’s Museum. I’m certain it’s hidden somewhere in the library. There’s just too many hidden rooms.’

‘I can tell you where it used to be—somewhere behind rooms B4 and B5.’ He explained the journal entry, but then added, ‘Surely Sinclair IV would have thrown the museum out when Jack died—he wouldn’t want incriminating heads in his library.’

‘Sinclair IV is a hoarder. He never throws anything out. Even if he hated Jack, he would never have thrown his collection out. And that’s if he even found it.’

The clean-up operation had not yet properly reached the basement, but the locks had been standardised and Linda’s key opened B5.

Inside, newspapers were piled to the ceiling; some were bound volumes, many were loose, tied up with string, if at all. The sight exemplified Sinclair IV’s legendary hoarding better than anything else Tom had seen. A gap between piles formed a kind of path, but this was partially blocked by strewn papers, a fallen stack brought down by gravity or movement.

He was excited; he stepped forward into the labyrinth, squeezing between newspaper towers and shining his torch into the darkness.

‘Tom!’ Linda cried out, ‘Come back!’

‘It’s okay,’ he said, ‘I’m treading carefully.’

‘It’s so dangerous! Some have already fallen. The whole lot could come down on you—come back!’

He was impressed by his own courage; he kept walking. The mass of newsprint and old paper had a comforting smell.

‘If I die…’ Linda called out.

The newspaper stacks stretched fifty metres. They came to the back wall. Tom shone his torch along; there was no obvious entrance to the museum. They squeezed along the wall, shining up and down it for some clue. They came to a huge print of a servant offering King Herod the head of John the Baptist on a platter. The picture seen by the policeman! It was an obvious place for a secret entrance and so they pushed it and pulled on it and tried to slide it but it wouldn’t move.

They eventually gave up and were carefully navigating the path back through the newspapers when Linda said, ‘If you’re right and it’s behind that wall we could crawl through the roof space and get to it from above.’

Once they were out, they furtively scouted the ceilings of the basement for an access panel. They finally found one in Sinclair IV’s reception area, almost above Mrs Staer’s head.
They prepared backpacks with everything they could need. Tom was worried—he was still clumsy and frail and he shouldn’t be clambering through roof spaces. But he didn’t want to miss out and nor did he want Linda to set out on her own.

It seemed an age before Mrs Staer finally left at six o’clock. Tom checked around for Sinclair IV’s movements; he was in his bedroom, reading or sleeping. It was as safe as it would ever be—they could never depend on Sinclair IV staying away. He texted Linda to come and she arrived a few minutes later.

Standing on a ladder, she managed to push open the access panel and climb into the roof space. Tom followed, nearly slipping as he pulled himself up. They replaced the panel. The ladder would be out for Sinclair IV to see if he happened to step into the reception area. They were hoping he would think it had been left innocently by a maintenance person, but he had a paranoid mind, so they knew they were in danger of him making the right assumption.

They had headlamps, lighting up a section in front of them. The roof space was about 1.2m high, low enough to be claustrophobic. There were trunks and boxes stored on boards: the extra space had not escaped Sinclair IV.

Tom found it hard balancing along the roof beams. Any wrong step could send him through the ceiling.

‘Are you okay?’ she whispered.

‘I’m fine,’ he said, as confidently as he could, but he was glad she was leading, because he was disorientated already; he had no idea which way they should be headed. His limbs were not obeying him. He didn’t know how he was going to make it. By the time they came to a brick wall it felt to him he’d been crawling for hours like a tightrope artist along the beam.

‘This is the western wall,’ she said, no longer whispering. ‘The collection could be anywhere around here.’

They searched for an access hole. There wasn’t one; they’d been prepared for this, and she had a hammer in her backpack to knock a hole in the ceiling. She was reaching into her backpack for it when Tom slipped off the beam and broke through the plasterboard of the ceiling bottom first. As he fell through, he knocked something with his arm and then hit the floor, plaster raining down around him then glass and liquid.

‘Tom!’ Linda shrieked. ‘Tom—I’m coming!’

He was shocked to be conscious, to have fallen through a ceiling and still have awareness. More plaster was coming down a little way off; she was making another hole. She jumped down and then she was above him. She had her hands on him and she was asking him, ‘Are you okay?’

She was picking a piece of glass from his jumper. He hadn’t hit his head, that was something. The worst pain was in his ankle. He tried to get up to test it, but she told him to stay where he was. She had her phone out and realising she was about to call someone he reached up to stop her. ‘No,’ he said. ‘If you tell anyone, we’re in too much trouble!’
She lowered the phone and then shrieked. Her headlamp illuminated a pale head, dripping and squished on the old carpet a couple of metres from Tom. It was an old man with protruding eyes, the flesh a horrid grey.

‘Is it a head?’ Tom said weakly.

Linda was scared; he was already so fragile and now he was injured and trapped. Even if she called for help, how would rescuers get to him? She wondered if she was being selfish, cowardly to be even contemplating not calling for help.

She shone her lamp around. They were in a long, narrow room, perhaps two metres wide. There were rows of jars on shelves along the walls. The dim shapes inside the jars were heads. Jack’s Museum. The heads were drowning in green liquid. Some had their eyes open; many were closed. Some looked stunned, others serene. At the top of each jar a name was stencilled on a label. There were probably thirty or forty of them.

There were other things, too—witchdoctor charms, a row of skulls, pickled snakes and lizards, a row of hearts, human, she supposed. She came to a handful of books displayed on stands, all a fawn-coloured leather. She picked one up. It was entitled *The Crimes and Trial of Victor McDonald*. At the front of the book, an old inscription stated, ‘Bound in the hide of the murderer’ with a signature and ‘No. 1 of 3’. Chilled, she put it back on the stand.

The room ran for about fifteen metres. It was thickly carpeted. Up one end was a grand armchair; up the other, an ancient wheelchair; a pile of clothes left on it. Jack had been wheelchair bound by the end of his life; she wondered why he’d left his chair in his museum.

She searched for the door, hoping to get Tom out through it. She found it—a gap in the shelving and a keyhole, but not even a handle. It could not be opened.

She was close to the wheelchair now and she realised there were bones in amongst the clothes. She made out the eyeholes of a skull peeking out. They were Jack’s Morgan’s remains! Why had she been so slow? This bundle of bones was so much smaller than the psychopath in her mind. Had he come here to die, amidst his beloved collection? Had he been locked in here? She wondered if the police would care, if there would be an investigation into the death of Jack Morgan and the theft of heads decades earlier.

But what was the hurry? If Tom could hold on, if she could get him out of here, then she could write what needed writing—perhaps it would be a part of the biography Tom had started, perhaps not—and have it ready to publish before letting the police know.

She walked back over to Tom and tried to say very calmly, ‘There’s a wheelchair at the end with Jack’s bones in it—he died in here.’

He groaned.

She said, ‘Is that all you’ve got to say?’

‘I’m overwhelmed and very sore.’

‘I don’t suppose you’re ready to try getting up?’
‘I’ll try.’
She grabbed his hand and pulled him up. As he tried to stand, his ankle gave way and he dropped back on the floor. He needed more time; he wanted to sleep. She helped him crawl away from the broken jar and head, and they lay further down on the thick dusty carpet.
Even though she was tired, she didn’t think it would be possible to sleep in this mausoleum. And then there was Tom, next to her. They were spending their first night together.
She drifted into a half-sleep and when she woke it was five in the morning.
‘Tom,’ she whispered, ‘Tom—what should we do?’
He stirred; she repeated her question. He tried to stand, but he still couldn’t.
He said, ‘Get the ladder away before Sinclair IV gets suspicious. Come back for me in the evening—bring some more food.’
Feeling cowardly, she did what he said, dragging the old armchair under the hole she had bashed in the ceiling.
‘See you soon Tom,’ she called as she hoisted herself up into the ceiling and left him in the dark.
Chapter 21

Perhaps the afterlife would be like this. Not the elaborate heaven or hell of medieval Christianity, but the dark half-life imagined by the Greeks—Hades. Darkness, incapacitation, the dead around you. Such a long time to think on everything he had ever done and said but no chance to change any of it or to do anything new.

He imagined all the dead eyes fixed on him. Semi-conscious in their jars, they were roused by the first disturbance in decades, curious about this new arrival lying on the floor. Some were hostile, their hatred quickening the air, the irrational, long-aged loathing of imprisoned spirits.

Decades ago, they had felt such glee to observe their tormentor starve in the corner, pleading for someone to rescue him. The life had ebbed from him till he was dead like them. But unlike them, the decay had set in and taken the flesh from his bones, erased his face forever. Had they gloated or were they jealous of the oblivion?

Perhaps it would be a good thing to end up here. It seemed a horrendous waste to bury bodies in the soil or burn them in crematoriums. All those faces, some of them famous, all of them loved by someone, consigned to dust or ash. He wondered why more people weren’t preserved. He pictured the general populace across the suburbs living with their relatives’ heads in jars, displayed with the photographs, watching across their lounge-rooms forever.

He forced himself to sit up. He drank some water and then sucked on an M&M to make it last longer. He had to do everything slowly and thoughtfully.

Turning on his headlamp, he stood up, leaning on the shelf for support. How was he going to get out? He could only think that at some point soon a gigantic act of courage would be required of him and he would have to hoist himself up into the ceiling against the pain in his ankle and in spite of his damaged reflexes.

It was time to document the collection, to memorise all that was in here. An account independent of Linda’s. He wondered whose head he’d knocked onto the floor.

He paused a sombre moment before each head, acknowledging its name and taking in the distinctiveness of each face. He contemplated with horror the thought of their headless bodies in the grave.

