Work submitted for the degree of Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA)

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Comprising

Exegesis

and

Creative Artefact (Breaking the Silence)

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Qualifications: BA, UNE
Master of Distance Education, Deakin
Master of Arts (Writing and Literature), Deakin
Submission Date: 21 April 2017
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ABSTRACT

This Doctorate of Creative Arts (Creative Writing) comprises an original novel entitled ‘Breaking the Silence’ and an accompanying exegesis constituting a dialogue with that novel. My research is based upon family lore which held that Jack Cozens, my grandfather, was an unremarkable soldier who fought in France in WWI, returned to Australia unwounded, and resumed his family life. However, my research into family history revealed a long-held secret: far from being unremarkable, Jack was a criminal, on the run from the law when he enlisted in the AIF in 1917, using an alias, and deserting his family. The hundred-year-long silence hid the shame, the humiliation of the financial loss, and the disruption endured by the family.

‘Breaking the Silence’ is a fictional biography of Jack’s life, a narrative based on the unspoken memories of my father and my grandparents which created a baffling silence that hid not only Jack’s criminality, but also the pain and loss experienced by my grandmother, my father and his siblings. Although the full account of Jack’s story will never be known, the material unearthed by my research is central to the narrative, which is told in two fictional narrative voices – that of Jack himself, and of his granddaughter, Kate. The use of two narrative voices exposes the many ways in which perceptions of ‘truth’ can hide, fail to reveal, or even distort unexamined beliefs.

My exegetical research investigates the stories behind the silence, examining the impact and consequences of the crime and the secrecy on Jack’s wife and family, the wider social implications of enlistment under an alias, and the possibilities of expressing such research as narrative. Research-led practice, especially archival research and immersion research, revealed that Jack was one of thousands of Australians who enlisted in the AIF under an alias, causing financial and emotional distress to their families; practice-led research has allowed experimentation with narrative disciplines and styles to express Jack’s story.
DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

This is to certify that this submission is all my own work, completed under the supervision of the University of the Sunshine Coast.

Signed: Bronwyn Cozens ____________________________ 21/07/2017
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to my Supervisor, Professor Gary Crew, for his support, encouragement, wisdom and guidance. My deep gratitude also to my Co-Supervisor, Dr Paul Williams, for his gentle and thoughtful guidance and encouragement.

I also acknowledge Jane Todd for professional copy editing and proofreading advice as covered in the Australian Standards for Editing Practice, Standards D and E.

Thank you all.
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ARTEFACT: ‘BREAKING THE SILENCE’
The past is never fully gone. It is absorbed into
the present and the future. It stays to shape
what we are and what we do.

Sir William Deane 1996
EXEGESIS

1. PREFACE

1.1 Background and context of the research

Between August 1914 and November 1918, some 417,000 men enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (Robson 1970, p. 202), to fight in the Great War. In December 1917, my grandfather, John David (Jack) Cozens, joined them. He was 47 years old, married, the father of five young children, with a new baby due. He owned his own home, plus several more properties that were leased out to provide further income; he was in steady employment with the Oxley Shire Council, Victoria. Although Jack was not young, by late 1917 the appeal for fresh troops was urgent, and it seems that any man standing was acceptable. To ensure acceptance of his enlistment, Jack lowered his age by several years, passed the perfunctory medical, and was accepted into the Australian Imperial Forces. He trained, was sent to France, fought in some of the fierce battles leading up to Armistice, and returned to England unwounded. He stayed there almost a year before his repatriation – last over, last home. When he returned, he disembarked and was demobilised in Brisbane, over a thousand miles from his hometown. His wife and children joined him, and he lived and worked in southeast Queensland until his death in 1937.

However, the story lurking in the shadows is darker and more complex. Jack had an ulterior motive for enlisting; he entered the army to escape arrest. In late December 1917, Jack, in his job as Rate Collector, was accused of embezzling a large amount of money from the Oxley Shire Council in northeast Victoria. The police also wished to question him about cattle stealing. An arrest warrant was issued, but before it was executed he travelled to Brisbane, and enlisted under an alias, becoming Private Albert Drummond in the 9th Reinforcements of the 41st Battalion. Jack followed the practice of many before him, who:

…invented fictitious backgrounds, occupations and family
details for their new identity, [and] named a trusted friend as
their next of kin. (Dunbar 2014, p. 101)
Jack’s false persona, Albert Drummond, was aged 43 years (five years younger than Jack), British born (Jack was Australian born), and single. The registered next-of-kin was Archibald Charles Drummond of Wangaratta. By these actions and deceit, Jack deserted his pregnant wife and five children, leaving her to face the bailiff and the humiliation and loss, as well as the confusion of not knowing his whereabouts.

After initial training at Enoggera Barracks in Brisbane, Jack’s group was sent to Wiltshire in southeast England to continue training and await posting to France. Jack revoked the alias on the eve of being drafted to France, presumably fearing that his wife and wider family would never know if he were killed in battle. Four months later, the war was over.

Growing up, I was vaguely aware of the story of my late grandfather who had fought in WWI, and who had died years before I was born. Then in the lead-up to the anniversary of WWI, a local newspaper advertised a community research program called ‘Adopt a Digger’. My grandfather’s name was listed as ‘up for adoption’, so I immediately claimed him, rather than have strangers dealing with my family story. I was sent an information kit, suggesting I start with his AIF records which I duly sent for. And that was when I first discovered the alias. Shocked, I researched further and eventually discovered the arrest warrant, and the police file. My initial reaction was disbelief. My father had never spoken of this, neither had his siblings. It simply didn’t fit into my idea of my family. More used to the usual stories of selfless heroism and bravery by soldiers during WWI, I confronted a story of shame, loss, humiliation and grief, couched in silence and secrets. 'A family without secrets is rare indeed… Family secrets are the other side of the family's public face' (Kuhn 2002, p. 2). But these secrets were so deeply buried they were invisible, even within the family of my generation.

Stephen King, writing of how he creates fiction, said ‘Two previously unrelated ideas come together and make something new under the sun’ (King 2012, p. 29). The coalescence of these ideas – of my grandfather’s criminality, of the grief and hardship faced by my grandmother and her children, and my complete ignorance of the story – came together to indicate there was far more to Jack’s story than family stories had allowed; both new knowledge, and forgotten and silenced knowledge. These ideas created a compelling reason for me to discover and write about Jack’s life. From the earliest conception of the project, it was clear I would be creating a fictional narrative,
not an historical account, because not only did I have no background in historical research and writing, but I swiftly became aware there was very little actual evidence, and even less hearsay. Kuhn (2002, p 4) says:

The past is gone forever. We cannot return to it, nor can we reclaim it as it was. But that does not mean it is lost to us. The past is like the scene of a crime: if the deed itself is irrecoverable, its traces may still remain.

Only the official records of the AIF, the police and newspapers of the time provided a background of information; the rest would necessarily be fiction, woven around the possibilities of each piece of information, the memories of family members, and my imagination.

Breen says ‘The best historical fiction takes the reader into the past and shakes the cage, undoing preconceived notions, unravelling what we think we already know’ (Breen 2014, p. 12). In my complacency, I had thought I knew my family story. But even my earliest research revealed readily available information – my grandfather's AIF record, the police files, and the astonishing claim that perhaps 15,000 men enlisting in the AIF used aliases (Smith 1995, p. 1). As I realised my grandfather was perhaps not the soldier-hero I had imagined, I had to confront the fact that thousands more soldiers' families may also have secrets to hide. Perhaps my father and others within his generation had chosen to silence these stories; I had other plans. I wanted to learn more of this story which had surely shaped me, even in its silence.

One aspect I found deeply surprising – the emotional investment I had in the story of my long-dead grandfather as soldier-hero. This new information called into question my pride in his memory as an Anzac, as one of the soldiers who had forged the Australian identity by their actions in WWI. And yet he had fought – his AIF record made this clear. But he had chosen to fight under a false identity. His official photograph, standing proudly in uniform, was displayed in our home; why had the full story been silenced? What else was hidden within my family narrative?

In a 2014 study of ‘the benefits for children of knowing their family narrative’, Lambert (2014, p. 18) says:

The stories we tell, and those we believe, create a paradigm to house our beliefs. The adjustment to a story can lead to an adjustment in the paradigm.
I definitely faced ‘an adjustment in my paradigm’; the new information about my grandfather disrupted my unexamined belief in my family narrative. But the family and community members who could confirm, deny, or even discuss my unsettling discoveries were dead or past remembering.

My late father and his siblings had told no stories about their father, passed on none of his wisdom or anecdotes, shared few memories of their lives with him. Labanyi (2009, p. 23) says that ‘lack of discussion in the public sphere is not the same thing as forgetting’, a view echoed by Reynolds (1999, p. 92), who said such ‘inattention [to history] equates to a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale’. This lack of discussion, or denial, compounds in subsequent generations, becoming the loss of family, cultural or even national histories, combined with a transmitted sense of silent shame. Such secrecy leads to misapprehensions, confusion and false historicity. Possibly, even probably, my father and his siblings had been shamed into silence; I felt no such need for such silence, and while I could no longer discover precisely the historical truth of the matter, I could research the available clues to imagine a fictional version of Jack’s story into being. I wanted to write a novel rather than an historical record because my fascination lay in the story behind his actions, and the effects of his actions on others. My purpose was not only to disrupt the Anzac myth of the soldier-hero (a myth already long disrupted by peace protesters, feminists, historians and others), but also to examine how one family had adopted that myth to cover secrets.

1.2 The research question

How could I use the research into the silences and secrets surrounding my late grandfather's WWI enlistment to write a fictional interpretation which would disrupt the myth of the soldier hero, examine the possible ramifications and impact of his decisions on his family, and focus attention on the situation of the many families similarly affected by false enlistments.

The outcome of this research is an exegesis and artefact entitled ‘Breaking the Silence’, a fictional biography of the life and times of Jack Conway (the fictional representation of my grandfather, Jack Cozens), told through the research of his fictional granddaughter, Kate. The research and the artefact are intended to focus
attention on the impacts of, and possible explanations for, the many cases of silences and secrets behind the aliases of WWI enlistees, as detailed in *Khaki Crims and Desperados* (Robinson 2014) and *Bad Characters* (Stanley 2010).
2. THE INNOVATION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

2.1 The need for this research

The research focuses on the motives and consequences of the adoption of aliases by WWI enlistees, the impact on the wider families and community of the secrecy, financial hardship and shame engendered, and on the impact of silences and secrets in creating false historicity for later generations.

Military historian Neil Smith (1995, p. 1) says ‘the incidence of aliases being used is frequently underestimated’, believing that as many as 15,000 members of the AIF served under an alias. Kelly (2014, p. 3) says:

Assumed names were quite common when men enlisted in WWI. Mostly they were men either too young to enlist legally, or they were getting away from unhappy marriages or love affairs or having to hide from a previous criminal conviction.

Some wanted to hide their true age (Turnbull 2014, p. 2), or a foreign-sounding name (Smith 1995, p. 10), and heroic stories of underage enlistment are well known (Carlyon 2007, p. 366; Smith 1995, pp. 3-7; Stockings 2012, p. 42). However others had darker reasons: ‘Notoriety and the use of aliases certainly were common bedfellows’ (Smith 1995, p. 5). Robinson describes the case of Norman Bruhn, a convicted criminal who enlisted ‘to escape further police attention’ (Robinson 2014, p. 2). Another soldier, Ernest Dunbar, enlisted twice, using three different names, after being discharged as medically unfit, and being ‘illegally absent’ (Dunbar 2014, p. 100). On August 14th 1914, Alfred Tyley, not long released from jail for burglary and theft, enlisted as Alfred Taylor, using an alias ‘so he could comfortably declare “No” to the question of being convicted by a civil power’ (Kelly 2014, p. 2). The examples that have been uncovered of soldiers enlisting under aliases (Kelly 2014, Robinson 2014, Smith 1995, Stanley 2010, Stockings 2012) focus on the soldiers, though little research has been directed toward the wives and families left, almost always in difficult financial circumstances.

Probably one of the most common instances of false information being provided to the military authorities surrounds the marital status of the enlistee. (Smith 1995, p. 4)
The AIF regulations ensured that two-fifths of the pay of a married soldier was automatically directed to his wife – three-fifths if she had children to support (Smith 1995, p. 4). The use of an alias by a married enlistee meant his wife was denied this payment. This situation was exacerbated by the Commonwealth’s lack of provision at that time for a Deserted Wives’ Allowance or similar. National Archives reveal that the Australian Army took an unfavourable view of men who deserted their wives. On 9th January 1915, an article in the Melbourne *Weekly Times* refers to such men as ‘Absent-minded beggars …’ reporting that

> Many of the married soldiers who have gone abroad on active service described themselves in the official papers as bachelors, and in consequence the paymasters in the military districts have been put to much trouble. Wives who have been forgotten, or neglected, come to the pay-offices and relate their difficulties. (*Weekly Times* 1915, p. 30)

Another article the same week headed ‘A Wife’s Discovery’ tells how a wife noticed in a newspaper a photograph of her missing husband in training camp at Broadmeadows, and took the photograph to the paymaster to claim financial support; ‘At the paymaster’s office the neglected wife had no difficulty in establishing her case’ (*The Argus* 1915, p. 7).