He came to a face he recognised with a shock. There was no plaque, but he knew it was Morgan. His distinctive engorged nose, bumpy, reddened, pocked, flared out across the middle of his face, half-frightening, half-comical. His wide face was set in a slight grin, his eyes open and serene. He had died in peace, if the look on his face meant anything.

Surely, now, Tom had found everything: the fate of Sinclair Morgan was to sit in an unmarked jar in Jack’s chamber of horrors, within the library that bore his name. Yet that was only one of his fates. It was also his fate to have his copper likeness stand above the library into the future. It was also his fate to have a grandson who lived on into the twenty-first century bearing his name, prolonging his legacy in every way but for carrying on the line.
Tom imagined carrying on the work of Sinclair IV himself. His name would become Sinclair Morgan V. He was a direct descendent, bearing Sinclair Morgan’s genes. And he was the man’s biographer. It would give his life a clear sense of purpose, to live in order to carry on another man’s legacy.

The idea had a perverse appeal at the same time as it appalled him. Sinclair IV’s life had been a quixotic waste, surely. But a fascinating one. Maybe that was all one could hope for. Tom didn’t believe he could even really achieve that in his own life, in the years he had left.

What would Sinclair Morgan have achieved if he reached his centenary? If he were still alive today, one hundred and seventy years old? He would have put off death a little longer. But it would still be waiting for him. He would still have to let it take him; he would still step blindly into the unknown, perhaps to eternal life, perhaps to nothing.

What would Morgan think of having ended up here? It seemed appropriate.

He took the camera from the backpack and photographed Morgan’s head over and over. The flashes lit up the chamber briefly, making him long for proper light.

He had been standing too long and so he sat down in the armchair to recover and ponder the fact he had now seen the remains of Morgan and his son, who were, genetically speaking, Tom’s great-great-grandfather and great-grandfather.

He fell asleep in the armchair. Hours later, Sinclair IV woke him as he unlocked the secret door Linda could not open and flooded the room with a powerful torch. He was puffing, manic.

‘Lamond! What are you doing in here?’

‘I fell through the ceiling—I can’t get out.’

‘There’s no need to go skulking through the ceiling like a rat. You can walk out the door.’

‘Through those newspapers? I’m injured and clumsy—they’ll fall on us.’

‘Not if you’re careful. I didn’t want you to find any of this. I wanted it left out of the biography. I wish you hadn’t listened to that woman, pushed on doors that should have been left closed. It’s just as well I caught her fleeing the scene, abandoning you to death. She would have let you die with my father here, but I’m going to pull you out as soon as I have my breath again.

‘But the first thing you have to understand is just what’s going on here. I am a murderer and now my secret is out. I want you to write about it and then bind the book in the skin off my back. I want the whole world to know that not only was Jack Morgan a murderer and a collector of heads, but his son was also a murderer, a patricide. That, Lamond, is the worst kind of murderer of all.

‘What you have to understand when you write about this is the circumstances. He was a wicked, wicked man. And he was very ill. He kept promising me he would have a great surprise for me on my eleventh birthday. I thought it would be something grand, because on my ninth he had given me my grandfather’s journals, just as he’d been instructed.
‘On the morning of my birthday, I went to see him. He was already a sick man. He cut a lock of my hair and placed it in a carved box. He told me it was a sorcerer’s box and if I ever told anyone about what he was to show me, I would die. Then he brought me into this chamber.

‘He took me over to my grandfather’s head and made me stare at it. “I beat the old bastard,” he said. “I have his head.” I ran out of the chamber in tears. The key was still in the lock and I turned it.

‘I want you to make it clear I had no intention to kill him. I was eleven years old and he was already a sick man. I was frightened and so very furious he’d cut off my grandfather’s head.

‘You tell them I went back the next day to let him out—but he was already dead. I went and told Mother, but she was quite pleased. Do not let them misjudge her though! Everything was done for the purest of motives. We pretended Grandad was alive right up until 1942. Quite a hoax really, and no-one’s even known till now. But you tell it right, won’t you?’

Tom was struggling to hold onto everything the old man was saying, aware he might only hear it once and it was a story no-one else knew. He wondered how it would all fit into the biography of Sinclair Morgan, these events after his death, the events of his afterlife as Jack Morgan and then as Sinclair IV. Perhaps that was what it should be, a chapter called “Afterlives”, the story of the continuations and memorialisations.

‘It was unlucky he died,’ Tom said. ‘I hope you got over the guilt.’

‘Of course I did! Now stand up and let’s leave this tomb.’

‘I can’t,’ Tom said, trying to stand. The pain in his ankle shot through his whole body and he dropped to his knees.

‘Come on!’ Sinclair IV said, ‘if an old man like me can make it, you can skip through, you pansy.’

‘I’m going to have to crawl,’ Tom said, and got down on his stomach.

‘You worm, Lamond,’ Sinclair IV said, chuckling.

Tom followed Sinclair IV through the low door into the labyrinth of newspapers. It was slow, surreal progress through the twists and turns. Sometimes he had to crawl over strewn newspapers; at one point, there was a pile of them a metre high across the path. He thought Sinclair IV would not make it over, but somehow he did.

It was like a child’s game, but it was real life and real danger. He felt a new determination to make it out of the darkness and get on with life, to finish the biography.

He could hear Sinclair IV grunting and muttering behind him, also struggling. Tom focused on the metre ahead of him. There was no hurry. He would crawl through here and emerge into the light.

At one point, Sinclair IV suddenly stopped, plonked himself on the ground and said, ‘Leave me here! I’m done for, Lamond! I’m done for.’
Tom crawled back to where Sinclair IV was sitting. What had happened to the old man’s bluster? There was a loose newspaper on the ground, a Detroit paper from the 1920s. Would any of the newspapers in here ever be read again?

‘There’s no rush,’ Tom told him. ‘You’re doing well. We can stay here as long as you need.’ Sinclair IV was breathing raggedly. ‘There are so many… things… left undone…’

‘How do you mean?’ Tom asked.

‘Never… got on top of the… papers… for one thing.’

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Tom said. ‘You kept the library going. You lived a long time.’

‘Put that on my tombstone,’ Sinclair IV said, trying to laugh.

When Sinclair IV was rested enough to continue, he tried to stand again. As he struggled and swayed, Tom thought he was about to stumble and crash into the newspapers, but he didn’t.

They kept going. Tom could make out the open door.

‘Tom!’ Linda called.

‘We’re coming—slowly!’

‘Get away!’ Sinclair IV shouted at Linda. ‘Away with you!’

His voice was feeble; he was puffing. Tom turned around and saw Sinclair IV stumble, putting a hand out to balance himself and slipping, his whole body falling against the stack.

‘Drat!’ the old man said, and the stack swayed before it toppled, collapsing over Sinclair IV and Tom with a flurry of thuds as other stacks came down too.

Linda was shrieking. Just as the collapse subsided, another stack fell between Tom and the door, blocking the way.

Tom’s headlamp was still on and his head was free, but his body was trapped under the papers.

‘Mr Morgan?’ he called out gingerly. He tried to crane his neck; he couldn’t make him out at all.

Linda was calling out their names. ‘Get help!’ he yelled back.

There was a mound of newspapers a couple of metres high where Sinclair IV had been. He was dead, he had to be. This was where the long lives of Sinclair Morgan came to an end, one hundred and seventy years on.
A Note on Sources

On page 58, Sinclair Morgan quotes in his journal a passage purportedly from *The Art of Longevity and Health*. This is actually a fictional conflation of two real sources. There is a book with this title by Dr Culverwell, who did die soon after publishing it; however, the passage quoted and the ideas mentioned come from a different source, “The Art of Living Two Hundred Years”, an article by William Kinnear in 1893.

Culverwell, Robert, *The Art of Longevity and Health, or, How to Live 100 Years*. London: Rendell and Weight, 1848.

Biographical Quest in the Twenty-first Century: The Origins and Future of a Genre Reconsidered

Introduction: Bioquest as a Framework for “Immortalities”

I set out to write a novel about a library of wonders. It started as a nebulous concept, as novels often do. In the early drafts of “Immortalities”, my protagonist, Tom Lamond, is on rotation as a graduate librarian in the Sinclair Morgan Library. In each department, he encounters new wonders or horrors, such as manuscripts of unpublished sequels to famous novels and the heads of historical figures preserved in jars. Eventually, he is asked by the library manager to write the biography of Sinclair Morgan, using Morgan’s exhaustive and possibly fabricated journals. I was also writing a parallel strand set a century earlier about Sinclair Morgan and the founding of the library. I had two problems. Firstly, the subplots were developing without a resolution in sight—the structure was too episodic and the novel did not hold together. Secondly, I was unclear about how to relate the past and present sections of the novel.

Having reached these blockages, I turned to the research for this dissertation, without expecting it to help resolve them. In reading about fiction with a dual focus on the past and present, I became aware that my novel had taken on features of a certain genre which I had not known existed. Jon Thiem calls it “biographical quest” or “bioquest”;1 Suzanne Keen, “archival romance.”2 In both accounts, the protagonist embarks on a quest to uncover the truth of the past by unearthing and interpreting documents and other traces it has left. Thiem writes:

Bioquest novels, which feature protagonists who are biographers, typically have three narrative strands: the biographer’s quest for the historical subject’s life (the search for documents, informants, former dwelling places, etc.); the life of the historical subject, in whole or part; and, finally, an account of how the biographical quest affects the biographer’s life.3

---

3 “Biographical Quest,” 137.
Keen’s archival romances are set (at least partially) in archives or libraries and feature amateur researchers uncovering events in the past, finding “solid facts, incontrovertible evidence, and well-preserved memories of time past.” 

Recognising the embryonic biographical quest contained within the early drafts of “Immortalities” was a watershed in its development. I decided that reconceiving the plot in cognisance of the genre’s conventions would provide the focus I needed and a solution to the problem of how to relate the past and present. Rather than rotating through the library, Tom’s recruitment as Morgan’s biographer comes early in the novel as the “inciting incident” which drives the novel forward. Focusing on just this aspect of the original plot still allowed much scope for exploring the themes of mortality and memorialisation which were central to my vision. In the reconceived plot, the past is revealed through the journals and letters the biographers discover and piece together, bringing it into the lives of the present-day characters and reflecting the way we must always encounter the past through the traces it has left behind.

The biographical quest genre which has proven so valuable to my creative practice is the focus of this dissertation. It is more than a decade since Thiem and Keen wrote and biographical quests continue to appear, despite receiving little further scholarly attention. A reviewer of one of these works, Alan Hollinghurst’s The Stranger’s Child (2011), writes that “the competitive quests of A.S. Byatt’s biographers in Possession and their ilk seem antiquarian today.” The popularity and achievements of the recent examples of the genre considered in this dissertation suggest this anonymous reviewer may have dismissed the genre too soon.

Chapter one evaluates Thiem’s biographical quest proposal in dialogue with Keen, arguing for an extended definition. Chapter two argues for an overlooked factor in the genre’s origins—the shifts in biography in the first half of the twentieth century. Chapter three considers the genre’s relationship to technology and the genre’s future in a digital age. Throughout, “Immortalities” will be considered as an example of the genre alongside other examples, particularly works appearing after Thiem and Keen.

---

4 Keen, Romances of the Archive, 3.
6 Keen has a forthcoming essay revisiting the genre, considering three “middlebrow” research novels of the past decade by American women with magical or gothic themes. “Magical Values in Recent Romances of the Archives,” in Literature, Libraries, and Archives, ed. Sas Mays (London: Routledge, forthcoming).
7 “Club of Members,” Economist 399, no. 8741 (July 9, 2011): 82.
1. Bioquest as a Genre: Definition, Survey, Redefinition

Biographical Quest or Archival Romance?

Thiem and Keen’s genre definitions have at least two unacknowledged antecedents. Thiem’s definition of the biographical quest was presaged, in passing, by the biographer Paul Mariani who remarks in 1983 that

…several good novelists from Henry James on have used the biographer as their protagonist. Most of these novels have been in the tradition of the comedy of manners, though from the biographer’s own standpoint I suppose the genre most apt would be the Romantic Quest. And at the heart of the romantic quest, remember, is the moment of the Grail, the visionary moment, the moment of the breakthrough.8

The unexplored importance of the practice of the biographer to the genre of biographical quest is the subject of chapter two.

Writing in 1995, Del Janik seems to have noticed the same pattern Thiem and Keen were to remark on. He describes a new kind of British historical fiction emerging in the 1980s and 1990s featuring a protagonist who is an explorer of history, with a dual focus on the present and the past which is being discovered or reconstructed.9 A.S. Byatt’s Possession: A Romance (1990) “exemplifies the type most directly and clearly”.10 Focusing on the works of Graham Swift and Peter Ackroyd as well as Possession, the novels he discusses share an “affirmation of the importance of history to the understanding of contemporary existence.” Janik is less concerned to identify this pattern as a genre than Thiem and Keen were to be.

Two years after Janik, Thiem sees the biographical quest genre emerging in the 1980s in the midst of postmodern critiques of the idea of biography.12 Thiem’s examples of the genre are balanced between novels which argue for “the possibility of biographical knowledge” and those which display scepticism toward the quest.13 Like Janik, he identifies Possession as the most typical example.

In 2001, Keen again identifies Possession as the pre-eminent example of what she calls “romances of the archive”. She deliberately limits her discussion of “historiographic metafiction”14 such as Flaubert’s Parrot by Julian Barnes (1984) and the works of Peter Ackroyd and Graham Swift

---

10 Ibid., 163.
11 Ibid., 162.
12 “Biographical Quest,” 137.
13 Ibid., 142.
which preoccupy Janik. Instead, focusing on British fiction, Keen groups together a range of novels from both genre fiction and literary fiction in which the past is, at least in part, knowable.

Lest her readers carry the wrong expectations of “archives”, she writes, “I should make plain at the outset that I employ the term ‘archive’ quite literally” which she defines as “collections of documents and the places housing, protecting, and concealing them.” Keen’s literal use of the term is in contrast to Jacques Derrida and his influential paper, “Archive Fever”, which uses the term broadly and metaphorically as the drive to preserve, and interprets it in Freudian terms.

With Mariani and Janik as antecedents, there are enough similarities to treat Thiem’s “biographical quest” and Keen’s “archival romance” as variant descriptions of the same genre. Not only do both use Possession as the exemplar of their genre; both also note Henry James’s The Aspern Papers (1888) as a prototype—for Thiem, either a “famous precursor” or the earliest example of the genre; for Keen a “wellspring” containing an “encyclopedia of key traits.” Both conclude with a discussion of Indian writer Bharati Mukherjee’s The Holder of the World (1993), in which the past is recreated virtually and the quester can inhabit it. Keen restricts her discussion to British texts, albeit with the addition of a chapter on postcolonial writers; most of Thiem’s examples are also British. Thiem defines the genre by its three narrative strands—the first being “the biographer’s quest for the historical subject’s life (the search for documents, informants, former dwelling places, etc.).” Keen’s initial definition aligns with this first strand:

They have scenes taking place in libraries or in other structures housing collections of papers and books; they feature the plot action of “doing research” in documents. They designate a character or characters at least temporarily as archival researchers, as questers in the archive.

Keen does not explicitly name Thiem’s second and third strands—the life of the historical subject and the effect on the quester—as conventions of the genre. However, they are both present in her discussion of examples of the genre. Implicit in Keen’s generic trait of “material traces of the past revealing the truth” is the story of the past—the second strand—being told. She comes closest

---

15 Janik rejects this designation for these works, insisting they “transcend the categories into which we have lately come to divide contemporary fiction.” “No End of History,” 161.
16 Romances of the Archive, 35. Keen writes: “My concern is not to rule out postmodern fiction from consideration, but to take care that the powerful ideas expressed in this relatively small number of literary fictions do not obscure the interesting contests about history contained in romances of the archive, a more widely dispersed kind of contemporary fiction.”
17 Ibid., 10.
18 Ibid., 12.
21 “Biographical Quest,” 141.
22 Romances of the Archive, 77.
23 However, interestingly, Keen considers American examples of the genre in her forthcoming essay, “Magical Values in Recent Romances of the Archives.”
24 Keen, Romances of the Archive, 3.
25 Ibid., 34.
to naming the third strand—the past affecting the quester—when she identifies one characteristic of the genre as “sex and physical pleasure gained as a result of questing.”

One apparent point of differentiation is in their attitude to postmodernism, but even here they come to similar conclusions. Emphasising how biographical quest novels “lay bare the constructedness of biography,” Thiem includes novels which “present the biographical quest as destructive, futile, or impossible”, like Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* (1987) and Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*. As already mentioned, Keen states that she does not wish to place postmodern examples at the centre of the genre, but instead to “subordinate them to the more numerous examples in which truth can be located.” To that end, the novels Keen particularly has in mind resist postmodern critiques of history:

They unabashedly interpret the past through its material traces; they build on a foundation of ‘documentarism,’ answering the postmodern critique of history with invented records full of hard facts.

Although Thiem engages the postmodern examples at greater length, he concludes by challenging their representation of the past:

I would like to conclude by sowing a seed of doubt about the deconstruction of CM [cultural memory] in novels such as *Chatterton*, Barnes’ *Flaubert’s Parrot*, and Vargas Llosa’s *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*… The poststructuralist positions played out in these works, for all of the dazzling narrativity they generate, often strike me as counter-intuitive and needlessly reductive. In these novels we witness the relentless textualization of all life, past and present… The poststructuralist reduction of life to text is a professional hazard for both critics and authors. A powerful intuition tells me, though, that life, even life in the past, has an existence independent of texts.

He goes on to praise *Possession’s* pre-eminence and importance for its ability to textually represent the “non-virtual characteristics of the past.”

Of the two terms for the genre, I am adopting Thiem’s term “biographical quest” or “bioquest” to refer to it. “Archival” focuses on the process and setting of the protagonist’s quest while “biographical” focuses on the purpose. Using *Possession* as a template, Keen sees the archival setting as a defining characteristic: “On the path of the archival quest lies those special locations—the libraries, special collections, offices, and stately homes in which documents reside.” Are archives as central to the genre as Keen claims? Kate Mitchell disputes Keen’s representation of archives in *Possession*, claiming that Byatt depicts the Stant Collection and the British Museum as “mausoleums for dead relics,” and that “in these structures the text cannot mediate and resuscitate the past in the body of the reader.” In an endnote, Mitchell writes:

Depicting the buildings that house archival materials in this way complicates Suzanne Keen’s use of *Possession* as exemplificative of her category of “romances of the archive”…

---

26 Ibid., 35.
27 “Biographical Quest,” 142.
28 *Romances of the Archive*, 58.
29 Ibid., 3.
30 “Biographical Quest,” 148.
31 Ibid., 149.
suggesting that these places are not conducive to attaining knowledge, at least of the kind Byatt celebrates and elucidates… Her discussion needs to be elaborated to focus [on] the role that the text itself plays in *Possession*, its importance in unearthing “the secrets and hidden truths that can be ferreted out of the archives.”

Mitchell problematises Keen’s purest example of the genre. In Keen's defence, she is using “archive” more broadly, to include locations like country houses such as Christabel LaMotte’s ancestral home where the main parcel of letters is found, sewn in a doll, in *Possession*. Furthermore, even a depiction of the special collections as “mausoleums” does not necessarily negate their importance to *Possession* and, by extension, the genre. However, in the novels I survey, there are always manuscripts of some kind—usually diaries or letters—but often only one or two, and usually kept in private hands, not as part of a collection. The biographical intent of the protagonists is more central to these novels than the archival settings.