The article says that:

> When Private Blank receives his cheque, either by the banks of the Nile or elsewhere, he will be surprised to find that three-fifths of the amount due has been deducted for his wife and child. (*The Argus* 14/01/1915)

The article adds that ‘the end of the matter will not differ from a number of others’, suggesting that the authorities managed to detect, and deal with, at least some soldiers using aliases. Nor did the end of fighting end the matter. National Archive records show a case of a man being charged after his return to Australia for ‘neglecting to fulfill his obligations’, and being required to make reparation of money paid to support his wife in his absence (reported in *The West Australian*, 1922, p. 8).

Another Australian soldier, Claude Harold Cameron (National Archives 110854), faced a court martial in Britain in 1919, after being AWOL and refusing to return to Australia. Enquiries proved that he had married bigamously in England, having falsely declared that his Australian wife had died. He was discharged, forfeiting six months
pay, and was denied all rights to medals, and to free repatriation (National Archives 110854). Yet another Australian soldier, John Oswald Kenny (National Archives 123852), faced a court martial and was discharged with no right of repatriation, leaving his wife and children in Australia without support. This wife sought assistance from the authorities, but it was denied and her children were placed in care of the State. But these documented cases are few, when compared with the estimated number of men enlisting under aliases, and the resultant suffering of their families.

Because Jack Cozens adopted an alias, my grandmother was denied her rightful portion of his pay, and had no knowledge of his whereabouts or well-being. This highlights one important of taking an alias. If a man using an alias gave a false next-of-kin, he could not be traced, but nor would his family be paid, or notified in an emergency. Many men, despite using an alias, gave a genuine next-of-kin, which allowed their pay to reach their dependants, and news to be relayed. Although the narrative focuses primarily on Jack’s story, the new knowledge revealed concerns the consequences his deceit had upon his wife and family. After Jack abandoned his family, and, as a consequence of the embezzlement, he was declared bankrupt, and the bailiff seized his home, goods and possessions. Until he revoked his alias, his wife had no income support, no official status as a ‘war wife’, and no news of her husband. She was forced to move, with her six children aged from ten years to newborn, back to her parents’ home. Her social standing as a well-to-do wife and mother, wealthy enough to employ a daily maid, now plummeted to destitution. However, a police report dated 22nd February 1918 notes that ‘one Archibald Drummond … has recently drawn a soldier’s allotment … about two pounds odd per fortnight … on behalf of Private Albert Drummond’ (Victoria Police Criminal Offence Report 1917-1918). This may indicate that Jack was endeavouring to send money to his wife. There is no way to ascertain the truth of this supposition; it is equally possible he may have been sending money back to pay debts, or he may have been blackmailed by Archibald Drummond, who was the very man who reported Jack’s crime to the police. The records simply do not tell.

Nor does it seem that Jack’s wife applied to any charity for relief, although other women in the same predicament were forced to do so. Poor, ill or deserted wives would start by approaching a member of the local Ladies’ Benevolent Society (Twomey 2002, p. 147). This would trigger an investigation by the police, which was repeated at regular intervals, to ensure the beneficiary of any charity was worthy ‘in
character and circumstance’ (Twomey 2002, p. 147). Those who were granted charity had to deal with charity workers ‘who always had the right of refusal’ (Twomey 2002, p. 146). An extensive file on a Mrs Alice Donovan (Qld Public Archives 25156) details interviews with neighbours and her landlady regarding her character and circumstances. Despite conflicting reports, the final judgement was that, due to reports of her receiving male visitors, ‘she does not bear good character in the street where she lives’.

Understandably, many women tried to be independent, by working in a public laundry or by taking in washing (Twomey 2002, p. 30), or even by teaching piano and music privately or in a school (Hazlitt 1996, p. 235). Although women wanted employment rather than charity, this presented difficulties of childcare. Hazlitt refers to this difficulty, explaining that in order for his mother to go around private homes teaching piano and music, she had to pay a young woman to care for her children (Hazlitt 1996, p. 236).

A letter from the Women’s Political Association to The Age in 1915, stated:

If employers will take women with one or two young children, we can supply any number of them from our Women’s Bureau. The women want work, not charity. (McMurchy, Oliver & Thornley 1983, p. 69)

Laundry work, or taking in washing, remained the most common source of income for these women.

Deserted women often attempted to raise money to purchase a mangle, a tool of the trade that wrung washing flat between two rollers and sometimes doubled as a makeshift iron for large items … laundering was a heavy, dirty, exhausting job, but one which required little specific training and that involved work in which children could participate, such as folding the clean clothes and linen. (Twomey 2002, p. 30)

Even so, Hazlitt remembered being hungry:

… the main thing we ate was bread … and a lot of dripping. Dreadful stuff! The food was enough to keep us going, but very very scarce. (Hazlitt 1996, p. 236)

Occasionally, live-in domestic work could be found, but this was seldom an option for women with children. Occupations that had provided employment to earlier
generations of women, such as needlework, or governessing, had disappeared. One young woman describes working in the alteration room of a Melbourne city clothing store because ‘sewing was one of the few employment options for a girl of her class, education and age … [and was] far preferable to the more poorly paid option of domestic service’ (Bassett 1985, p. 268). Even soldiers’ wives also sought work, finding it almost impossible ‘to make ends meet’ on her allotment of her husband’s pay. With her portion of his pay, plus a separation allowance and a supplement from patriotic funds, a wife could expect to receive between £1 10s 11d increasing to a maximum of £2 17s 9d for a wife with seven or more children (Bassett 1985, p. 270). But prices were rising rapidly, far more rapidly than pay and allowances.

Deserted wives also had to compete for work against the large numbers of younger single women entering the workforce after training in secretarial colleges, or taking factory positions to replace enlisted men. And although groups such as the Women’s Peace Movement and the Ladies Benevolent Societies were sympathetic and supportive, ‘patriotic groups were much more concerned about the fate of men in the trenches than that of their wives at home’ (Bassett 1985, p. 271).

My research addresses the need to better understand the experience of my grandmother and women in her situation. In the words of Southgate (2009, p. 35), my research seeks ‘to reconstruct a past event within a context sufficiently wide as to enable [the reader] to understand how it came to pass’. My reconstruction will be fictional rather than historical, as my intention is to focus on the issues and questions raised, rather than attempt to resolve them. Mujica (2016, p 11) suggests that ‘writers should embrace their own subjectivity rather than trying to purge it from novels … by inventing an unabashedly opinionated narrative voice’. Taking this path has allowed me to interpret the results of the research ‘with no pretense [sic] to objectivity’ (Mujica 2016, p 12).

In a review of fictional biography, Birat draws attention to ‘the need to address the gaps in the historical records caused by the absence of people whose names have disappeared or were never recorded’ (Birat 2013, p. 58). Every biographer hopes to discover some hidden family secrets (Hocking 2011, p. 80). Maybe so. I wasn’t looking for a secret but the one I uncovered, the secret of Jack’s alias, exploded the family myth that Jack had no story, and was not worthy of mention.
When I discovered the story of my grandfather’s alias and criminal record, I recognised that the family silence amounted to an erasure of my grandparents’ story from the family, community and wider history. Marina Larsson, researching the official speeches to ex-servicemen at Anzac Day ceremonies, said ‘the grief, loss and sacrifice of their family members were consistently overlooked’ (Larsson 2009, p. 16), and that ‘official speakers make little mention … of the domestic sacrifices of wives and mothers’ (Larsson 2009, p. 22). The grief and losses experienced by my grandmother, by her children including my father, and by the wider family, were certainly ‘overlooked’, and never mentioned or discussed. Thomson, whose father was a senior infantry officer in the Australian army, enjoyed ‘a military childhood … surrounded by soldiers and soldiering’ (Thomson 1994, p. 1). Discussing the contrasting war experiences of his grandfathers, he says ‘My family war myths show how only some experiences become highlighted in remembering, while others are repressed or silenced … my grandmother's war story remained unheard outside the family' (Thomson 1994, p. 4).

The baffling silence in my family, a silence imposed, I believe, by shame and humiliation, is the reason I want to write Jack’s story, believing that through writing a fictional narrative, I may challenge the silences in my family and others, and raise questions about the stories behind the Anzac myth of the soldier-hero. It is on this silence in the family history, and in the wider community and national history that I focus.

Auster, writing of his realisation about how little he knew of his late father, asks ‘If there had been anything more than silence, would I have felt the need to speak in the first place?’ (Auster 2012, p. 21). My need to know what lay behind the silence, and thus the need for this research, is driven by that same wall of silence, the same dearth of stories, the same need to understand. I believe it is important to research the motivations that led to the use of aliases, by my grandfather and others I have discovered, and the consequences for the enlistees and their families.

My artefact, ‘Breaking the Silence’, presents a narrative that focuses on the disruption to historicity, memory, beliefs and identity, when hidden stories are revealed (Lambert 2014, p. 18), and characters are ‘forced to rearrange [their] memories … perceptions and descriptions of the past’ (Southgate 2009, p. 92). The fictional character, Kate, reveals a hidden story when she discovers her grandfather was not killed in the war, as
she had been told, but was possibly alive and nearby. Her sense of identity is disrupted, and she is overwhelmed, ‘forced to rearrange her perceptions of the past’ (Southgate 2009, p. 92). Kate’s experience parallels my own, as I faced the knowledge of Jack’s many lies ‘even to the people nearest [to him, and that] … such lies and secrets tear holes in the social fabric’ (Merrilees 2011, p. 71).

While ‘historians have been slow to ask questions about the family lives of “broken” soldiers’ (Larsson 2009, p. 22), the research seeks answers to some of the unasked questions of my own family. Larsson (2009, p. 23) said that:

… it is only by admitting to the devastating effects of war on the private lives of Australian families that the true cost of war for the nation can ever be truly understood.

Thomson (1994, p. 26) describes the making of the Anzac legend of a soldier who is 'enterprising and independent, loyal to his mates and to his country, bold in battle, but cheerfully undisciplined out of the line and contemptuous of military etiquette'. Thomson goes on to say that his research revealed ‘a war experience that was much more complex … and sometimes even contradicts the legend’. Like Thomson, my intention is not only to challenge the legend, but to indicate how much suffering may be masked by the 'homogenous identity of the legend' (Thomson 1994, p 26).

2.2 New knowledge

My research intention is to create a fictional narrative of my grandfather’s story, woven around the information revealed by research, in an attempt to do justice not only to his life, but also to the memory of his wife and children who bore the consequences of his actions, for their own sakes and as a microcosm of the wider stories of many other families thus affected.

Hamilton (2012, p. 25) says ‘tackling the mystery of a life is no mean enterprise’. The aim of this research is to challenge the silences that made a mystery of my grandfather’s life, and to research the consequent areas of shame, grief and hardship within the family story, and, by extension, to other families in similar circumstances, thereby contributing new knowledge into the impact of the shame and its consequences. Kuhn (2002, p. 167) discusses 'the idea of nation as family, with its assumption of, or desire for, a past held in common by all its members, a past that binds them together'. But the shame and secrecy surrounding my grandfather's
enlistment would have isolated his family, and other families in similar circumstances, and excluded them from this national identity.

Further, the research considers the discomfort of facing the issues of ‘who owns the past, hence who owns this story? Who has the right to expose long-held secrets?’ I have taken the stance held by Breen, as she says ‘No one owns history – the best we can do is honour it’ (Breen 2014, p. 11). Although my artefact is my fictional 'vision of (Jack's) life and the world, and not an accurate representation of an actual person's life' (Lackey 2015, p3), it is my attempt to honour the lives of my grandparents by recognising the difficulties they faced. Birat (2013, p 58) says 'Imagination does not fulfil the need to confront people with the historical reality of the losses'; my purpose is to focus on the issues raised, rather than resolve them.

The use of aliases is an aspect of WWI history that has lacked research attention. The records that exist are largely concerned with underage boys enlisting, or with known criminals escaping the police. If a soldier using an alias was killed in action, his family would never know his fate, unless he had given a traceable next of kin. Families could not be sure if the man had enlisted or had simply disappeared from their lives. But while there is scant research into the use of aliases, there is even less into the impact of the aliases on the deserted families left behind. Their grief, loss and sacrifice were consistently overlooked. With no financial assistance available except from private means or public charity, families faced ruin. Jack’s wife and family lost their home and all their possessions, and endured the humiliation of seeing those possessions sold at public auction after Jack was declared insolvent. Jack’s story was kept silent, none of his children spoke of it to their families over their lives. The silence was complete, until my research opened this ‘can of worms’. War stories commonly promote nationalistic pride in the heroism and sacrifice of the soldier; my artefact ‘Breaking the Silence’ aims to develop, through a fictional depiction of the experience of a single soldier and his family, an understanding of a personal, less heroic, impact of war.

Humans are innate storytellers. Jonathan Gottschall (2013), in *The Storytelling Animal*, proposes that humans have always told stories as a means of making sense of experience, of transmitting culture, shaping expectations and influencing behaviour. Stories tell us who we are in our world, in our communities and in our families (Gottschall 2013, p. 177). My father told stories of his grandfather, and these stories have already been passed on down further generations, thus carrying a purely oral, and
personal, history across five generations. But across the gap of a single intervening generation, the oral history of my grandfather has disappeared, and nothing remains of his story except a few documented details, embedded in silence. Dening says ‘the past has its own silences that will never be voiced’ (Dening 1998, p. 15). This may be so, but through fictional biography, I intend to attempt to give a voice to that silence. My grandfather never faced a judge to answer to the criminal charges levelled against him; because of the unanswered questions this raises, in my artefact ‘Breaking the Silence’, I create a fictional opportunity for him to explain his actions (that is, an explanation as I imagine it), and to face, in effect, ‘victim impact statements’ from his family. Pinto (2010, p. 8) says:

…historical novelists routinely deploy all invented specifics only to invoke what look like universal themes of humanity, love, fear or death – in other words, to tell profoundly ahistorical stories. Indeed, it is not historical understanding – that is, understanding of a specific time and place – that many historical novelists seem to seek. Rather, novelists seem intent on using stories of the past to shed light on aspects of humanity that are presumed to have resonances across time, space and place.