### Examples of the Genre

The definition of a genre needs to be tested with actual examples, from observation of patterns and resemblances. To illustrate the nature of the genre better and, at the same time, to refine my definition, I will now survey some examples of the genre, providing a synopsis and an evaluation of their place within the genre. I have included *Possession* as the exemplar of the genre, and added four examples with parallels to my novel, all written after Thiem and Keen’s studies.

*Possession* is the story of two contemporary literary scholars—Roland and Maud—who, in a series of remarkable manuscript discoveries, uncover a secret affair between two (fictional) nineteenth century writers—Randolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte. The letters and poems by Ash and LaMotte are reproduced to form a narrative of the past within the novel. The contemporary strand follows the complications Roland and Maud face as other, more prestigious scholars get wind of the initial discovery and try to beat them to the final discovery. The affair between Ash and LaMotte echoes the developing romance between Roland and Maud. In the finale, the questers dig up Ash’s grave to unearth a box of documents in which they discover a final, unopened letter from LaMotte to Ash—LaMotte secretly gave birth to his child and her sister raised it as her own. This means that Maud is in fact the direct descendent of both Ash and LaMotte.

Virginia Smith’s *The Carradine Diary* (2004) is a much simpler novel than *Possession*, but just as much a pure example of the biographical quest genre. The quester is the British narrator, Abby, who travels to Canada to illustrate the biography of a (fictional) early twentieth-century children’s novelist, Lucy Pritchard, creator of the children’s character, Hector Price. Staying in the same house Lucy stayed in, Abby discovers her host family are in conflict over a diary they recently found. Reading the diary and some love letters, Abby pieces together Lucy’s secrets—Lucy had a love affair with a teenager, Edouard, the real father of her child; and she stole the character of

---

34 Ibid., 189.
Hector Price from him. The revelations have an effect on the quester, encouraging Abby to be “true to herself” and leave her safe and boring partner for Elise, a descendant of Eduoard’s brother.

Barbara Vine, a pseudonym for crime novelist Ruth Rendell, could lay claim to being the most prolific bioquest novelist. At least three of her novels fit within the genre—*Alta’s Book* (1993), *The Chimney Sweeper’s Boy* (1998), and *The Blood Doctor* (2001)—and others contain elements of it. Nick Turner writes that in her novels

any crime has been committed at least a generation before; the focus is on the relationship between past and present, the dark sides of bourgeois family history, and how criminal behaviour impacts upon perpetrator and descendant. The novels thus become ruminative, psychological and moral.\(^\text{36}\)

His description of a “frequent device” used by Vine resembles the bioquest:

A frequent device is that of a present-day first-person narrator uncovering secrets from the past… A tension is created between past and present, and the use of the first person elevates the fiction, by raising questions as to why this person needs to either tell, or write their story.\(^\text{37}\)

In *The Blood Doctor*, the quester is a biographer named Martin Nanther, who is now writing the biography of his great-great grandfather, Lord Henry Nanther, a specialist in haemophilia. The life of Henry is revealed through extracts from his diaries and letters as Martin tries to get behind the façade to discover why Henry broke off his courtship of a well-to-do woman, turned his attention to a much poorer woman, and then, when she was murdered, married her sister. Eventually, through his amateur detective work, Henry learns the terrible truth: Henry married into the poorer family because he believed they were haemophilia carriers and he wished to make observations about the transmission and treatment of the disease in his own children. Horrified, Henry abandons the biographical quest; in this case, the effect on the biographer is to make him realise that sometimes the truth is better not published.

Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child* is a recent variation on the bioquest novel. In five parts set in different times, it tells first of the fictional poet Cecil Valance meeting a teenager named Daphne Sawles in 1913, and then the shifts in the reception of Cecil over the next hundred years as attitudes toward homosexuality and biography change. Unlike a typical biographical quest novel, the novel is told chronologically—the biographers appear after we have already read of the events they are trying to reconstruct. Compared to the more conventional examples above, it relies less on discovered documents to narrate the past and is more ambivalent about the ability of the biographers to uncover the truth of the past.

Louis Nowra’s *Ice* (2008) is an even less representative example, but is worth including as an Australian novel with the most striking parallels of theme and plot to “Immortalities”. Based on a historical figure, nineteenth century entrepreneur Malcolm McEacharn is obsessed with overcoming death. I only read *Ice* in the rewriting stage of “Immortalities”, yet McEacharn’s preoccupations mirror those of Sinclair Morgan in my own novel. The two late-nineteenth century

\(^\text{36}\) *Post-War British Women Novelists and the Canon* (London: Continuum, 2010), 101.

\(^\text{37}\) Ibid., 102.
Australian characters are both obsessed with building monuments and recapturing lost time. In the present day of *Ice*, Rowan writes McEacharn’s biography from the notes left by his comatose wife, hoping the story he has created (and possibly fabricated) will jolt her to consciousness. Compared to more typical examples of the genre, *Ice* is less concerned with the biographer and the unfolding quest to uncover the truth of their subject; instead, the quest is a framing device and the life of the biographical subject is the central narrative. At various points in the telling of the story, Rowan reveals snippets of how he uncovered the story of McEacharn, but they are never more than asides; he also supports some of his speculations about McEacharn’s state of mind with brief quotes from letters McEacharn wrote at the time.

**The Emerging Pattern**

This survey of biographical quest novels, together with the rest of my reading, suggests three conventions not discussed by Thiem or Keen. Firstly, the quester is retrieving a past which is not only “lost, forgotten or disappearing,” but which contains a secret, often a secret of birth. Secondly, in an overlapping feature, the biographical is often also genealogical. Thirdly, the discovery of a document is a catalyst in the plot and a key to unlocking secrets, with the found documents reproduced in the novel.

**Birth Secrets**

A secret drives the biographer’s quest, and the secret is usually related to paternity or birth. As already noted, both *Possession* and *The Carradine Diary* feature birth secrets. In Virginia Duigan’s *The Biographer* (2009), the secret is that the main character gave birth decades earlier and adopted out the child to her sister and her own ex-husband. In John Harwood’s *The Ghost Writer* (2004), part of the secret is that the main character’s mother had a previous son also called Gerard who died in infancy. The secrets of *The Stranger’s Child* are more sexual than birth secrets, but Paul Bryant’s biography claims Daphne carried two birth secrets—Cecil was actually the father of her first child and an artist the father of her third child.39

In “Immortalities”, the birth secret is the paternity of Tom’s grandfather, George. George’s real father is Jack Morgan, but George is brought up as if his mother’s husband, Edward Lamond, was his father. Alice’s affair with Jack is a source of abiding shame for George, a shame transmitted through the generations to Tom. This aspect of the plot developed without me being aware of birth secrets as a feature of the genre—indeed, before I was even aware of writing a “biographical quest” novel.

**The Personal Past**

38 Thiem, “Biographical Quest,” 143.
Thiem notes that Wallace Stegner’s “Angle of Repose, like many other bioquest novels, also involves a genealogical quest.” However, in the confines of an essay, Thiem does not go on to elaborate this trait. The genealogical aspect of the quest means that typically the quester or another character is a descendant of the biographical subject, or discovers some sort of kinship in the course of their quest.\(^{40}\)

Genealogical themes in fiction parallel a growing interest in the subject by the public, encouraged at least in part by the availability of online genealogical databases.\(^{41}\) The ninth season of television series *Who Do You Think You Are?* was broadcast in Britain in 2012, and the program has been adapted for many other countries, including Australia, USA, Canada, Germany and Sweden.\(^{42}\) The series is a true-life genealogical quest, with researchers tracking down the ancestors of a different celebrity each week, and taking them to ancestral homes or newly found relatives. Reviewing the Australian series, Graeme Blundell writes that “for many of us, especially baby boomers, genealogy is the new travel, and tracking our hidden family history has become addictive.”\(^{43}\) The popularity of genealogy is also reflected in the rise of what could be considered a relative of the bioquest—the “genealogical mystery”, usually in the “cosy” mode of crime fiction, featuring an amateur genealogist solving a mystery rooted in the past.\(^{44}\) An typical example of this genre is Rett MacPherson’s *Thicker Than Water* (2005), part of the Torie O’Shea series.

A family connection is often the original motivation for the biographical quester. In *The Blood Doctor*, Martin is an experienced biographer, yet the fact he is descended from Henry Nanther and has inherited his peerage gives the quest to write Henry’s biography an importance his previous biographies lacked. In *The Chimney Sweeper’s Boy*, Sarah sets out to write a biography of her famous father, a novelist. In *Asta’s Book*, Asta’s granddaughter, Ann, takes possession of her diaries and tries to solve the mystery of the mysterious birth of one of Asta’s daughters.

At other times, the quester discovers a family connection in the course of the quest. *Possession* demonstrates some of each—Maud is related to Christabel Lamotte, a factor in her becoming a Lamotte scholar; at the end of the novel she discovers she is not descended from Lamotte’s sister, but from the “love child” of Christabel herself and Randolph Ash. In Paul Auster’s *Moon Palace* (1989), MS Fogg is hired to write an “obituary” for Thomas Effing while he is still alive. He writes down the old man’s story, only to learn after Effing is dead that he was actually his grandfather.\(^{45}\)

---

\(^{40}\) Strictly speaking, “genealogy” is usually defined as the construction of lists of ancestors and descendants, while it is the broader category “family history” which includes “information about ancestors’ lives and contexts”; in practice the two terms are often used interchangeably. Jeanne Kay Guelke and Dallen J. Timothy, “Locating Personal Pasts: An Introduction,” in *Geography and Genealogy: Locating Personal Pasts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 1.