It was this emotional experience, rather than historical accuracy, that I have sought. Davies (2006) challenges the view that the past can only be known through an historiographic lens, saying 'Virtually anyone can contribute to historical consciousness' (Davies 2006, p. 9), and quotes Samuel saying 'history … is rather, a social form of knowledge; the work … of a thousand different hands' (Samuel in Davies 2006 p 9). He says that without the work of these 'other hands', 'The fabric of experience would dissolve … the particular texture of ordinary days would be irretrievable' (Davies 2006 p. 9). The unfolding narrative of the artefact, although fictional, seeks to reveal 'the particular experience of ordinary days', by replicating and echoing the experience of myself, the wider family and the community as each new piece of information uncovered necessitated this adjustment of memories, perceptions and beliefs. As an example of this disruption of historicity, the newspaper account of my grandfather’s death in 1937 says ‘He was a native of Victoria and came to Queensland about 23 years ago, and went to Buderim …’ (Nambour Chronicle and North Coast Advertiser 17/09/1937). This ignores the years he was away overseas in the AIF. Official records show that he fled Victoria on 17th December 1917, enlisted under an alias at Victoria Barracks in Brisbane on 20th December 1917, and was
discharged from the AIF in Brisbane on 3rd November 1919, almost two years later. The two years of AIF service are not mentioned. Nor, perhaps more understandably, is any mention made of his crimes and the family disruption.

In this sense, my research fills some of the gaps in the historical record, in the public story of my grandfather and in the unrecorded and silenced story of my grandmother. The new knowledge reveals the consequences of the silences and secrets within the family, and across the wider community, as voices are silenced, stories disrupted or ignored, and suffering airbrushed out. These consequences include the loss of family stories, the shame and humiliation caused, the financial losses incurred, and the lessening of the history of a family and a community.

Dening discusses the important role of the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in the Mall, Washington in ‘breaking the silence … letting people say things that should have been said long ago’ (Dening 1998, p. 3). My yearning to break the silence, to hear those family stories ‘which should have been said long ago’ form the context and the impetus for this research.

Using the techniques of fictional biography, and through multiple viewpoints, my artefact and exegesis aim to show the actions, reactions and deep misunderstandings that can result from deceit, because…

… misunderstandings shape our picture of ourselves in obscuring and inaccurate ways … they situate our attitudes to the past falsely, distort our reading of the present and our expectations of the future. (Stockings 2012, p. 3)

Malouf says 'It is the very absence of fact that has … allowed me the liberty of free invention, since what I wanted to write was neither historical novel or biography, but a fiction with its roots in possible event.' (Malouf 1999, p 154) As such, this research will contribute to the emergent literature that challenges the historicity of popular representations of the Anzac myth (Lake & Reynolds 2010). Further, it contributes significant new knowledge of the story of one family, and of other families in similar circumstances, and the challenges in writing such a personal story.
3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research-led practice & practice-led research

The focus of my research is the exploration of the impact of family silences and secrets, and the re-evaluation of identity and familial relationships when those secrets are revealed. By using research-led practice, I can establish the details of Jack's family situation, his wrongdoing and escape, enlistment, AIF service and post-war life, but the primary focus of the research is on the human experience of the events, the perceptions of individuals, and this aspect is better suited to practice-led research, which allows me to anchor the information within a fictional imagining of the experiences. Beyond ‘What happened?’ lies the deeper, more important question of ‘What impact did that have on Jack’s wife and family, and equally, on other families similarly affected?’

Haseman and Mafe (2014, p 216) ask ‘How can the findings of a practice be best represented? … The materiality of a creative work impacts on both the content and the reading of that content’. It quickly became clear that my research was going to focus on issues common to other families, issues that may have become, as in my family, hidden behind the soldier-hero myth. To avoid giving pain and unnecessary offence, yet to allow a recognition of common issues, I chose to represent the findings of this practice as fiction. I used practice-led research because there are many ways this story could be told, and practice-led research allowed me to explore and experiment, interweaving the research and the creative process, until I found the voice that best expressed the narrative I wish to tell. The strength of practice led research lies in the opportunities that arise from giving consideration to unverified and unverifiable aspects, such as emotional experiences, and the perceived impacts of actions. Taking the enquiry beyond 'those things which can be exactly measured … to include one's own lived experience and reactions' (Barrett 2014, p. 4), allows the method of the enquiry to develop and unfold as practice. Through the creative writing process, that is, by integrating, modifying, reshaping or discarding research material as it came to hand, thus creating an ongoing research dialogue between the exegesis and the artefact, I came to recognise the artefact itself as a form of research as much as the exegesis, although framed differently. 'Breaking the Silence' is a work of fiction, neither biographical, nor historical, nor autobiographical. However, many aspects have developed from my own experiences, formative, emotional and actual. Perry (2014, p.
37) refers to this as 'the instability of boundaries between the fictive and the autobiographical, the singular experience and the collective, the personal and the political'. It is in this sense I created Jack as an 'Everyman' character, rather than the biographical character of my grandfather, and created for him experiences beyond those of my own grandfather. Practice led research, as creative practice, allowed incorporation of aspects and concerns that relate more widely to the issues upon which I focus, especially, the impact of an alias and false identity on the wives and families thus abandoned. Pinto (2010, p. 8) says 'Historical novels such as The Secret River' make their pasts known on emotional terms'. My creative writing – the practice led research - allowed the development of this 'emotional truth' by mining both my own emotional history and that of my family.

The cycle of research-led practice, practice-led research, and reflection (Smith & Dean 2014, pp. 19-24) became the ideal pathway for this research into family silences and secrets, and the re-evaluation of identity and familial relationships. My iterative practice has meant that the artefact and the exegesis, ‘Breaking the Silence’, develop in parallel, as the exegetical ‘scholarly research that leads to creative work’ (Smith & Dean 2014, p. 7) informs the artefact, and the artefact directs the exegetical work; the research and the practice are reciprocal. ‘Practice and research inform each other’ (Biggs 2014, p. 76).

Research is initiated in practice, where questions, problems and challenges are identified and formed by the needs of the practice, and the research strategy is carried out through practice. (Gray 1996, p. 3)

Gray’s quote shows how inextricably linked are the processes of research-led practice and practice-led research. Each new piece of research uncovered has fed the writing practice which instigated more research. 'The act of writing becomes a process of searching' (Perry 2014, p.42). The more the research revealed new, often unexpected, material, the more the practice-led approach allowed me to incorporate this into the artefact, and to focus attention on these issues. The discovery of Jack’s alias led to wider research into the use of aliases by WWI soldiers, and the results of that research fed back into my artefact. Similarly, my discovery of Jack’s embezzlement led to research into methods, motivations and consequences of embezzlement. My task, using research-led practice and practice-led research, was to weave the results of this research
into a credible and engaging fictional narrative, thus carrying forward cultural knowledge. Perry (2014, p.44) quotes Goldsmith (referring to Holocaust history): 'Art should not tamper with the known facts, but what about the unknown issues?' It is within this area of unknown issues I have developed my practice led creative practice.

In what could be a description of the research component of practice-led research, Brien says:

Creative writers regularly mobilise all their senses to mine the reality around them for information to inform their writing. In the process, besides reading a wide range of books and other printed material, writers read (in the sense of decoding, interpreting and understanding) a wide variety of media and cultural texts. (Brien 2006, p. 55)

Certainly my research has entailed utilising a wide variety of sources of information, especially through archival and immersion research.

3.1.1 Archival Research

Onsite archival research in the Public Archives of Queensland, and National Archives of Australia gave me access to the primary sources, the official documents about Jack’s life, and although these are now digitised and available online, the experience of actually handling them, opening files untouched for 100 years, was an unexpected emotional jolt. Far from lessening the distance between my grandfather’s life and my own, the primary source documents actually reminded me of the differences, as cautioned by Dening (1998, p. 101) ‘Difference is the hardest thing to see … to accept.’ Material that I had considered familiar through online access suddenly became distant – foolscap rather than A4 paper size; green, orange and grey sheets of paper, enclosed in grubby white covers, and tied with white tape. There was the added impact of seeing, of running my fingers over, the original words recorded so long ago; the formal cursive script written in a broad nib pen; Jack’s false signature angled awkwardly to fit the space; his easy looping signature on the Statutory Declaration as he reverted to his true name; the reduction to formal phrasing in the reports of the challenging emotional decisions Jack faced (enlistment to escape arrest, choice of an alias, reversion to true name).
Culturally, we seldom speak ill of the dead; eulogies praise the best aspects of lives. But official documents are crueller. Poring over the archived originals, I was reminded of Mark Anthony’s speech at the death of Julius Caesar ‘The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones’ (Shakespeare, Julius Caesar Act 3 Scene 2). Clearly the official records of Jack’s life ensured that the evil lived on, and the good aspects of his life, since they have not been absorbed into family lore, have been interred with his bones. This has resulted in an absence within the stories of a family with an otherwise rich storytelling tradition.

The Criminal Offence File of Victoria Police, relating to Jack Cozens, (files held in Public Records Office Victoria), deepened this sense of distance and sadness as I read the accusations of embezzlement, of cattle stealing, and of the ‘diligent enquiries’ by a Constable Martin who was ‘also anxious for this man’s apprehension, as he left Victoria, owing my Father a fair sum of money’.

Primary sources examined include:

- AIF file of Albert Drummond alias John David Cozens SN 3529, held in National Archives, Canberra
- War Pensions Entitlement Application by Amelia Cozens, held in National Archives, Canberra
- Victoria Police Criminal Offence Report re John David Cozens, held in Public Records Office Victoria
- Death Certificate of John David Cozens, and matters regarding his Will, held in Queensland Public Archives
- Jack’s self-published books (Cozens 1920 & 1936), in my own possession
- WWI diary of Rowland Jones (nephew of Jack) detailing Jack’s contact with him in France. Rowland’s diary, original held in private family archive, was transcribed by me, and consists of two pocket-sized, leather bound notebooks, pencil written (indelible pencil?) much faded, but legible.

As I examined and re-examined documents, I thought of Dening’s comment:

Once begun on a search, there is no ending till you are satisfied you have seen all that there is to be see. … to read fast, exhaustively,
3.1.2 Immersion Research

This research has been intensified by immersion research, that is, by familiarising myself with a wide range of WWI literature, media, and archival documents. ‘The best way for a researcher to understand a group, a subculture, a setting, or a way of life is to immerse themselves into that world’ (Crossman 2016, p. 2). With this in mind, attempting to achieve a closer understanding of Jack’s war experience, I spent long hours in the War Memorial in Canberra, immersing myself in the depicted experiences of soldiers in France during the Great War. A series of huge dioramas graphically showed the mud and filth, the mangled and dismembered bodies unburied, the men huddled in shallow shell-holes. A constant loud soundtrack of booming explosions, screams and cracks of rifle fire added to the overwhelming horror, and I could well imagine the despair of men who later said that they were no longer fighting for their country, or their honour, or even for their mates, but simply to survive. Other displays showed models of well-equipped soldiers in their fresh uniforms, their complex and comprehensive equipment stowed in their many pockets and slung about their bodies. The dioramas showed these men in battle, sodden and filthy, clutching their rifles, with little sign of other equipment. Audio extensions to each section of the display allowed me to listen to excerpts of diaries written under these appalling conditions; reports of officers telling of courage, of losses, of urgent need; young voices pencilling letters home, trying to remain upbeat for their loved ones. This immersion, disturbing as it was, informed and shaped my writing of ‘Breaking the Silence’.