\(^{45}\) *Moon Palace* is on the fringe of the genre at best, a postmodern rite-of-passage novel with a biographical quest subplot.
In “Immortalities”, Tom is a family historian, seeing one of his tasks in life as uncovering and remembering his ancestors. In the course of his quest, he unearths the fact that his great-grandmother was Alice Greene, the first librarian of the Sinclair Morgan Library, and that Jack Morgan was his grandfather’s real father.

Some novels, though, show no family connections. Similarly to *The Carradine Diary*, *The Stranger’s Child* has the families of the subject trying to keep secrets from the biographer; there is no familial connection to the subject in this case or in *Ice*. The genealogical element of the bioquest, then, is not essential, but recurs often enough to be worth noting.

**A Discovered Document as Catalyst**

One of the generic characteristics Keen identifies is that of “material traces of the past revealing the truth”; she goes on to defend the idea that material traces can reveal the truth, without focusing on the significance of the traces themselves. Discussing *The Astern Papers*, Thiem identifies “the quest for the hidden treasure of personal documents which can reveal the innermost feelings, and perhaps even the secret self, of the biographee”; again, he does not go on to make more of this.

The discovery of a document is often the catalyst which begins the biographical quest. *Possession* opens with Roland finding a letter inside one of Randolph Ash’s books; it is the draft of the first letter he sent to Christabel Lamotte, and its discovery sets in motion the quest. In similar fashion, in *The Blood Doctor* Martin sets off on his quest after finding a letter from his great-aunt which refers to horrible secrets about Lord Nanther. In *The Carradine Diary*, the diary is a catalyst for Abby’s quest. In “Immortalities”, Kristen’s discovery of a letter from Alice to a lover inspires her to write Alice’s biography.

Not only are documents discovered at some point in every novel discussed; they are also reproduced in every case. Keen writes that the genre is “rich in descriptions of documents, images, and manuscripts, and with embedded samples of these representative archival materials.” *Possession* contains hundreds of pages of reproduced primary documents, making up entire sections of the novel. *The Carradine Diary*, *The Blood Doctor*, Elizabeth Kostova’s *The Historian* (2004) and Virginia Duigan’s *The Biographer* all intersperse the present day narrative with diary entries from the past, usually representing the quester’s process of reading through the diary. *Ice* and *The Stranger’s Child* are again less typical; in *Ice*, fragments of McEacharn’s letters are reproduced and *The Stranger’s Child* includes letters and parts of poems.

---

46 *Romances of the Archive*, 35.
47 “Biographical Quest,” 141.
A Modified Definition of the Biographical Quest

To extend Thiem’s definition, the texts I am discussing as biographical quest “feature protagonists who are biographers”\(^\text{49}\) —or if not biographers in the strictest sense, then at least questers seeking the secret of the subject’s life. They “typically have three narrative strands: the biographer’s quest for the historical subject’s life (the search for documents, informants, former dwelling places, etc.); the life of the historical subject, in whole or part; and, finally, an account of how the biographical quest affects the biographer’s life.”\(^\text{50}\) The quest is usually set in motion by the discovery of a document which hints at what will eventually turn out to be a “birth secret”. The document is reproduced in the novel, and this is typically the only narration of the past—the past is revealed through the documents it leaves behind, and the interpretations made by the quester. Secondary characteristics often include “settings and locations (such as libraries and country houses) that contain archives of actual papers”\(^\text{51}\) and the discovery of a family connection between the quester and the subject. As in Keen’s work, the texts I have brought together are marked by confidence that the quester can at least partially recover the truth about the past.\(^\text{52}\)

\(^{49}\) “Biographical Quest,” 137.

\(^{50}\) Ibid.

\(^{51}\) Keen, *Romances of the Archive*, 35.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
2. Bioquest and Biography: The Development of the Biographer’s Quest in the Twentieth Century

An unexplored aspect of the origin and nature of bioquest fiction is its relationship to biography itself. Australian biographer Jill Roe argues that the twentieth century gave rise to a new and persistent expectation that biography should address the “inner life” and sexual experience of the subject.53 There was also a new recognition of the role the biographer plays in discovering and shaping the story of the subject’s life, shown no more clearly than in A.J.A. Symons’s *The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography* (1934). In this chapter, I will be arguing that it was these shifts in biography after the Victorian era that made bioquest fiction possible.

Bioquest and Shifts in Biography: The Influence of Freud and Strachey

The gulf between Victorian biography and contemporary biography is illustrated in *The Blood Doctor* when Martin reflects on his ancestor’s expectations of the biography which would be written about him:

That he hoped to be the subject of a biography is clear from the orderly way in which he kept every significant (in his view) letter he received and often made copies of his own letters to other people. Very little that is personal can be found in any of them; that, no doubt, is the way he wanted it. Everything he calculated would be of help in the writing of that biography he kept and packed into three large wooden chests... Probably he thought a Life of Henry Nanther would be written within a few years of his death.54

Martin’s approach to the biography is very different—he wants to understand the “personal”—who Henry was on the “inside”—and, more than anything, uncover the secrets he was hiding. A similar illustration is found in *The Stranger’s Child*. Sebastien Stokes, the initial, uncritical biographer, denies being a “detective”—he is, rather, “no more than a well-meaning friend.”55 The later biographer, Paul Bryant, is at the other extreme of biography, writing a shocking “tell-all” account of Cecil which goes beyond the facts he can establish with certainty into speculation.

The “great men” biographies of the nineteenth century “tended to be long and respectful.”56 Nigel Hamilton writes that biographers “in Victorian England came to believe that portraying human beings ‘really as they were’ was an insult to propriety.”57 He uses Harold Nicholson’s term “new hagiography” to describe the style of biography which emerged during the Victorian era with a “rhetoric of evasion and obfuscation” and the uniform exclusion of vices.58

58 Ibid., 113. Cf. the pre-Victorian Stanfield, writing in 1813, and emphasising the role of the biographer in judging the life of the subject for the sake of moral example, “pronouncing on the virtues and on the crimes of all” – and asking, rhetorically “what writer of the life of Francis Drake would fail to expose the flagrancy of his guilt in the abominable transaction at Ternate the abandonment of the poor pregnant negro girl with
Freud wrote to Jung in 1909, “We must also take hold of biography,” and proceeded to write a biography of Leonardo Da Vinci. In an important sense, Freud did take hold of biography:

No-one before Freud had thought to deal with an individual psyche as deeply unpublic. Now nearly all biographers do so in some measure, since now it is conventional for a biographer to assume that he must show his biographee to be not what he publicly seems to be. If a biographer in our time has not secrets to tell, what good is he?

Building upon “the base that Freud provided,” Lytton Strachey’s Eminent Victorians (1918) is widely viewed as the turning point in moving away from this form of biography:

Strachey implied a nexus between his subjects’ personalities and their public acts, thereby removing the Victorian veil that had shrouded such figures and frozen them in reverential and unreal poses. In Strachey’s hands, biography became a debunking genre, critical of society and of its so-called pillars. Even if, “in retrospect, the new biography does appear to have been a transient phenomenon,” its influence is seen in the persistent expectation since that biography should address the “inner life” and sexual experience of the subject. It is this legacy, together with the recognition of the role the biographer plays in discovering and shaping the story of the subject’s life, which makes bioquest fiction possible.

Driving many bioquests is the same challenge Roe notes real-life biographers facing: the lack of material about the inner life and sexual activities of the subjects. Sometimes, Roe writes, these elements were never recorded; other times, relevant documents have been destroyed by the subject or their descendants, leaving biographers to speculate. The surviving family and descendants of the famous are often careful to maintain their reputation; after William Godwin’s death, for example, the Shelley family “weed[ed] in accordance with the standards of their day and of their social class,” burning letters and tearing out pages. While this censorship might be typically Victorian, it cannot be taken as peculiarly so. Archival censorship is an ongoing challenge to the biographer as well as a recurring theme in bioquest fiction, occurring in almost every novel previously discussed, but especially in The Carradine Diary (the eponymous diary is hidden by the descendants), The Stranger’s Child (various letters and a poem suppressed by different family

---

60 Ibid., 79–80.
61 Ibid., 104.
64 Hoberman, “New Biography.”
66 Ibid., 113.
members) and “The Immortalities” (Tom’s grandfather destroying letters from Alice). The bioquest represents a kind of biographers’ wish fulfilment—the document which reveals the truth of the subject’s life is recovered against the odds and the demands of the contemporary biography can be filled. In the days of “hagiography”, these documents were not sought, and the quest at the heart of the bioquest was not set in motion.

The Visible Biographer in The Quest for Corvo

Biographer Allen Hibbard describes the process of writing a biography in terms that resemble the bioquest:

The enterprise of writing biography necessarily involves two distinct, yet related, narrative strands: the story of the subject and the story of the biographer coming to know, structure and recreate the life of the subject. \(^{68}\)

Hibbard’s claim is, in effect, that every biographer embarks on a kind of biographical quest. Naturally, it will not have the neatness of the plots of bioquest fiction. Yet the writing of every biography involves the process of “coming to know” the subject through the discovery and interpretation of sources.

Although every biographer embarks on a kind of quest, the quest itself is not described in conventional biographies, where the biographer is usually invisible and the life of the subject told chronologically. Hibbard observes that while it is common for a biographer to note a connection to the subject in a preface, “stories of biographers’ quests have most often been relegated to places outside the biography, such as anthologies gathering anecdotes of biographers’ experiences and travails, or even entire works devoted to the biographer’s journeys, retracing the quarry’s path.”\(^{69}\)

A.J.A. Symons’s The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography is one case where the biographer’s quest is the biography. Marcus situates Corvo in the context of new biography led by Lytton Strachey; Hoberman agrees, describing Symons as “one of a wave of biographical experimenters inspired by Lytton Strachey.”\(^{70}\) Although not fiction, Symons’s book otherwise fits the bioquest genre—albeit lacking the birth secret or genealogical element of my modified definition.