The archival and immersion research has been complemented and extended by wide reading, listening to the stories of returned soldiers in the community, reading accounts of women in difficult circumstances (Carter 1990; Twomey 2002; Lake & Kelly 1985; National and Qld Public Archives), examining police files online (Harris 2016), examining photographs and soldiers’ accounts from WWI (Public Records Online Victoria), and holding many conversations with a military historian at Sunshine Coast Genealogical Society. While only a fraction of material thus found has been of immediate relevance, I believe it all serves to inform and enrich my research, reflecting Hemingway’s ‘iceberg theory of writing’:
If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader … will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing. (Hemingway: 1932, p. 192)

My wide-ranging process of information-gathering is well served by the iterative practice of research, reflection and writing (Smith & Dean 2014, pp. 19-24), and is of critical importance as it is inevitable that I, two generations after the events, see newly-revealed information differently, raising the possibilities of unexpected interpretations ‘through time and perspective’ (Carter 2012, p. 3). Grenville spoke of this when she found that her experience of the places of her childhood memories was nuanced by her new knowledge; ‘Writing The Secret River was the opening of a new set of eyes … now I could see what was underneath’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 221). The poet, WH Auden, writing on the death of Yeats, also acknowledged the differing interpretations of Yeats’ work a new generation may offer, ‘The words of a dead man are modified in the guts of the living’ (Auden in Ferguson, Salter & Stallworthy, 1996, p. 1368). As I researched ‘Breaking the Silence’, my task was to interpret, across the generational gap, the silence within my family story, using the scant information available. This was confronting at times, and I wove this concern into the reaction of Kate (in ‘Breaking the Silence’) as she considers what to do with her new-found knowledge:

…she considered bundling the journal, the medals, and all her notes into the rubbish, ...simply live without that knowledge. But it was too late. (Cozens 2015, p. 154)

The newly-revealed information I found was new only to my generation: it seems impossible that my father and his siblings were unaware of their father’s story. Within my own generation, reactions and interpretations vary widely; responses to the story from within my family have varied from ‘What a bastard!’ to ‘Poor fellow’, and ‘You’re not going to tell the world about this, are you?’ to ‘Wonder if we can find the money?’ These reactions have been modified and incorporated into ‘Breaking the Silence’, and are reflected in Jack’s fear of discovery, in Charlie’s refusal to acknowledge his father, ‘My father died in France. Mum was right about that.’ (Cozens 2015, p. 121), and in the reaction of Jack’s post-war employer, ‘I don’t want to know what’s behind this. Not now, not ever.’ (Cozens 2015, p. 111).
Goodall echoes this awareness of changing interpretations across time, as she discusses her research into historical records to inform her writing, ‘Research alone cannot rescue you, but it may still be of some help … since people think differently across the centuries’ (Goodall 2014, p. 202). I accept the truth of this observation; the lives Jack and his family lived, their experiences, influences and opportunities were so different from my own, it would be presumptuous for me to claim to know what or how each thought because interpretations may differ across generations, as may priorities, and perceptions of what matters. With this in mind, my research does not challenge the reality of the experiences of each protagonist in the artefact, but, in fictional narrative, focuses on the differing perceptions of that reality (Maxwell 2012, p. 9).

Recognition of this shared and varied interpretation focuses the strength of my practice of working from the unknown to the known (Sullivan 2014, p. 48). By moving from verifiable facts to imaginative fiction and back, I am able to express, as did O’Brien, writing of his Vietnam war experience (O’Brien 1990, p. 79), ‘A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth’. It is this generalised, rather than particularised, truth that I seek to reveal, an ‘evocation of authenticity’ (Breen 2014, p. 11). For example, while I can establish specific official information regarding Jack Cozens (he confessed to embezzlement; he was declared insolvent and his investments, goods and chattels were seized and sold; he enlisted under an alias; and so on), I must rely on research into lives parallel to Jack’s, and on my creative imagination, to construct a fictional biography, a story of what could have happened, how his life might have been.

Grenville, researching her great-great-great-grandfather’s life in preparation for The Secret River (Grenville 2006), says ‘in an hour I’d learned more about him than Mum had ever known’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 23), and while this reflects the current relatively easy access to archival records, it also indicates how ambiguous the records may be, how much remains untold. Pons (2001, p. 69) describes the gap between:

…what is publicly revealed and what has been kept hidden …
the secret part has to do with the inner, that is the emotional life
… feelings of love especially.

The publicly revealed information in the archives was clear, but my research seemed to be reducing my chance of glimpsing the secret part, the emotional life of Jack.
Grenville goes on to describe how she ‘felt alone, with this man [she] hardly knew’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 23). This was my own experience as I discovered my grandfather’s deceit and criminal activities, especially as I can never know how much of the story my late father knew, nor his perception of how the knowledge affected him. Peter Ellingsen (2011, p. 150), probing the place of memory in our lives, says ‘Unspoken memories destroy us, as the families of soldiers understand’.

Research-led practice allows me to identify, within my grandfather’s story, ‘the spaces and places opened up by the gaps in existing knowledge’ (Sullivan 2014, p. 48), while the practice-led research and reflexive practice allow me the ‘imaginative leaps into what we don’t know as this can lead to critical insights that can change what we do know’ (Sullivan 2014, p. 48).

As I move between the roles of researcher/reader, reflexive practitioner, and writer, the iterative nature of practice-led research blurs the distinctions of each role. Carr says ‘…reading (research) and writing go on simultaneously … parts of a single process’, with the result ‘the more I write, the more I know what I am looking for, the better I understand the significance and relevance of what I find’ (Carr 2008, p. 28). This dictum applies to both my artefact and my exegesis – for example, principles and nuances of practice-led research which eluded me early became clear as I recognised that I was actually using them.

‘In the practice of any art form, there is a need to know about the work of others and to build up a density of such knowledge’ (Goodall 2014, p. 207). This speaks to me of the need to contextualise both the artefact and the exegesis in the broader cultural context of previous research, and within a tradition of storytelling as cultural replication/transmission (Barrett 2014, p. 159), thus validating both the process and product of the research.

The research is where I start, it is the original investigation through which knowledge and understanding grows; the creative practice, that is, the writing of the artefact, is the means to turn that knowledge and understanding into credible narrative, ‘never about truth so much as it is about the evocation of authenticity’ (Breen 2014, p. 11).
s3.2 Developing reflexive practice

'Practice can only lead research when the researcher is genuinely interested in and attentive to the possibilities generated through creative practice' (Haseman and Mafe 2014, p. 222). My personal familial commitment to this project presented me with some of the difficulties Bradman and Mafe foresaw for practice led researchers, especially those of ‘finding a place from which they can reflect upon and view the work they are creating, … and claim significance for the work’. Reflexive practice, journal writing, engaging with other practice led researchers and wide reading led to a richer understanding of my own work and its possibilities.

Reflexivity … occurs when a creative practitioner acts upon the requisite research material to generate new material which immediately acts back upon the practitioner who is in turn stimulated to make a subsequent response. (Haseman & Mafe 2014, p. 219)

This definition sounds simple, but the process of reflexivity is slow and complex, ‘a messy process’ (Sullivan 2006, p. 3), which can lead to the ‘shock of recognition that comes from new insight’ (Sullivan 2006, p. 3). I encountered this ‘messy process’ as I discovered new material – welcome ‘shocks of new insight’ – which necessitated reviewing, and refashioning earlier work. Each new piece of information, while exciting and stimulating, triggered a need for further research. My solution, to exploit yet control the ‘messy process’, was to set parameters. I established detailed timelines, calendars for the pertinent years, a chart of Jack’s movements with maps and railway timetables, and a parallel set of timeline and maps for Kate’s story. In this way, I was able to contextualise new information, and know what could be excluded, thus containing and minimising the messiness of the process. Brady discusses a similar approach, which she calls ‘the bowerbird technique’ (Brady 2000, p. 2):

I needed to acquire a working rather than a specialist knowledge, not in one area but in a range of areas and disciplines … like a bowerbird that picks out all the blue things… With so much information to gather, the writer needs to be able to work quickly, to know the questions to ask and to be able to isolate the essence. (Brady 2000, pp. 2-3)

This ‘bower-birding’ approach is well suited to practice-led research which requires flexibility, and willingness to select and incorporate new material, even as the research
continues. Southgate’s quote, ‘Writers often do not know where they’re going until they’re there’ (Southgate 2009, p. 194), indicates not a lack of planning, but this willingness to adapt as new material, new connections, and new ideas come together. As Goodall (2014, p. 206) says, in discussing her own practice-led research, ‘…fiction writing requires a finely calibrated balance between conscious planning and improvisatory caprice.’

I also found, like Grenville (2007a, p. 188), that giving the characters fictional names (in early drafts I had used real names) sharpened my focus, changed my perspective and my relationship with the characters; with less self-identification with Jack and Kate, I gained clarity and was able to dispassionately write the story, even though this moved the story further into fiction, and away from the documents I had found. Further, I employed techniques of self-reflexivity, that is, by creating the second character (Kate) who comments on her research process and her responses to each discovery, as the full picture of Jack's life is revealed. Kate's discoveries mirrored my own, as she and I both came to appreciate the possibilities for the research to open discussion on silenced topics, to disseminate the new knowledge across family and communities, and to examine a silenced aspect of cultural history.

Biggs says that research ‘begins with an idea for a project and an investigation of the tools, resources and skills necessary to realise it’ (Biggs 2014, p. 76). Originally, my planned project was to create a biography of my grandfather, believing that through careful ‘research that would lead to creative practice’ (Smith & Dean 2014, p. 3) I would assemble all the information I needed to equip me for the task.

I could not have been more wrong. The ‘messy process’ described earlier disrupted my plans as every new piece of information I uncovered raised new questions, and led to unexpected places and insights. I realised that my meagre stock of verifiable information was not going to assemble neatly, jigsaw style, into the planned biography. Brien (2006, p. 58) says ‘Creative writers primarily work by processing a welter of information into written work.’ Developing a pattern of reflexivity, that is, of wide research and reading, and of creative writing, became, for me, ‘the only way to make sense of the factual information and the imaginative reconstructions this reading was generating’ (Brien 2006, p. 56). As the narrative developed, and as I became deeply absorbed, the boundaries between the results of my research and the creative narrative blurred. Narrative transportation theory describes how ‘a story invites receivers into
the action it portrays, and, as a result, makes them lose themselves in the story’ (Deighton, Romer & McQueen 1989, p. 335); this perfectly described my experience as I became absorbed in the work, juggling ‘factual information’ and ‘imaginative reconstructions’. Carter (2012, p. 2) says:

…meaning happens within the process of the text linking the reader and the creator … all text is not only subject to the interpretation of its reader but that all texts maintain innate meaning that is changeable through time and perspective.

This sense of meaning shared is echoed by Atwood (2003, p. 113) when she says that ‘the reader and the writer communicate … through the page’ and that the reader is ever-present as ‘silent partner and collaborator’ (Atwood 2003, p. 129). Reflexive practice allows me to move back and forth between the two roles, as I utilise research-led practice and practice-led research.
4. CONTEXTUALISING VERACITY – LITERATURE REVIEW A

4.1 Introduction

The creative artefact, ‘Breaking the Silence’, is a fictional biography, loosely based on my late grandfather, and told in two narrative voices, that of (a fictional) Jack himself, and of his (fictional) granddaughter, Kate. While I had access to a background of official documents, and to Jack’s own writings (Cozens 1920, 1936), these alone did not substantially contribute to my family story. I needed to contextualise Jack’s writing and my research within a deeper knowledge of his experiences, culture and times. To complicate the research, not only were almost all who had known him now dead, but I was also faced with the family silence that had surrounded this grandfather.

My initial plan was to write a biography of my grandfather who embezzled money from his employer, and, when faced with imminent arrest in 1917, abandoned his pregnant wife and five children to enlist in the AIF under an alias. But, as I began researching, it became apparent that the real story lay in the family silences beyond that initial dramatic flight; I was able to ascertain the official version of the embezzlement and flight into the AIF, but beyond that, almost nothing except the relatively uneventful story of Jack’s war service and repatriation. The planned biography, the story I had somehow thought would write itself, was rapidly settling into the gap between writing and thinking.

And although I knew, in a theoretical sense, that even the most successful families hid dark secrets, I was astounded to discover the secret that lay at the heart of my father’s family. These considerations shaped and guided my literature review.

My literature review covers:

- Silences and secrets
- Jack’s war experiences.

4.2 Silences and secrets

Kuhn (2002, p.2) says 'A family without secrets is rare indeed' and discusses the ways in which families conceal secrets from the world, and from each other, as 'involuntary amnesia' and 'wilful forgetting'. She says 'telling stories about the past, our past, is a
key moment in the making of our selves … such narratives of identity are shaped as much by what is left out of the account as by what is actually told' (Kuhn 2002, p 2). It seems likely that shame lay behind the keeping of Jack's secrets from my generation, shame shared by my grandmother, my father and his siblings. However, that silence itself had formed part of my own 'narrative of identity', so uncovering the secret became, in turn, another part of my identity. At the same time, my respect for the decisions made by my grandmother and father, the decision to keep the secrets, combined with the lack of documentation and information, led me to choosing a fictional narrative, as this gave me more flexibility and range as I considered possible shapings for the story.

Owens speaks of being challenged by the ‘loud silences’ as she searched for a way to fictionalise unpalatable truths in her family story (Owens 2014, p. 14). Her paper ‘Fictionalising the Truth’ discusses many of my own concerns about airing family secrets, and the ways in which a narrative may be created, teasing out the choice between fiction and biography. Owens concludes that her practice-led research gave her a “bricoleur” approach to “fossicking” for ranging data sources that contribute to a story that could “almost be true”’ (Owens 2014, p. 14). Her description of her fossicking approach echoes the ‘bowerbird-like’ approach of Brien (2006, p. 55); this advice guided me to seek and recognise research value in a wide range of sources.

The unease regarding exposure of family secrets discussed by Owens is echoed by Chee who said that ‘looking into the past is like finding yourself with the belongings of some newly-dead relative … as the haphazard pattern of their life is revealed … One piece reveals the truth of another’ (Chee 2016, p. 6) with the researcher gradually reaching ‘a small provisional understanding’ (Chee 2016, p. 6). This well describes my experience as I worked between research and creative writing.

Labanyi, writing of the role of memory and testimony in the political upheavals of South and Central America, suggests that the researcher must ‘learn to listen to the silence’ because the silence does not necessarily represent a lack of memory (Labanyi 2009, p. 23). The researcher may encounter people who ‘refuse to speak' about their suffering, and to pass on memory to later generations (Labanyi 2009, p. 23), which has been my experience in researching the family story. Labanyi’s scope is broad and political, mine is narrow and personal, nevertheless the principle articulated – learn to listen to the silence – informed the research.
Whitlam, discovering an unexpected family secret, said that ‘unpalatable truths will not diminish, but rather enrich, our common commitment to the research, the writing, the reading and the understanding of Australian history’ (Whitlam 2001, p. 1). Again, I believe that the broadbrush principle expressed applies equally to my personal approach to breaking the silence in my own family story. Certainly ‘the dead can no longer expect their secrets to be buried with them’ (Lewis 2014, p. 2). However, like Lambert preparing her memoir ‘Stories We Tell’, I ‘shall search for the truth in different people’s perspective’ (Lambert 2014, p. 18). Official documents, especially those in the Victorian Police files, revealed something of the extent of the suffering behind the use of aliases and false identities. Conscious that I would not be able to do justice to these stories, but wanting to bring into public awareness of an aspect of Australian history, I chose fictional biography, so as to allow incorporation of aspects of these many stories into my fictional narrative of Jack's story.

Atwood says writers, like jackdaws, ‘steal the shiny bits (of life) and build them into the structures of our own disorderly nests’ (Atwood 2003, p. xviii). My search for ‘the shiny bits’ was informed by memoirs and fictional biographies that revolve around family secrets and silences, especially Searching for the Secret River by Kate Grenville, The House of Fiction by Susan Swingler, and The Invention of Solitude by Paul Auster. Each example chosen revolves around a story of a missing or unknown parent or earlier ancestor, and shows the impact of silences and secrets on family members, and upon the wider community. In each case, shame lay behind the silences; shame and humiliation and grief and loss.

Grenville’s The Secret River (2006) is the fictional story she uses to create possible histories of her great-great-great-grandfather, Solomon Wise, as he arrives in Australia as a convict, and carves out a new life for himself and his family. Her own journey of discovery she explicates in Searching for the Secret River (Grenville 2007a), an exegetical memoir mapping her research, tentative first steps into the writing, and eventual development of the fictional biography.

William Thornhill, the fictional central character in Grenville’s The Secret River, is married with a family at the outset of the novel, working hard but always struggling, always wanting more. Under financial pressure, he succumbs to temptation to steal, is caught, and is transported to the other side of the world to start a new life. His wife and children join him there, he works to create a new life, and he eventually prospers. This
suggested interesting parallels with my grandfather’s story: Jack Cozens was married with children, and although the records suggest he was not poor, he embezzled money. His crime was discovered, and he escaped as a falsely enlisted soldier to the other side of the world. Thornhill was sent from England to Australia, Jack made the reverse trip. Thornhill stayed on the other side of the world for the rest of his life, Jack returned to Australia, though never to his birthplace. Both men suffered as a result of their criminal record, and both sought to free themselves from their pasts. In ‘Breaking the Silence’ I fleshed out the bones of this outline with fiction, even though, as Grenville discovered in her writing, this took me far from ‘what had really happened’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 185).

Grenville tells how she struggled to turn ‘what had really happened’ into a story. Realising that the central drama she sought lay in ‘watching a character make choices … the journey he takes in making those choices’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 185), Grenville was able to refine her decisions about what aspects of truth and family lore to retain and what to discard. My narrative focus was also on the choices a man made, but even more so on the consequences of those choices, and how they played out across the following generations. The choices Jack made were visible in the historical record of his confession (Country News 1917 & Wangaratta Chronicle 1917), his enlistment under an alias (National Archives 1917), his abandonment of his family. But, like Grenville, I found the bare information insufficient for a novel; I sought the story in the causes and the consequences. The documents I discovered gave me the impetus and background I needed, the techniques of fiction gave me the means to create the story, to make the ‘imaginative leaps into what we don’t know’ (Sullivan 2014, p. 48).

Like Grenville, I found that placing the central character in an unfamiliar setting gave the character opportunities for unfamiliar choices. Grenville’s character, Thornhill, and my character, Jack Conway, both had to ‘think on their feet’, rapidly developing new practical skills, ethical stances, and philosophical justifications for their actions. And behind each man was a wife and family, less visible but deeply affected by the choices made. Both wives (Sally in The Secret River; Mary in ‘Breaking the Silence’) showed independence of spirit and decision-making, despite the social constraints on women in past times.

Grenville speaks of retracing her ancestor's footsteps ‘…he was here. This, right here, where I am standing, is where it happened’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 56), but goes on to
dismiss any significance of the moment, ‘But what did it really matter…?’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 56). I spent many hours retracing my grandfather’s footsteps. I visited his parent’s home in Oxley Victoria, I stood on the same spot where he stood in one of his wedding photographs, I waited late at night on the platform of Albury Railway Station, I walked from the railway station at South Brisbane across Victoria Bridge and up to Victoria Barracks where Jack enlisted, I called at the Buderim property where Jack’s boarding house had once stood, and I trudged over the Woombye land where Jack had eeked out a meagre living as a pineapple farmer. Finally, I simply sat on his grave in Woombye Cemetery, and wondered. And like Grenville, I concluded ‘What does it matter?’ Jack’s story had disappeared from the family and the community; I had only the official records and my imagination to create a new story for Jack.

Grenville's work attracted criticism from historians, who felt that her vision of the shameful past was biased, partial, skewed (Chapter Collingwood-Whittick 2013, p 13). Grenville describes her sense of confrontation with an incomplete or contradictory version of her family's past (Grenville 2007a, p.12). My own work contains a contradiction, and a challenge to the accepted national Anzac narrative in that I present the character Jack as far less than heroic – not a coward, because he did enlist and he did fight in major battles. But his reasons for being in the AIF, and the deserted wife and family he left behind, do not match the accepted soldier-hero image, and since the research shows he was one of many in similar circumstances, my research adds to the disruption of the Anzac myth (already long disrupted by peace activists, feminists, and historians).

In The Invention of Solitude (2012), Auster details how his father dealt with the secrets in his past by retreating into silence, distant even from his own children. ‘Impossible to enter another’s solitude,’ says Auster. ‘If we can ever come to know another human being … it is only to the extent he is willing to make himself known’ (Auster 2012, p. 20). Is this how my own father felt about his father? Auster’s father ‘rarely spoke to [him] about the past’ (Auster 2012, p. 51). My father seldom spoke of his past, and never of his father, Jack Cozens, my grandfather.

Auster prefaces his book with a quote from Heraclitus: ‘In searching out the truth be ready for the unexpected, for it is difficult to find and puzzling when you find it’ (Auster 2012, p. 3). For me, the official record of Jack's story was surprisingly easy to find, but nevertheless, incomplete and very puzzling. Auster discovered his father’s
secret – that his grandmother had murdered his grandfather – through old newspaper reports. It was also through old newspaper reports, and army records, that I discovered the secrets of my grandfather, the story of embezzlement that led to his flight and alias. And like Auster, I found that ‘The difficult thing is to see [the story] in print – unburied, so to speak, from the realm of secrets and turned into a public event’ (Auster 2012, p. 38).

Malcolm (1994, p. 9) says ‘Biography is the medium through which the remaining secrets of the famous dead are taken from them and dumped in full view of the world.’ I had experienced this discomfort as I uncovered Jack’s long-held secrets, and wondered what right I had to even know, let alone speak of his story. Opening those bundled archives, reading the details of the Victoria Police Criminal Report, and especially facing the brutal clarity of the arrest warrants, I wondered if Jack’s story even could be told, let alone whether it should be. I interpreted my late father’s silence as his expression of this unease, and echoed it in the relationship between Kate and Charlie in my artefact, as they argue over her right to research the silences in the family story. ‘But this man is my grandfather. And I know practically nothing about him. Why the mystery?’ (Cozens 2015, p. 133).

As I tried to make sense of what I was finding, and weave it into a narrative, I could relate to Auster as he says:

> Slowly, I am coming to understand the absurdity of the task I have set for myself. I have a sense of trying to go somewhere, as if I knew what I wanted to say, but the farther I go the more certain I am that the path towards my object does not exist … a feeling of moving in circles, of perpetual back-tracking. (Auster 2012, p. 33)

Auster writes of the contradictions he saw in his father: ‘He was good, or he was bad … I have the feeling I am writing about three or four different men … each one a contradiction of all the others’ (Auster 2012, p. 65). This recognition of the numerous aspects and possibilities within each character intrigued me, and I allowed similar contradictions to appear within the fictional character of Jack, without needing to attempt to explain or resolve them. In fact, not only were such contradictions a necessary and enriching aspect of the character I was creating, but I simply could not have explained and reconciled such contradictions, even had I wanted to. As Auster said ‘Even the facts do not always tell the truth’ (Auster 2012, p. 21). This contributed
to my decision to create a fictional biography, a narrative in which I could incorporate the contradictions, and reveal something of the impact his actions had upon his family.

Susan Swingler had similar mixed feelings about her father. As a young adult, Swingler discovered a complexity of silences and lies in her own family story when she was presented with ‘a version of my past I did not recognise’ (Swingler 2012, p. 8). Her father had deserted Swingler and her mother when she was four years old, and had denied her existence, pretending to his wider family that another, illegitimate daughter was Swingler herself. Since he migrated to Australia with his second family, the relatives in England had no reason to doubt him, and Swingler accepted her mother’s decree that they have no contact with her father’s family. Only a chance event brought them into contact, and the lies were slowly revealed and untangled.

Swingler’s ‘anger at the deception’ (Swingler 2012, p. 209) when she discovered the extent and complexity of ‘the lying and the secrecy’ (Swingler 2012, p. 129) leads her to wish he would ‘Tell the bloody truth for a change’ (Swingler 2012, p. 212). As she searches for answers, she says ‘Perhaps the truth by itself is not enough. I knew the truth, or thought I did. It was an explanation I was looking for’ (Swingler 2012, p. 132). I incorporated recognition of this baffled anger in ‘Breaking the Silence’ when Harry convinces Jack to delay revealing the truth to Charlie: ‘You’ll be asking him to understand that all the important adults in his life – his mother, his stepfather and his dad – have all lied to him. How would that feel?’ (Cozens 2015, p. 115).

The secrets Swingler sought to uncover lay with her father and his second wife, yet even when she confronted her father, face to face, for the first time in forty years, she failed to ask the questions that may have provided the answers. ‘I didn’t have the courage’ she says after their first meeting (Swingler 2012, p. 153), and at their second meeting, she thinks ‘How could I ask this sick old man to explain his behaviour of forty years ago, how could I accuse him of lies and deception … I just couldn’t do it’ (Swingler 2012, pp. 159-160). Later, she regrets that ‘those years of deception and denial had not even been discussed, let alone probed’ (Swingler 2012, p. 162), but she avoids speaking about this to her mother, with whom she has always been close; ‘I felt I should protect her … how could I tell her without causing hurt?’ (Swingler 2012, p. 163). My own family secret was uncovered several months after my father’s death, so I can only wonder if I would have had the temerity to ask my father what he knew. Is this how the silences begin in family stories, with a wish to avoid giving pain, which later
becomes regret when opportunities slip away forever? For Swingler, the opportunities did slip away; the main players died, access to archives was blocked, she had family stories and some letters, not much more. As a consequence, Swingler’s account of her search ‘shines a light on only one side of what is bound to have been a multifaceted situation’ (Riemer in Swingler 2012, p. 315). My research confronts the same problems: those who knew the full story of my grandfather are dead, and the silences that surrounded his life continue to muffle and distort the few scraps of information within the family. Because so little trace remains of my grandfather’s life, I also can research only narrow aspects of ‘a multifaceted situation’. The aspects about which I had the most information were the alias and the arrest warrant, so I started there.

My choice to use fiction reflects my awareness of the problems and distortions within the material I had discovered. In order to create a fictional narrative of a family with such a secret, a narrative which revealed the impact and repercussions of the secret, I hoped to focus attention on the many families whose true stories are hidden in shame behind the soldier-hero myths of WWI.

4.2.1 The arrest warrant

The trigger for both my grandfather’s flight and for my research was the arrest warrant, issued on 22nd December 1918, in which he is accused of embezzling money ‘between 1st January 1916 and the 17th ult.’, a period of almost two years. The initial date of 1st January 1916 would appear to be arbitrary, and may well indicate an inability to place a specific start to the offending. I echoed this in ‘Breaking the Silence’, showing how the embezzlement started almost innocently, a game almost in which everyone benefits, and which grew over time to become overwhelmingly illegal, and bound up in risk and secrecy. Did Jack operate alone? Was his wife aware of his activities? No records exist, and no family stories. However, an elderly aunt, Jack’s second daughter, remembered her mother’s fury when Jack left to join the AIF, saying that he had no need to go, the war was for younger men, and that he had responsibilities at home which should take priority. This could indicate that Jack’s wife was unaware. In the artefact, I echoed this, depicting her as unaware, or at best suspicious, of Jack’s secrets when he left.
4.2.2 The alias

The alias Jack assumed, in order to escape police detection as he made his way through Victoria, across New South Wales, into Queensland to enlist, was Albert Drummond. Drummond was the family name of a man described variously in police documents as either ‘a close friend’, ‘a brother’ or ‘a brother-in law’. Jack’s late daughter recalled the Drummonds as being ‘close family friends of my parents’, and Mr A Drummond was the man who reported Jack’s embezzlement to the Shire President, after meeting Jack at Albury Railway Station. This is borne out by the newspaper report that:

Mr Drummond had been with Mr Cozens on the Albury Railway Station on Monday night the 17th …[where Cozens] had handed him a document showing the names of ratepayers together with amounts paid by them, and which money the collector had misappropriated. He was led to believe the particulars were taken from a note book, which had later been destroyed. (Wangaratta Chronicle, 29th December 1917)

An entry of 22nd February 1918 in the police record notes that:

I beg to report that I have been reliably informed that one Archibald Drummond of Oxley, a brother-in-law of the offender, has recently drawn a soldier's allotment of pay at the Wangaratta Post Office on behalf of Private Albert Drummond, said to be his brother who is in a camp in Brisbane. The amount is two pounds odd per fortnight. My informant has every reason to believe that Albert Drummond is identical with the offender Cozens. (Victoria Police Criminal Report 1918)

Archibald Charles Drummond is given as Albert Drummond’s next of kin on the enlistment papers. A local history, Memories of Oxley (Jones 1995, p. 143), shows a photo of Archibald Drummond, a handsome young man swaggering at a local tennis tournament, and it was this impression that triggered my idea to include an accomplice, someone close to Jack, someone he trusted, but who would eventually do him harm. This character became William Dempsey in ‘Breaking the Silence’, a young man close to Jack, who was able to influence and manipulate him for his own interests.