The quest begins with a discovered document as catalyst. A friend named Millard introduces Symons to a novel, Hadrian, by a neglected writer named Frederick Rolfe, the self-styled Baron Corvo of the title. Symons is so taken with the novel that Millard shows him a series of letters written by Rolfe from Venice at the end of his life which describe “the destruction of a soul”\(^{71}\)

---


\(^{69}\) Ibid., 22.


\(^{71}\) The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography (London: Cassell, 1934), 12.
and “perverse sexual indulgence.” Yet it is not the perversity that interests Symons but rather the question of “the course and cause of this tragic decline”: “In Hadrian and the letters I had (what I took to be) the opening and close of a career. What story lay in between? After reading newspaper clippings which reveal that there are lost manuscripts by Rolfe, Symons writes that

a resolution which had been latent in my mind ever since my introduction to Hadrian took definite shape. I would find these lost manuscripts, and write a Life of Frederick Rolfe. As the biography progresses, Symons seeks out the people who knew Rolfe, and a picture emerges of a writer of potential genius who was constantly seeking the help of patrons only to turn on them when their largesse faltered. Just as in bioquest fiction, Symons reproduces letters he discovers and the “plot” generally recounts the movements of Rolfe in the order of Symons’s discoveries.

Notably, a third of the way through the book, at chapter VIII, Symons finds this approach impossible to maintain, and he presents his findings in the next three next chapters chronologically because “to present it as I obtained it would set so great a task to the reader’s attention that the resulting knowledge would almost certainly seem insufficient reward.”

Bioquest fiction does not face Symons’s challenge of attempting to be faithful to real-life events.

Symons the biographer, although radically involved in the narrative by the standards of biography (especially for the early twentieth century), is less present as a character than typical bioquest fiction; the narrative does not directly reveal much about him. However, Julian Symons, brother of the author, argues that he is still an important character:

We are introduced to a biographer who becomes interested in an odd character, and with a delicate deceptive sleight-of-hand the book builds up not one picture but two: that of the crab-like Corvo, hard-crusted, nipping and strange, a self-conscious artist to the end of his pen nib; and that of his urbane, worldly and elegant biographer… [He] indulges himself in a final chapter about the fantastic Maundy Gregory… which reveals more about the nature of Baron Corvo’s biographer than it does about Corvo.

In this way, Corvo is a more subtle bioquest than most bioquest fiction: the effect of the quest upon the biographer is not foregrounded. We are given clues about the effect of the quest on Symons in the passing of time, the mention of many frustrations, and the disappointment he shows in his subject’s wasted opportunities and talent. Symons’s trials are suggested, as he briefly describes his falling out with Rolfe’s family over a paper he delivers on Rolfe; by chapter XX, “The Quest for Corvo had been almost at a standstill for months; with Millard’s passing, it altogether stopped.”

Interestingly, the quest has a resolution neater than the rules of fiction would tend to allow. Just at the point of standstill, a wealthy, eccentric stranger named Maundy Gregory appears, who

---

72 Ibid., 13.
73 Ibid., 14.
74 Ibid., 19.
75 Ibid., 105.
77 The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography, 269.
shares Symons’s interest in Rolfe. Gregory funds the search for the missing manuscripts and promptly recovers Rolfe’s “pedantic masterpiece”:

> It had been found, I gathered, by one of his many “agents”, who, at considerable cost, had traced the original printer, and from the depths of a rat-haunted cellar salved five copies, the only survivors of the whole edition.\(^ {78}\)

Symons concludes by writing of his satisfaction at knowing that the lost works had been collected together by sympathetic hands, and from the depths of every one. Nothing was left to be discovered; the Quest was ended. Hail, strange tormented spirit, in whatever hell or heaven has been allotted for your everlasting rest!\(^ {79}\)

**Corvo** represents one of biography’s more radical experiments in structure. While it was never plausible that it would become a common template for structuring biographies, Marcus writes:

> This method (which according to Symons’s own biographer, his brother Julian Symons, writing in 1950, was “emulated very little by later biographers”) was in fact adopted by a large number of late twentieth-century biographers, including Richard Holmes and Peter Ackroyd.\(^ {80}\)

Marcus refers here to Ackroyd as a biographer; Ackroyd’s postmodern novels have already been mentioned as existing on the boundary of the bioquest genre. In assessing Corvo’s influence, Hibbard discusses *The Search for J.D. Salinger* (1988), Ian Hamilton’s account of his struggles to write the biography of the reclusive, litigious author.\(^ {81}\) Knowing the elusiveness of his “quarry”, Hamilton sets out expecting to write “a kind of *Quest for Corvo*.”\(^ {82}\)

In the contemporary Australian context, Martin Thomas begins his account of the difficulties of writing the life of anthropologist, R.H. Mathews, by mentioning both *Corvo* and *Possession*:

> [In his study] are biographies that have enthralled him. Boswell on Johnson and David Marr on Patrick White share company with A.J.A. Symons’s *The Quest for Corvo* and A.S. Byatt’s romance of biographical investigation, Possession. Sometimes the man looks up from the muddle of papers on his desk and one of these books will catch his gaze. He thinks jealously of the shrewdness or good fortune of the writers who found such subjects. Unlike himself, these biographers had the opportunity to breathe life into their creations.\(^ {83}\)

The essay starts in the third person, making it read more like fiction. Thomas writes a letter to Mathews describing his pursuit of his subject across the places he visited, and laments the lack of emotion or motive he displays in his “swollen corpus”. Later, he switches to first person, describes the fate of Mathews’ papers after he died, and the rest of his quest. Another Australian writer, Kate Grenville, published a memoir about the writing of her novel *The Secret River* (2005), in which she describes her research into her ancestor, Solomon Wiseman, and the evolution from what was originally conceived as a biography into a novel.\(^ {84}\)

The “nonfiction bioquest”, then, is a minor subgenre of the biography, with a clear line of ancestry back to *Corvo*. The influence of these works on bioquest fiction is difficult to prove, but we do know of *Corvo’s* importance to A.S. Byatt. Byatt wrote the introduction to the 2001 edition;
she read *Corvo* as a teen and has “read and reread it every few years since. I have learned much from it about how to construct novels and how to think about human lives.”

Byatt sums up the work in terms which reflect the bioquest genre:

> The peculiar glory of *The Quest for Corvo* is that, formally, it has not one but two plots. The first is A.J.A. Symons’s telling of his own unearthing of the secrets of the life of his strange subject, his collection of the documents, his tracking down of the betrayed friends and collaborators, his collusion with other interested trackers and collectors. The other is the form of Corvo’s life itself, which was given a plot-like quality by its hero’s obsessive paranoia.

Byatt does not mention *Possession* in her introduction, but there are strong similarities between her summary of the “two plots” of *Corvo* and her own novel.

## Conclusion

Bioquest fiction has a significant relationship to the genre and practice of biography itself. I have argued that it has emerged as a representation of the biographer’s task after Freud and Strachey, in the age of biographies which reveal the inner life and the secrets of the subject, an age in which the presence and effect of the biographer is recognised. There is a tension between these two developments—a need to uncover the truth of the subject and a recognition that the “truth” is shaped by the biographer. Even though the way Thiem, Keen and I have defined the genre favours novels which emphasise the possibility of uncovering the truth, bioquest fiction still depicts the role and task of the biographer with a stimulating ambivalence. Is Paul’s sensationalist and probably exaggerated biography in *The Stranger’s Child* an improvement on the respectful hagiography of half a century earlier? In *The Blood Doctor*, Martin abandons the biography, saying “I can’t face other people knowing what my great-grandfather did” and he no longer wants “some Sunday newspaper offering to serialize the more sensational bits.”

A.S. Byatt is the most ambivalent of all. A decade after *Possession* came *The Biographer’s Tale* (2001), the story of a postgraduate abandoning literary theory for “real life”—the writing of the biography of a great biographer—only to find the task impossible:

> Where *Possession* bills itself as “a romance,” then, *The Biographer’s Tale* is an academic anti-romance: far from a fantasy of scholarly wish fulfilment, Byatt’s latest novel is a chronicle of thwarted research, thwarted dreams, and thwarted career.

Yet even here, Erin O’Connor finds not an abandonment of the possibility of biography but a critique of literary studies and its “divorce” from “the very thing that gives it meaning: intent, careful, patient, creative study of writers’ lives; study that reaches beyond the flat discursive realm of “textuality” to the people who produced the texts upon which literary critics expend their energy.”

Both in *The Biographer’s Tale*, in the famous biographer’s notes on the “Art of

---


86 Ibid., x.


89 Ibid.
Biography”\textsuperscript{90}, and the self-important, devious Mortimer Cropper’s similarly titled lecture in Possession, “Art of a Biographer”\textsuperscript{91}, Byatt parodies biographers. Yet Possession is also a novel about biography’s importance, about the discovery of Ash’s affair with Lamotte revolutionising the understanding of their poetry; a true romance with parodic elements. Heidi Hansson reads Possession the other way around when she groups it with Carol Shields’s Swann (1987) and a crime novel featuring a murdered biographer, Deborah Crombie’s Dreaming of the Bones (1997), to conclude that their insistence on the unreliability of historical sources, the subjectivity of the biographer and the impossibility of retrieving the past could be seen as utter scorn for the genre, but throughout the novels this is matched by a strong sense that biography matters and makes a difference.\textsuperscript{92} Hansson’s interpretation of Possession is at odds with Keen and Thiem’s, emphasising its “distrust” of historical evidence and placing it in the genre of historiographic metafiction with the other two novels, a term only really applicable to Swann.\textsuperscript{93} Yet even Hansson pulls back from this to conclude that in all three, “biography matters.” If we take Possession from Hansson and restore it to the bioquest family, her contention still largely holds if given a different emphasis. Driven by the tension between the possibility and impossibility of retrieving the past—but favouring the possibility—bioquest fiction also concludes that no matter the gaps and flaws, biography does indeed matter.