4.2.3 Embezzlement

The secret behind the arrest warrant and Jack’s flight into the army was embezzlement, defined as:
The fraudulent appropriation of property by one lawfully entrusted with its possession … wilfully taking or converting to one’s own use, another’s money or property, of which the wrongdoer acquired possession lawfully, by reason of some office or employment or position of trust. (Linker 2008, p. 1)

Jack perfectly fitted Linker’s profile of an embezzler (Linker 2008, p. 3):

- An older man, 30+ (Jack was 48 when his embezzlement was detected)
- Married with stable family relationships (Jack was married with five children, and a sixth due. His widowed mother, and several siblings lived nearby)
- Well-educated (Jack was confidently literate, and had been trained in his role as Rate Collector by his father, an accountant)
- Highly social habits (Jack served in honorary roles on various local social and sporting committees, including church positions, Red Cross, and sports clubs. The description and photograph of his wedding in the local newspaper at the time indicate a major social event)
- Seldom a past criminal record, and in long-term employment (Both true for Jack).

This profile contextualised Jack within his community, and matched the scant verifiable information I had gathered.

Within the history of his own workplace, Jack may have had an example to plan his embezzlement. In a history of Oxley Shire, Moonie (1962) details a scandal in 1867, when a ‘Zadok Porter, clerk, valuer and rate collector for Oxley Shire, had disappeared … It was alleged he had collected rates and never paid them over’ (Moonie 1962, p. 8). Porter was caught, and faced court, but was acquitted. Moonie quotes an unnamed newspaper report, ‘Although there may be doubts as to Mr Porter’s having taken any of the ratepayers’ funds with him in his flight, there can be none as to his having left a pretty considerable muddle behind him.’ (Moonie 1962, p. 8)

Jack almost certainly left a similar ‘considerable muddle’ in his wake. The Wangaratta Chronicle 29th December 1917 reports

...information had come to hand on 18th inst that John D Cozens, rate collector and inspector, had absconded… and that he had sent to the Secretary a statement admitting that he had misappropriated moneys of the Shire. A warrant had been issued for his arrest …

The Country News Ballarat and District 26th December 1917 reports the scandal:
A warrant has been issued for the arrest of John David Cozens on a charge of having misappropriated funds of the Oxley Shire Council, for which body he was rate collector, dairy inspector, etc. Cozens was last seen on Tuesday when he purchased a ticket at Albury for Sydney.

The arrest warrant recorded in the Victoria Police Gazette repeated this information, adding a physical description:

…around 45 years of age, 5ft 7in high, medium build, round shoulders, fair complexion and hair turning grey, fair moustache (may be clean shaven), has a peculiar movement of the mouth and chatters his teeth; may wear a dark suit and straw hat … Last seen at Albury Railway Station … May go to Sydney or Queensland. (Victoria Police Gazette 1917, p. 677)

The warrant was swiftly replicated by NSW and Queensland Police, adding that Jack was ‘supposed to be en route for Sydney or Queensland where he may endeavour to enlist, probably under an assumed name’ (NSW Police Gazette 1918, p. 43). Further newspaper reports across northeast Victoria repeated this information, so it seems reasonable to assume there was a scandal, and consequent distress for his family.

Over the following months, these newspapers reported that Jack had been declared insolvent, that his property had been seized and was offered for sale at public auction. By this time, Jack was in training camp in England. Since Jack left, his wife had given birth to her sixth child; she and her six children were now living with her parents, fifteen kilometres from Oxley, and in the heart of the very community from whom Jack had embezzled. No records, personal or public, survive to record her experiences. However, the newspaper accounts quoted here gave me the structure and a ‘public voice’ of reportage which I incorporated into my artefact, ‘retexting the already texted past’, as Dening put it (Dening1992, p. 5).

Next I turned to an account of embezzlement. Kevin Cross, a convicted embezzler, wrote of his criminal experiences (Cross 2010), and his emotional reactions to success and failure. Cross, working with a friend, planned the embezzlement carefully, aware that once they ‘crossed the first threshold of [their] adventure, there is no going back’ (Cross 2010, p. 13). Filled with confidence and bravado, he declares ‘The plan was perfect … Undetectable’ (Cross 2010, p. 16) and later ‘This is genius’ (Cross 2010, p. 21). As he embezzles more and more money, he writes of his euphoric joy, his insatiable need for more, and his growing fear of getting caught. This account provided a rich mine of emotional material for ‘Breaking the Silence’, and I ascribed these same
seesawing emotions to Jack as his success grew and the risk of detection increased. Cross also detailed his methods, and although he was working in early 21st century America, I was able to glean enough detail to create a credible embezzlement technique for Jack to have used in early 20th century Victoria, and a model for collusion between a clerk and a banker to embezzle money. Using Cross's model of embezzlement, I created, in ‘Breaking the Silence’, a burgeoning scheme in which the fictional Jack entered into crime almost innocently, then discovered new avenues to exploit opportunities. Later, he consults his friend, William, and William is able to slyly, gradually gain advantage over Jack, until Jack is exposed, discovered and subject to an arrest warrant.

4.2.4 The context

The discovery of Jack’s secrets tempted me to focus on the shocking and inexplicable aspects of his story. But it was clear that context was all; the culture and times in which Jack had operated, and in which my own father had grown up, were so different to my own experiences as to be almost foreign. ‘No personal originality is enough to make a rich work unique, unless it also has the characteristics of a particular time and locality and the life that is in it’ (Weiss 1964, p. 207).

This advice directed my research into the wider context of Jack’s circumstances. However, Dening warns of the danger of ‘seeing the past as us in funny clothes. The past in its totality is different … but difference is the hardest thing to see’ (Dening 1998, p. 101). Because the external differences of life one hundred years ago are obvious, Dening was perhaps referring to human nature, suggesting that the temptation is to assume that people are always the same beyond surface appearances, or that a writer can readily identify with an historical figure. Hirst says such identification is not possible:

Kate Grenville ponders what she would have done on the frontier and what sort of a person this would have made her. The leading character in her novel (The Secret River) is not an eighteenth-century waterman at all; it is herself. (Hirst 2005, p. 85)

Clendinnen (2006a, p. 27), defending the role of historians, writes of ‘the novelist’s gift of empathetic imagination (to) project back …contemporary assumptions and current
obsessions.’ Thus cautioned to observe authenticity in contexts as I researched Jack’s life, but to avoid believing I could step into the minds of my characters or impose my values onto them, I adopted Grenville’s dictum ‘What I was writing wasn’t real, but it was as true as I could make it (Grenville 2007a, p. 191). In this way, I have sought to ‘reconcile the need for historical accuracy with the desire for emotional authenticity’ (Birat 2013, p. 58).

Jack was born in Oxley, Victoria, in 1870, and lived there until December 1917. In the first decade of the 20th century, Oxley was a progressive and rich rural area, with well-developed infrastructure including several churches and schools, excellent roads and plans for a railway connection to nearby Wangaratta (Moonie 1962, p. 11). Jack’s father was the Rate Collector for Oxley Shire from 1887, and Jack trained under his father’s tutelage, eventually taking over the position. Moonie details the rates levy, and the public reaction each time the levy was increased as ‘the rise of a mechanical age challenged the complexity of municipal activity’ (Moonie 1962, p. 15). Moonie (1962) and Jones (1995) both write of the challenges of climate extremes, floods and bushfires, and Boer War enlistments. In the years of Jack’s childhood, the first motor cars and motor cycles arrived in the district, electricity was installed to replace gas lighting, and tractors began to replace farm ploughs (Jones 1995, p. 113). Not all new developments were readily taken up. Although the first trunk line telephone was installed in the district in 1915, by 1945 there were only seven local subscribers (Flanigan 1985, p. 19). In ‘Breaking the Silence’, I utilised this information about the first motor cars and the lack of telephones, in allowing Jack more time to escape due to poor telephone service, and in having William purchase a car at a time when they were still a novelty (Cozens 2015, p. 74).

Jack's documented participation in a rich social life is reflected in ‘Breaking the Silence’; Jack served in many voluntary offices, for example he was vestryman and honorary secretary for the Milawa St Paul’s Church of England, honorary secretary for the Oxley Shire Red Cross, and representative of Oxley Shire School (Wangaratta Chronicle 1915, p. 2; 1916, p. 1; 1917, p. 4). These positions indicate he was well-regarded within his community, but, interestingly, these activities also neatly fit the profile of an embezzler, as described earlier.

This background informed my artefact, and an extensive photographic record of many local sporting and social occasions during the early years of the 20th century gave me
visual references for Jack’s life and activities (Jones 1995, pp. 124-145). This was useful for scenes in ‘Breaking the Silence’ such as the tennis party (Cozens 2015, p. 6), the funerals of William’s wife and of Jack’s father (Cozens 2015, p. 11 & 25), the preparation of Mary’s house (Cozens 2015, p. 10), and in descriptions of domesticity (Cozens 2015, passim).

4.3 Jack’s war experiences

In 1920, Jack Cozens wrote of his WWI experiences, but prefaced his booklet:

As there are so many books written on the war, I do not propose to write much about it, only what I saw. It will be more of a guide to Great Britain should tourists wish a trip there and see as much as I did they will certainly be able to say their trip around the world was a success. (Cozens 1920, p. 3).

His book is more than a tourist guide though: he writes obsequious praises of Great Britain, and includes verbatim reports of speeches by generals and politicians, passages of history, unattributed poems and newspaper reports. However, he does include reports of his experiences in training, in transit and in fighting in France, and these reports have been the basis for fictionalised accounts in ‘Breaking the Silence’. Specifically, these accounts concern:

- a suicide in camp in Ismalia, Egypt (Cozens 1920, p. 9; Cozens 2015, p. 81);
- a torpedo attack as his contingent of reinforcements was en route for Marseilles (Cozens 1920, p. 12, Cozens 2015, p. 84);
- a wild ride on a horse-drawn wagon under shellfire (Cozens 1920, p. 20, Cozens 2015, p. 94);
- an incident of being trapped in a trench with dead soldiers (Cozens 1920, p. 21, Cozens 2015, p. 92).

Jack’s narrative voice is formal, pompous, boastful throughout, and although I was able to use incidents and context from his writing, I could not sense the man behind that voice. Physically his voice was described, in the arrest warrant and elsewhere, as ‘soft’, but his authorial lexicon was bombastic, flowery, pompous, formal. This was not a voice to which I could relate, and I realised how much I was depending on memories of my father’s voice and my grandmother’s voice to ‘hear’ Jack. This search for Jack’s
voice revealed to me the extent to which ‘voice’ is a key to character; Jack’s character remained elusive, indeterminate.

However Frederic Manning’s *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (2012) suggested to me a model for Jack in his character Bourne. Bourne is a loner who senses that he is out of step with his fellow soldiers, and who ‘had the faculty of withdrawing right into himself’ (Manning 2012, p. 107). Bourne’s sense of isolation, of an introspective inner life, provided a model for the fictional Jack of my artefact. Manning says ‘A man may rave against war; but war, from its myriad faces, could always turn toward him one which was his own’ (Manning 2012, p. 221). If Jack’s own account of his war did not turn toward me a voice and face I could recognise as Jack’s, Manning’s war account did, and I seized that isolated, introspective narrative voice for Jack in ‘Breaking the Silence’.

Jack Cozens had created a fictional life for himself, by enlisting under an alias, by denying the existence of a wife and family. As such, he was clearly an unreliable narrator of his own book *Around the World with the AIF in Times of War and Peace* (Cozens 1920), so I needed to corroborate his account of his AIF life with established historical accounts. *The Forty-First* (McGibbon 1919), a record of the 41st AIF in WWI, provided a broad corroborative view of the troop movements and actions in which Jack was involved. Jack arrived in France on 16th August 1918, at the time of the ‘offensive on the Somme which ended the war’ (Downing 2000, p. 130), and Jack’s accounts of his movements in France are further corroborated by Downing (2000, pp. 131-183) and Carlyon (2007, pp. 673-719). Downing describes many of the same engagements and troop movements that Jack experienced, although they were in different battalions and divisions (Downing was 57th Battalion, 15th Brigade, 5th Division: Jack was 41st Battalion, 11th Brigade, 3rd Division). However, because the Australian divisions were ‘leapfrogging’ (Downing 2000, p. 155), relieving each other to allow for rest and reinforcements, it is not surprising that the two accounts overlap. Carlyon (2007) describes the wider sweeps of battle, while Downing (2000) focuses on his own experience in the fighting. Downing’s accounts and personal voice energised and shaped Jack’s voice in my artefact. His lively description of the battle of Bellicourt (Downing 2000, pp. 175-183) runs parallel to Jack’s cool, dispassionate account (Cozens 1920, pp. 22-23), with both detailing the massacre of young American soldiers, and the experience of actually entering the trenches of the Hindenburg Line.
 Downing’s passionate voice, his breathless excitement and fear, his easy vernacular enlivened his account (Downing 2000), and this energy and passion is deliberately transposed into Jack's voice in ‘Breaking the Silence’.