\textsuperscript{90} The Biographer’s Tale (London: Vintage, 2001), 25.
\textsuperscript{91} Byatt, Possession, 386.
\textsuperscript{92} “Biography Matters,” 368.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 355.

Technology shapes our engagement with the past. With the spread of photography, Walter Benjamin writes of the rise of “the cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead.” In April 2012, a performance by a “hologram” of dead rapper Tupac made news, with singer Rihanna tweeting, “#TupacBACK #unbelievable #IWASTHERE #STORY4myGrandKid.” Memories are now recorded online on Facebook timelines; archives are digitising records and many new documents are born digital. As a genre concerned with the presence of the past, shifts in technology have particular relevance for bioquest fiction. In their definitions, Thiem and Keen only treat the relationship of the genre to technology in passing. However, their comments suggest some interesting lines of enquiry about the genre’s relationship to technological shifts and the effect the increasing digitalisation of the archive will have on the genre.

Digital Anxiety?: Resistance to the Virtual in the Bioquest

Early in her monograph Keen comments that

many scholars and teachers fear that the traditional and still essential methods of conducting research in books, printed periodicals, and papers will be neglected by students whose first impulse is to lug keywords into a search engine on the Internet. In the face of this information revolution, nostalgia for the old ways, inconvenient and expensive though they were, infuses fictional romances of the archives.

This is one of only two references to the internet in Keen’s monograph (the second is discussed later in this chapter) and “nostalgia for the old ways” of research is not a significant part of her account of the origins of the genre—it is more a trait than a cause. Rather, Keen argues that the genre’s prominence in British fiction is a response to post-imperialism. Marlene Manoff recognises the centrality of post-imperialism to Keen’s argument while still citing the passage above to claim that Keen “interprets the existence of this large body of both popular and literary fiction as, in part, a response to the information revolution and the more impersonal forms of research conducted via computer.” If Manoff makes too much of too little in Keen’s work, Max Saunders compounds the fault by quoting Manoff to sum up Keen, and then insist that “the existence of… pre-digital archive fictions undermines the attempt to establish a causal link between the digital revolution and such narratives”. Keen is being refuted for a claim she did not make.

96 Romances of the Archive, 9.
97 “Theories of the Archive From Across the Disciplines,” 16.
The “pre-digital archive fictions” Saunders mentions are “autobiografictions” such as The Memoirs of a Failure by Daniel Wright Kittredge (1908)—the novel as a collection of documents resembling an archive. Dating further back, to the turn of the twentieth century, he finds them pulling in two directions—not only displaying scepticism toward the “truth” of the archive, but also “shaped by anxieties about transformations in communication technology” such as the typewriter and the telephone, expressing “an anxiety that the archive itself is in a terminal condition, that the solidities of papers and books and the authenticities of autograph manuscripts are in danger of being replaced by the transience of telephony and the mechanical process of typewriting.”

If any of the bioquest novels under consideration show a similar “digital anxiety” around technology shifts one hundred years later, it is my own. “Immortalities” presents a clash between Sinclair IV, the collector and keeper of every book, pamphlet and paper, and the new head librarian, Verity Throsby, who says to Tom, caught in the middle:

‘...the tide will turn on print books. A lot of librarians are still being sentimental about this, but if we look clearly, we can see how things are going to go, and it’s electronic. Have a look at what’s already happened to academic journals. The next couple of decades—every book is going to be digitised. The print book is going to be left to enthusiasts, not everyday readers. A place like this can remember and celebrate the days of printed book by housing treasures. If anyone needs content—and let’s face it, at the core, that’s what books really are—it’ll be electronic.’

Maybe that’s all they were for her, but not for him. He found it a sad prediction. He’d heard it before, of course, but he had been certain readers would never embrace ebooks, that it was a fad or an exaggeration by those enamoured with technology. Yet listening to her it now seemed inevitable.

The upheaval in the library as thousands of books are discarded is part of the backdrop of the novel; it leaves some of the characters with a sense of loss, Sinclair IV most of all, as he has seen his life’s mission as one of collecting and preserving books for the future.

Thiem’s comments on technology go beyond Keen’s modest claim that the genre has a nostalgia for the old ways. They come in his conclusion, as part of his critique of some of the more postmodern novels he has considered:

As we enter the third millennium and become more and more dependent on screens, on electronic communication, on cybertexts and hypertexts, as we pour our lives into virtual reality programs, or pull our lives out of them, the tendency to think of life itself as virtual, as digital, as text, will gain force.

For him, the achievement of Possession is “Byatt’s compelling representation of the non-virtual characteristics of the past”, its push back against the “coarse reduction of life to text.” In Thiem’s argument, digitisation and other technologies are a part of a postmodernising trend which can be dehumanising, and the best bioquest fiction resists this.

Both Possession and The Stranger’s Child briefly parody the attempts to relate to the past virtually. In Possession, Mortimer Cropper gives a lecture on “The Art of a Biographer” in which he

---

99 Ibid.
100 Nathan Hobby, “Immortalities” (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Western Australia, 2013), 56.
102 Ibid., 149.
projects photographs of various items owned by the poet Randolph Ash and claims, in the finale, that “mere possession of the relics of the past if of little importance” when “their representations, fresh, vivid, even, as you have seen, more vivid than in the flesh” can be seen around the world.  

Ironically, Cropper is more obsessed than anyone with possession of the physical relics of Ash, and he times his lecture with Ash’s large gold watch, undermining a reading which sees this passage as a parody only of the virtual. In The Stranger’s Child, an antiques dealer has a side project, a website called “Poets Alive” where sound recordings of dead poets are matched to digitally animated photographs of them; the viewpoint character, Rob, is unimpressed:

Rob didn’t think the films were remotely convincing, but in a way this made them more disturbing. The dummy-like dropping of the jaw, the cheesy melting and setting of the features, were like the evidence of other impostures—the doctored photos of the early séances, more creepy and depressing to Rob than the thought of real communication with the dead.

Of all the attempts to reconnect with the past in the novel, this one falls flattest.

In addition to these critiques of the virtual, Thiem is correct in noticing the recurring importance attached to “non-virtual characteristics of the past” in the genre. Bioquest fiction often presents physical remains—whether print documents or other objects—as having an ability to put the quester in the company of the dead. In The Carradine Diary, Abby stands in front of one of Lucy’s dresses:

The fabric has turned sour with the years, with decades of damp, and tongues of salt forever licking at threads and stitching. They are unravelling, slow as the universe, but ever so gradually breaking apart, breaking down. I think of Lucy wearing these dresses, her body warm and fluid and alive inside them, her white wrist, with its heartbeat of a bird, circled by the ring of lace in my hand, and suddenly I feel intrusive and shamed.

In Ie, Malcolm communes with his dead wife by “resting his forehead” on a rug they had once made love on “like a Muslim bending before Allah”; “it was as if Ann’s presence had impregnated the rug.” Reading a letter in “Immortalities”, Tom is “placed in the presence of his anguished great-grandfather”, later, reading Sinclair Morgan’s journal he is affected by the “strangeness of pen marks made across paper in a different century speaking to him.”

Neither Thiem nor Keen look to technological shifts to explain the origins of the genre, but both note the genre’s resistance to the virtual. Thiem captures an important part of the genre’s ideological appeal, its insistence that the past and its physical traces matter. Keen’s mention of the nostalgia for the old ways of doing research captures the essential “bookishness” of the genre—and begs the question of the future of the genre in an increasingly digital research environment.

Digital Research?: Technology and the Future of the Genre

In 2001, Keen felt able to predict that

---

103 Byatt, Possession, 386–387.
104 Hollinghurst, The Stranger’s Child, 549.
107 Hobby, “Immortalities,” 32.
108 Ibid., 37.
though many more descriptive catalogues, runs of journals, and unique collections have been placed on the World Wide Web, the utopian dream of universally accessible, fully digitized collections make some archivists “give a hollow laugh,” as Byatt does at Cropper’s hologram projections which theatrically proffer the simulacrum as an improvement of the real thing (Possession 386-7). Scholars who need to read in far-away archives will still need to travel, for the foreseeable future. This fact of the researcher’s life undergirds the romance of the archive’s quest plot: searching for the truth necessitates the traditional narrative delights of travel.109

More than a decade on, are we still in Keen’s “foreseeable future” or has the digital revolution in archives and libraries begun to change the bioquest/archival romance? In her forthcoming follow-up essay, Keen notes the continuing need to travel to physical archives in the three post-2001 archival romances she is examining:

Although acknowledging the researcher-characters’ access to world class libraries, electronic collections, experts, databases, and interlibrary loans (for they are postmodern navigators of the information stream), these narratives insist on movement back to sources located in Europe.110

Yet the advances in digitisation since 2001 have been dramatic. Google Books was launched in 2004, and by March 2012 had digitised over twenty million books.111 This is not so significant for the bioquest, as the published book is only occasionally where the secret lies. More significantly in the Australian context, the National Library of Australia’s newspaper digitisation project has digitised entire decades of major newspapers across Australia. The full text searching is imperfect, with optical character recognition riddled with misreadings, but it is accurate enough that searches for names of ancestors will bring up newspaper articles about long forgotten incidents, almost impossible to locate manually. The National Archives of Australia has a digitisation “on-demand” service, meaning a copy of any publicly accessible record can be made on request, reducing the need to travel to their physical sites.112

Derrida writes of how technology shapes the process of archivisation and thus affects what is archived; as it happened, it was not just “E-mail” but the internet more broadly which was to, as he predicted, transform the “entire public and private space of humanity.”113 Paul Longley Arthur, writing in 2009, considers the possible challenges of future biographers trying to write of subjects in our present.114 The shift to digital formats—from personal letters to emails; from private diaries to blogs—will have a significant effect. He argues that even though these forms are more accessible in the short term—emails can be forwarded; blogs are usually public—they will prove

109 Romances of the Archive, 48–49.
110 Keen, “Magical Values in Recent Romances of the Archives.”
113 Derrida, “Archive Fever”; Manoff considers this one of the most valuable parts of Derrida’s work on archives, and places it in the context of the discussion about archives in other disciplines. “Theories of the Archive From Across the Disciplines,” 12–13.
more ephemeral in the long term and thus less accessible to the future biographer. While this is a genuine risk, it is probably overstated—the Internet Archive has stored copies of one hundred and fifty billion web pages since 1996, offering snapshots of the web as it was; the shift toward cloud storage means data is increasingly backed up better than it previously was sitting on individual personal computer hard drives. Yet even if the future biographer will be able to find information about present day subjects, a problem still remains for the bioquest novel—are, as Keen suggests, “real travel” and “actual papers” an essential part of the genre? Can there be an equivalent description of the pleasures and thrill of finding an unknown website or electronic document?