Manning (2012) and Graves (1960) both wrote graphic descriptions of battles (Manning 2012, p. 9 & 207; Graves 1960, p. 156 & 234), of boredom between battles (Manning 2012, p. 51, 91 & 201), and of the strange otherworldliness of army life at the front (Manning 2012, p. 71; Graves 1960, p. 99, 104 & 193). By immersing myself in these accounts, by rereading them and holding them in my mind as I immersed myself in the Australian War Memorial WWI dioramas, I was able to further inform and shape my writing of the fictional Jack’s experiences in France. My writing was further enriched and expanded by battlefield descriptions and information in letters, photographs and images (Macdonald 1991; Butterwood 2014; Nixon 1989). The letters reprinted in these books, plus the WWI accounts of Downing (2000) and Dando-Collins (2011) further supported Jack’s voice and dialogue in the artefact.

Although, like most of my generation, I had a broad and respectful knowledge of WWI, it was only through months of immersion in these and other texts and in visits to the Australian War Memorial and other exhibitions, that I felt confident to create a narrative of Jack’s immediate experiences at war.
5. WRITING FICTIONAL BIOGRAPHY – LITERATURE REVIEW B

5.1 Introduction

My choice of fictional biography as the genre for ‘Breaking the Silence’ reflects the impossibility of writing an historical biography because there was simply not enough source material. The central character and the experiences of his life have disappeared into the silences of so many years, and no witnesses to his life remain alive. Far from wishing to prove or disprove the historicity of my grandfather’s story, my aim is to create a way to comprehend, to construct, and finally to claim Jack’s story as part of my own history and identity. ‘The past is never fully gone. It is absorbed into the present and the future. It stays to shape what we are and what we do’ (Deane 1996).

Like Grenville, I planned to write ‘a non-fiction book … perhaps a biography … and a portrait of his times’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 14). However, as I discovered long-hidden secrets, I needed to keep my focus on Jack’s story, and not let the voice of my own dismay and doubts intrude. Rather than allow the researcher to be trapped by the facts of history, Southgate suggested ‘…following the lead of a novelist, get beyond the particulars and embrace the truly generic – that which is quintessentially “human”’ (Southgate 2009, p. 199). In other words, I needed to remove myself and my reactions, and let Jack’s story tell itself. However, to do this successfully, I needed to consider my writing practice:

…not just from a crafting perspective but also from an ethical perspective –how I shaped my own stories, whose point of view I told them from, how I created and presented all the characters, the language, the structure, what went in and what was left out; and most importantly, to question and interrogate my blind spots, my particular perspective and the moral and ethical perspectives underlying my writing practice. (Gandolfo 2011, p. 4)

These considerations underpinned, and complicated, my whole endeavour; I wanted to embed the fiction of my grandfather’s life within a broader fictional biography, I wanted to honour my father and grandmother for the unspoken stories in their lives, and I wanted to reclaim my grandfather from the silence. While I could and should ascribe partiality to various characters, my challenge was to create an impartial narrator. Clearly none of this was going to be easy.
Grenville (2007a, p. 156) tells how she found it necessary to ‘step out of the limelight … fictionalise the quester, but not the quest’. Ball (2014, p. 4) goes further, saying that ‘storytelling has always been a primary tool [of history]’ and this storytelling must concern itself with causality, not simply an account of what happened; ‘That is what storytelling depends on: narrative is about consequences’ (Ball 2014, p. 4). Hamilton (2012, p. 120) agrees: ‘It isn’t enough to show what a man did – you’ve got to tell us who he was.’

Jack was a man who created a fiction within his own life. This realisation allowed me to enclose his fiction within a broader fiction – a fictional biography of his life, my artefact ‘Breaking the Silence’.

Mailer says ‘the novel is the form best suited to developing … a sense of understanding rather than a rush to judgement’ (Mailer 2003, p. 151). It is this calm, non-judgemental, reasoned narrative voice I seek to use in ‘Breaking the Silence’.

5.2. Making a start

As he detailed in his book (Cozens 1920, pp. 7-24), Jack trained in Brisbane, then in Egypt and England, before being sent to France. Here he took part in various battles, escaped injury, and returned to England to await repatriation. He returned to Australia late in 1919, reunited with my grandmother, and they lived in Queensland until his death, of heart disease, some twenty years later. My entire archive of his life consisted of three photographs, a letter he had written to his sister in 1930, copies of two booklets he had self-published (Cozens 1920, 1936), his army records, his police record, and some newspaper articles.

I hoped the two booklets would give me an insight into the man. The first, Around the World with the AIF in Days of War and Peace (Cozens 1920), is an account of his experiences in the AIF. The second book, A True Story of the Doings of The Kelly Gang (Cozens 1936) is ‘a true and correct account’ of the Ned Kelly story (Cozens 1936, p. iii). Both narratives contain many anecdotes and conversations, unverifiable, and to a modern reader, unlikely. Neither book offered a personal glimpse of the writer/narrator; the voice was impersonal, the narrative barely more than lists of questionable statements of ‘fact’. Perhaps this is explained by Dening (1998, p.208) who says of historical sources 'the silences in them are unfathomably deep: silences of
pain … silences of guilt … The language of the deepest passion is often trite, bland and without apparent depth'. Even after close readings of these books, I felt I knew little of the writer, my grandfather. Hutcheon (1988, p. 122) says ‘that the past once existed, but our knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted’, meaning the signifiers change over time and with individual perspective. This may explain why some of Jack Cozens’ claims seem questionable, even preposterous, to a contemporary reader. For example, writing the Kelly story when he was aged 66, he emphasises the absolute veracity of his story.

At the time of the outbreak of the Kelly lawlessness I was a boy eight years of age … and a boy’s memory at that age is very retentive; any interesting event occurring at that age of life he never forgets, and being possessed of an exceptionally good memory, everything I write here is as fresh on my mind as if the event occurred but a year or two back. (Cozens 1936, p. 11)

He prefaces Round the World With the AIF in Days of War and Peace with the equally boastful and somewhat ludicrous claim that he is writing ‘…in response to a request by some eight hundred soldiers … that I should write an account of my trip around the world’ (Cozens 1920, p. 3).

Added to my incredulity was the clear evidence that Jack Cozens enlisted under an alias, thus denying financial and emotional support to his family during a tumultuous period in their lives, due to his disappearance and the loss of all their goods and property to the bailiff. Clearly Jack had created a fiction within his life, and as such was certainly an unreliable narrator. However, my choice of genre of fictional biography allows for this, and even exploits it, by offering alternative and multiple perspectives on a fictional version of his life story, and recognising that this was not to be an account of factual accuracy, but an imagined narrative of fictional possibilities. Dening (1998, p. 208) quotes Valery 'I believe that this is what we must empower imaginations to do: to see these absent things, to hear these silences' which are 'being broken … by the imagination of poets, novelists, painters …' (Dening 1998, p. 113). Dening describes this use of imagination as 'the capacity to see ourselves as somebody else' (Dening 1994, p. 209).
5.3 Finding the voice of the creative artefact

As I crafted the story, I wanted the reader to identify empathically with the two main characters, Jack and Kate. Both characters behave selfishly, make poor decisions, and hurt others by their choices and actions. But neither is, essentially, a bad person; the point I wanted to make clear was that, under pressure of time and circumstance, anyone might make poor choices. My early drafts presented first one then the other in first person narrative, which seemed a logical and natural voice. But these early drafts failed to give vitality, clarity or credibility to either character; both characters were ‘trying too hard’. I needed to find a more authentic voice for each, and I was drawn to the strong narrative voices in *Voicing the Dead* (Crew 2015) and *True History of the Kelly Gang* (Carey 2002).

In *Voicing the Dead*, Crew tells the story of young Jack Ireland, a survivor of the 1834 shipwreck of the *Charles Eaton* in the Torres Strait. Ireland protects a younger survivor, and the two boys endure danger, terror, starvation, and imprisonment before they are taken in by kindly Murray Island natives. Eventually the boys are ‘rescued’ and returned to European civilisation, and Ireland writes his autobiography. To his indignation this story is edited and largely rewritten by his publisher, Thomas Teller, who prefaces the book thus:

> The Narrative was written by one of the orphans, John Ireland, and I give it to you in nearly his own words, having made but a few alterations in the style in which he tells the tale of their sufferings. (Teller 1845, p. 3)

Ireland declares ‘My tale is not truly told’ (Crew 2015, p. 4), and explicates the deceitful rewriting by Teller by analysing the Preface:

> The Narrative was written by one of the orphans, John Ireland (John, not Jack!), and I give it to you in nearly his own words – (Nearly, note!) – having made but a few alterations – (Few? Try hundreds. Try thousands!) – in the style in which he tells the tale of their sufferings. (Crew 2015, p. 4)

Throughout *Voicing the Dead*, Crew gives Ireland a voice to explain and detail his untold silenced story, his version of his role in historical events, and his outrage at the false histories in circulation; ‘Many lies have been told about me’ (Crew 2015, p. 163).
Jack Ireland is a self-assured boy, with a confident voice – confident enough to challenge his reader ‘you may question my own veracity’ (Crew 2015, p. 167). But the boy is capable of rueful reflection, and is able to learn from his missteps. For example, after nearly drowning as a result of showing off, he declares ‘I fear I have begun badly … I will never be such a fool again. Never’ (Crew 2015, p. 20), and when faced with the reality of cannibalism, he says ‘I have much to learn about humanity’ (Crew 2015, p. 46). He acknowledges his own burgeoning maturity when, after an act of bravery, he recognises that ‘I, too, was becoming a man’ (Crew 2015, p. 113). Indeed, it is this first person voice Crew has created for Jack Ireland gives the boy an unsettling vitality and credibility, allowing the reader to suspend disbelief as Ireland presents evidence in support of his version of the story, evidence that he could not have accessed in his lifetime. Ireland explains this phenomenon as he says ‘I lived then, I live now … I live through the written word … only when I am truly voiced, do I live’ (Crew 2015, p. 4). Crew's title *Voicing the Dead* echoes Greg Dening (in interview with Tim Dymond) discussing the moral element in writing history. Dening says ‘the principal moral element I always found was that I needed to give a voice to the dead. I couldn't give them life of course, but I could give them a voice. And I could give the living an understanding of the consequences of the past for the present. And maybe by the story persuade them to the necessary changes that are needed to offset the consequences of the past’ (Dymond 2001, p. 2). Crew gives Ireland that voice, and the chance to tell his own hitherto hidden story, thus disrupting the accepted mythology of Jack Ireland's story.

Similarly, Carey gives Ned Kelly a first person voice in *True History of the Kelly Gang*, a voice which Ned uses to express his outrage at the treatment he and his family receive at the hands of the law, over many years. Kelly speaks directly to the reader in the opening lines of the novel, ostensibly in a letter to his unborn daughter, ‘I lost my own father … and know what it is to be raised on lies and silences’ (Carey 2002, p. 5). Later the fictional Kelly reminisces about a scandalous story about his father, told to him in his childhood by a vindictive policeman:

> The memory of the policeman’s words lay inside me like the egg of a liver fluke and while I went about my growing up this slander wormed deeper and deeper into my heart and there grew fat. (Carey 2002, p. 10)
Kelly’s memory of that moment colours his attitude to the police throughout his life. My own father was three years old when Jack fled into the AIF, five years old when his father returned, old enough to listen to and comprehend or utterly misunderstand gossip, stories, bullying from other children. Carey’s character Kelly indicates what the reader instinctively knows – that children are shaped by the impressions they receive from their childhood experiences.

Kelly’s voice is harsh, unlettered, aggressive and proud throughout the narrative, and his belief in the stupidity of the police and his own invincibility is his downfall. When Kelly faces certain capture, his lover, the soon-to-be mother of his child, begs him to escape with her to California, but Kelly refuses, declaring himself ‘very offended she should think me such a selfish coward’ (Carey 2002, p. 327), declaring himself safe from the police ‘They cannot catch me … they cannot even find their way along the public highway’ (Carey 2002, p. 328). Unlike Crew’s Jack Ireland, who learns and grows with each new experience, Carey’s Kelly’s experiences through life harden his attitudes of hatred for authority, as in ‘the turnkeys stripped me and shore my cut and bleeding head while heaping me with threats and insults’ (Carey 2002, p. 171), and discovering his thoroughbred horses have been stolen, ‘the thief were beyond the law he were Constable Flood of Oxley’ (Carey 2002, p. 181). His pride and paranoia are shown in bitter expressions; ‘I went back to brooding … all the damage that had resulted from my imprisonment’ (Carey 2002, p. 183), and ‘We was dead men now … we might as well accept the fact’ (Carey 2002, p. 268), and ‘we poor uneducated people will all be made noble in the fire’ (Carey 2002, p. 270).