One scenario is that the bioquest novel will decline as archival quests become more implausible. The ease of finding information could render novels about the process of doing so unappealing. The bioquest could be forced to remain in the past, pre-digitisation, set in the twentieth century or earlier, occupying a smaller, less relevant niche. While this is possible, I believe the mystique of the archives and the significance of secret, non-digital information is only increasing in a digital age. The nostalgia for the past inherent in the genre will extend to nostalgia for old forms of information. Besides this, the possibility of unearthing previously undiscovered physical documents from the past is one which will persist for the foreseeable future. The secret letters sewn into Christabel Lamotte’s doll in her ancestral home depicted in Possession will be as plausible a discovery in 2090 as 1990, unaffected by digitisation.

Given that it remains plausible for physical documents to persist into the future, what will be the effect of the hybridised archive, part digital and part physical?

A likely outcome is for the genre to insist on the continuing importance of physical documents into the future, perhaps with a focus on the gaps in digitisation. Nicholson Baker writes (controversially) of the variations in editions of major newspapers which were lost when one edition of the newspaper was microfilmed and the physical copies thrown out, as well as some information rendered unreadable by poor microfilming. If his contentions hold true for the digital format, this is fertile ground for a kind of bioquest in which the quester must recover the print originals of documents to counter the gaps in digitisation. Besides the gaps, we are a long way from universal digitisation; archives are renowned for struggling to even process all the material they receive, let alone digitise it. Physical diaries are also still being written without digital counterpart. The biographer would have to be writing about a “digital native”, not born until the millennium, to face a subject for whom physical documents are an implausibility.

115 Ibid., 47.
117 Romances of the Archive, 9.
Another likely outcome is a long period of hybridised research in bioquest fiction, where physical documents still have primary significance but are supplemented by online research. Rett Macpherson’s *Thicker Than Water* is an instance of this—a mysterious postcard is the catalyst for Torie’s quest, but she then conducts much of her research online—sending emails to other genealogists and using Google to search for the location of a street name in the picture. Unfortunately—but perhaps inevitably—MacPherson does not manage to invest the descriptions of internet searching with any of Keen’s “glamour” or “excitement”. Instead, its convenience is emphasised—the narrator comments, “God bless the Internet” and blandly describes the searching process:

I logged on to the Internet and found the GenWeb page for the county to Dubuque. GenWeb is a network of genealogical pages for each state. Each page has a host and various collections of things like wills, biographies, and census records for that particular state.

If internet searching becomes a part of the bioquest novel, it will be a challenge for writers to make it interesting.

### Conclusion

Soon after the “resurrection” of Tupac, an Australian scientist wrote an article debunking the technology as not truly holographic but just a two-dimensional projection, a nineteenth century stage-trick called “Pepper’s Ghost”. After announcing plans for a world tour, the company behind the performance later filed for bankruptcy protection. The attempt to make the dead live had fallen flat. In *The Stranger’s Child*, the animated poets brought to Rob’s mind the séances of a hundred years earlier; perhaps Tupac’s hologram evokes them again. A number of bioquest novels feature failed séances set in the past strand; the biographical subjects are seeking after the dead, just as the present day biographers seek after them through research. Neither technology nor spiritualism will bring back the dead in bioquest fiction, but the dead can at least speak in the present through the documents and objects they leave behind. The presence of the past is through these relics—not their simulacra, not mediated by any technology; it is the diary or letter or watch itself which is discovered and held and through it the biographical subject encountered. This may change somewhat in the digital future as the scenarios I have outlined come to pass—or not. Regardless, for the moment, the bioquest insists on the importance of the “non-virtual” past, even as the reader is increasingly likely to be reading a bioquest novel as an ebook, turning virtual pages without ink or weight.

---

121 Ibid.
Epilogue: The Place of “Immortalities” in the Bioquest Genre

Writing within a genre is a tightrope walk between awareness of conventions and the need for innovation. In the introduction to this dissertation, I outlined how my discovery of the bioquest novel and my decision to write within its framework contributed to “Immortalities”. Here, in the conclusion, I ask what “Immortalities” brings to the genre—in what ways is it innovative?

Firstly, a bioquest novel in an Australian setting is uncommon. A majority of bioquest fiction is British, perhaps supporting Keen’s analysis of it arising out of post-imperial British nostalgia. The Australian examples I have found are generally hybrids. In popular fiction, Virginia Duigan’s *The Biographer* features a biographical subject who is still living, and, ironically, the biographer is a secondary character; Josephine Pennicott’s *Poet’s Cottage* (2012) is a cozy mystery in the style of *Midsomer Murders* with a biographer protagonist. In literary fiction, John Harwood’s *The Ghost Writer* is more ghost story than bioquest, and does not feature a biographer as much as an identity quester, while Thomas Keneally’s *Bettany’s Book* (2000) is a sprawling epic encompassing many genres, of which bioquest is one. Louis Nowra’s *Ice* comes closer and was used as one of the key examples in this dissertation; however, as mentioned, the biographer’s quest is more a frame story around the narrated story of the historical subject. Jane Rogers’s *Promised Lands* (1995), a novel by a British writer set in colonial Australia, is similar, with the historian’s story making up a small part of the novel. Alex Miller’s *The Ancestor Game* (1992) resembles a bioquest in a number of ways, as the character Steven works on a biography uncovering the past of his fellow teachers’ ancestors. Yet amidst an intricately multi-layered narrative, the quest, in bringing together the strands of the narrative, again feels more like a frame.

If Nowra’s McEacharn is correct in *Ice*, Australia needs novels of memory:

> Australia… like all insolent young countries, had no memory. In the rush to be rich, the only thing that mattered was the present and promise of the future… The past, even the most recent past, was consigned to oblivion, like those abandoned mines honeycombing the bare Bendigo earth. Newness was all.

Nineteenth century McEacharn could only conceive of Australia as a “young” country, despite thousands of years of Aboriginal settlement; but his comment rings even truer of the consumer society preoccupied with the new more than a century later, the context in which Nowra writes. Historical fiction is an obvious—if controversial—way to “remember” the past, and prominent Australian writers like Kate Grenville, David Malouf and Peter Carey are well known for writing in this mode. Bioquest fiction offers an alternative way to remember the past, consciously starting in the present and interpreting the past through its remains, as history must always do.

---

126 *Romances of the Archive*, 15–16.
Admittedly, “Immortalities” remembers a fictional past—there was no Sinclair Morgan or Alice Greene. However, it is a fiction grounded in the known contours of that time, the gold rush and Federation society in Perth. There is value in a fictional representation of this time and place, Anna Haebich’s *Murdering Stepmothers* (2009) being one of the few others of which I am aware.

A second innovation of “Immortalities” is its exploration of the library. Although libraries are included within Keen’s “archives” as a setting for the genre, none of the books she or I discuss are concerned with libraries in themselves. With echoes of the real-life J.P. Morgan, Sinclair Morgan builds a ten-story library in Perth as a monument to himself, a statue of himself on top. Morgan contends with public opposition—is he trying to compete with the State Library and privatise knowledge? His library is a curious mix of altruism and self-aggrandizement. His successors take the library in different directions—Jack’s priority is his macabre collection of heads while Sinclair IV aspires toward a universal library, collecting everything he can; the library becomes an act of hoarding. In opposition to this state of affairs, the new economic-rationalist approach to the library under the regime of Danielle Morgan and Verity Throsby reduces the library to a single floor of treasures and a secondhand bookshop named after Sinclair, while renting out the rest of the space to make the enterprise profitable. Throughout, the novel depicts the pleasures and possibilities of the library. The library is valuable to the bioquest genre because it is one of the key places where the documentary traces of the past are curated and rediscovered by questers. “Immortalities” calls attention to this underappreciated setting as well as the profession of librarianship in the characters of Alice, Sinclair IV, Tom and Verity.

The biographical quest offers a framework for representing our encounter with the past. It is an enduring theme, difficult to exhaust, even if the genre itself transforms with shifts in the concepts of biography and archive. For “Immortalities”, the genre offers a set of conventions which were helpful in focusing a novel concerned with questions of mortality and memorialisation. These questions are asked, to some extent, by all bioquest fiction; in my novel they are given a rare setting—the libraries of Perth, both in 2007 during a mining boom and in the aftermath of the earlier boom period of the 1890s.

129 Romances of the Archive, 49.
Bibliography


“Club of Members.” *Economist* 399, no. 8741 (July 9, 2011): 82.