The voices of Ireland and Kelly are fearless, confident and defiant; each confronts and challenges the reader; each demands that the reader ‘Listen to me’. In each case, the reader is aware, indeed is reminded by the protagonist, that this version of the story is the true version. Carey’s title True History of the Kelly Gang ironically asserts truth, and Kelly says ‘This history … will contain no single lie’ (Carey 2002, p. 5). Crew’s Ireland also asserts that his story is the truth, saying ‘This narrative faithfully recounts … I was there and saw all of this … you may check the accuracy of my story…’ (Crew 2015, p. 8).

The reader accesses the stories of Ireland and Kelly primarily through these strong assertive voices. Each protagonist declares his thoughts and feelings, but at all times remains in control of the content, quality and quantity of the story that is revealed to
the reader. Crew and Carey each offer alternative views and versions of the stories, through anecdotes, quotes and reported dialogues. Indeed, Crew offers several pages of references to support and validate the alternative views offered by Ireland throughout his narrative. Similarly, Carey includes excerpts from The Jerilderie Gazette (Carey 2002, p. 336), the Melbourne Herald (Carey 2002, p. 278) and The Morning Chronicle (Carey 2002, p. 309), each of which offers a journalist’s view of events. Thus, while these selections are controlled by the protagonist, the reader is offered several ways of interpreting aspects of the story.

The use of this self-aware first person voice gives the reader access to the inner life of the character; the reader, rather than identifying closely with the character, is more like an observer, or even a confidant. The protagonist demands neither hero status nor affection from the reader; his demand is simply to be heard.

In my initial drafts, I attempted to replicate this effect, but was unsuccessful, because, I believe, my protagonist had a fundamentally different outlook from those of Crew and Carey; my protagonist’s deception (of taking an alias) was deliberate, planned and sustained for many months. Prior to that, his embezzlement activities required an extended period of deception. Far from being able to assert that his life ‘contained no lie’, Jack created a fictional life for himself to disguise his criminality. Jack, it seemed to me, was such a weak character, so unable to tell the truth, a narrator and a third person voice would serve to tell his story more effectively. This would, I hoped, allow the reader a close identification with the character, in the process of narrative transportation, in which the reader becomes ‘absorbed into the narrative, becomes part of the story and lives the story from the inside’ (Kim, Lloyd & Cervellon 2016, p. 305). This is effective because the narrator, rather than the character, selects, for narrative impact, the events, emotions and developments to be told. My choice of third person omniscient voice, for Jack and for Kate, thus allows the reader access to each character’s thoughts, plus an external view of the character in action. The character is unable to hide, because the narrator, not the character, controls the development of narrative.

Like Crew and Carey, I follow Dening’s imperative to give voice to the dead (Dymond 2001, p. 2). However, unlike the protagonists in Voicing the Dead (Crew 2015) and True History of the Kelly Gang (Carey 2002), my protagonist never confronts the reader, never makes any attempt to reclaim his earlier life or status, nor does he try to
excuse or justify his actions. The reader is cast in the role of external observer, only coming to understand Jack as his story is gradually revealed through his actions, and through his granddaughter’s research. The people most impacted by his decisions, that is, his wife and children, are as silent regarding Jack's story in the artefact as they were in life and in the public record. Southgate (2009, p. 84) describes the novel Rebecca as:

not explicitly concerned with "history" per se … but a narrative with much to do with the potential for tragedy arising from … uncommunicated pasts, … from narratives constructed from these and later found to be baseless.

My discovery that the family narrative, that of my grandfather as soldier hero, was baseless and misleading, was the impetus to give voices to the dead, to attempt to construct meaning through fiction - 'historiographical issues may actually be better presented to a wider public through the medium of fiction' (Southgate 2009, p. 85). This approach gave me a way to both exploit the intriguing details of the research and present at least three possible interpretations through the points of view of three characters (Jack, Charlie, and Kate).

I had difficulty understanding, empathising with or even liking the grandfather I was discovering in the archives; how could I ask my reader to empathise with him? Using third person voice, allows me, through the narrator, to express the bewilderment, frustration and confusion Jack causes, and to ascribe these reactions to Kate and to other characters, especially Jack’s wife, Mary.

Mary is a much stronger character than Jack; her voice is strong and assertive as a young woman, but as soon as Jack leaves, she retreats to the background of the narrative, her character shown entirely through her actions; her distress and dilemma revealed only through others. Excepting for a single letter to Jack, this silenced condition is maintained until her brief dialogue as she is dying ‘Who cares what you understand? I have never understood, and it was my life’ (Cozens 2015, p. 4).

Because I actually knew this grandmother, and always found her to be an angry, querulous woman, I found it easier to ascribe a ‘voice’ to her fictional character. Conversely, I never met Jack; he died many years before I was born, and his character was shadowy to the point of invisibility in my life. I had my father’s vague denials that there was anything to say about Jack, my aunt’s fondness for her ‘gentle but weak’ father, and the brutal clarity of the archival records. Faced with these contradictions, I
struggled to ‘voice’ Jack until I decided, finally, on third person omniscient voice and a fictional name (as discussed earlier).

So ‘Breaking the Silence’ uses two narrative voices, each relating a blend of fact and fiction, yet separated by two generations and by utterly different lives and experiences. The two main fictional characters, Jack Conway and his granddaughter Kate Conway, experience and enact actual situations of the lives of Jack Cozens and myself, set in a broader context of fiction. These dual voices use fiction as ‘a means of explaining a reality which is distinct from it’ (Waugh 1996, p. 89). This allows me to ‘play upon the truth and lies of the historical record’ (Hutcheon 1995, p. 81), which I understand to mean the ways in which documents and family stories can hide, or fail to reveal, or even distort the ‘the historical record’. For example, the research shows that Jack appeared to be financially sound, but police records reveal that he was in considerable debt; research indicates that he deserted his wife and family but it also appears that he may have tried to send money home, and the family archive of postcards Jack sent home from England as he awaited his draft to France show a man concerned for the welfare of his family. There is always, as Dening says, a need to ‘read what was absent in the records and to hear the silences’ (Dening 2004, p. 44).

5.4 Finding the genre of the creative artefact

Auster, attempting to write of his late father, said:

My choices are limited. I can remain silent, or I can speak of things that cannot be verified. At the very least, I want to put down the facts … and let them say what they have to say. But even the facts do not always tell the truth. (Auster 2012, p. 21)

This reflects my feelings as I first discovered about Jack’s alias; I had official documents of events, but no context, no story, no way to make sense of it at that stage. Initially, I searched for more information; the idea of incorporating fiction came later.

Atwood, writing *Alias Grace*, ‘a work of fiction, although it is based on reality’ (Atwood 2009, p. 537), had a rich source of material from prison, hospital and
in institutional archives, from newspapers and commentaries of Grace’s trial and imprisonment, and from letters of doctors and clergymen who visited her (Atwood 2009, pp. 537-41). Atwood makes it clear that she is fictionalising history, adding ‘I have not changed any known facts, although the written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally “known”’. (Atwood 2009, p. 541)

Undaunted, she declared ‘Where mere hints and outright gaps exist in the record, I have felt free to invent’ (Atwood 2009, p. 542). Similarly, Malouf (2010, p. 223), searching for a new angle on an historical figure, found his story ‘only in the margins of earlier writers’. As I researched, I found Jack’s AIF records (National Archives of Australia), and the Victorian Police Records supplied the ‘margin notes’, nothing more.

Writing An Imaginary Life, Malouf said:

… the very absence of fact is what made [Ovid] useful as the central figure of my narrative and allowed me the liberty of free invention, since what I wanted to write was neither historic novel nor biography, but a fiction with its roots in possible event. (Malouf 1999, p. 154)

Like Auster, Atwood and Malouf, I had some clear information, but not enough to write a biography. British biographer Lytton Strachey guided me into fresh considerations, saying that ‘ignorance is the first requisite of the historian’ (Strachey 1965, p. 19).

Although I make no claim to being a historian, I fulfilled that requirement – I knew little about my grandfather, and could not see a way to discover more. Strachey suggested a strategy more subtle than simply repeating all the known facts: ‘attack the subject in unexpected places … shoot a sudden, revealing searchlight into obscure recesses, hitherto undivined’ (Strachey 1965, p. 19). His own approach was to ‘examine and elucidate certain fragments of the truth which took [his] fancy and lay to [his] hand’ (Strachey 1965, p. 19).

Lambert (2014, p. 20) says:

…the power of the documentary lies not so much in its capacity to present objective truth as in its ability to weave a narrative as powerful as fiction … the documentary has more in common with fiction than we have expected.
These approaches suggested a possibility to take the story beyond established background information, and develop a compelling fictional narrative.

Don Watson says:

... a novel is primarily a work of the imagination, and even those set in well-known historical territory might, under various pretexts and guises, describe imagined worlds. (Watson 2014, p. 8)

The official documents of Jack's story were reliable as ‘fragments of truth’, but the human story of the motivations and consequences of his choices could never be discovered now, let alone proven. However, Watson’s ‘well-known historical territory’ was achievable and important to the story. I had the ‘historical territory’ of Jack’s life in Oxley, Victoria, of his land purchases over time, his involvement in a social life, his marriage and family, the accusation and arrest warrant, his escape and enlistment, and his active service in the AIF. Although it was not enough for the story I hoped to tell, it was a rich start.

Leiblich discusses the imperative of contextualising biography in its time and culture, adding, ‘from fractions of information that form a mass, the biographer forges a story…’ (Lieblich 2004, p. 206). Biography has a dual nature, says Leiblich (2004, p. 206), which lies between history and literature. This was encouraging; perhaps I could find a way to fictionalise my grandfather’s story without compromising myself, and without offending my family, both dead and still living. Taking some of the research material of Jack’s biography, and creating fiction around that would allow me to utilise Malouf’s ‘liberty of free invention’ (Malouf 1999, p. 153). Pons goes further: ‘Fiction, then, becomes history’s highest form, the most accurate way of setting out reality before the reader’s eyes’ (Pons 2001, p. 68). Clendinnen says ‘We expect the novelist’s creations and narratives to delight us. That is their proper task’ (Clendinnen 2006a, p. 34). Thus guided and encouraged, I turned to fictional biography.

5.5 Writing fictional biography

Writers have long blended fiction and fact in fictional biography, which may also described as historical fiction, or biofiction. Biofiction is described by Lackey (Lackey 2015, p.3) as 'literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical
character', and where 'the goal is not to do biography. Rather, it is to use history and biography in order to construct a narrative'. However, as I had relatively little material on my protagonist's life or character, I recognised that my focus would necessarily be fiction, not 'bio'. My protagonist uses only the given name of my grandfather; all other identifiers are fictional. Even so, I was able to incorporate important aspects of Jack's life into a fictional biography, recognising that the result would be 'a novelist's view of life and the world, and not an accurate representation of an actual person's life (Lackey 2015, p7).

Contemporary examples of fictional biography range from Suzanne Falkiner’s Ethel: A love story (Falkiner 1996), almost purely biography due to the wealth of information available on the life of her subject, to Allsebrook’s Saint or Sinner? Father Christmas: The Chicago Years (Allsebrook 2011), which is an entirely fictional biography of Santa Claus. Grenville’s The Secret River (Grenville 2006) takes a middle line. This was followed by her memoir, Searching for the Secret River (Grenville 2007a). Grenville originally planned to write the story of her great-great-great grandfather, Solomon Wiseman, ‘a non-fiction book … perhaps a biography of Wiseman and a portrait of his times’ (Grenville 2007:14); Searching for the Secret River describes the development of The Secret River.

I identified with the journey Grenville took in writing Searching for the Secret River, a journey not unlike my own. Excited by her research, Grenville set out to write a book of non-fiction, but faced problems; ‘…most of it was boring … there was something about the tone I didn’t like … where did that awful starchy schoolmarm tone come from? … What was wrong…was the writing itself” (Grenville 2007a, p. 154).

Grenville then describes reading, ‘wolfing down’, Amil's Ghost by Michael Ondaatje, ‘because Michael Ondaatje was telling me what to do … a way out of my deadlock’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 156). As Grenville found her way forward by reading Ondaatje, so I found a way forward reading Grenville's Searching for the Secret River. Like her, I chose to ‘fictionalise the quester, not the quest’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 156), to switch from first person to third person subjective voice (Grenville 2007a, p. 164), to allow the story ‘to speak for itself … to get out of its way’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 171).

Grenville describes her difficulty in ‘finding the picture’ (2007a, p. 159); she resolved this by incorporating sensory details from her own experience – a spitting competition between children, an old woman’s cough, the smoky stench of a homemade slush lamp
Later, Grenville worried that there was no information on some aspects of her ancestor’s life, but she resolved this by adapting information from other sources (2007a, p. 162). Faced with the same problem, I immersed myself in details of the community and culture of Jack’s lifetime, in documents, in movies and in conversations.

Like Grenville, I came up against family silences and half-truths; ‘She didn’t always want to answer. “I don’t really remember” she’d say’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 16); like Grenville, I found a story far more startling than I had anticipated; like Grenville I struggled to find a credible voice for the characters. Using my grandfather’s own name gave me some uneasiness, a sense of disloyalty to his memory and to my father. However, when I changed his name, I was freed. I felt relief and a new sense of clarity, as had Grenville:

> Changing his name changed my relationship to the character. [He] had stepped out of the book now, taking his name with him … I went on writing in another direction, further and further away from him. (Grenville 2007a, p. 188)

I retained much of the historical record I had unearthed, but allowed the story ‘to speak for itself’. In Grenville’s words ‘What I was writing wasn’t real, but it was as true as I could make it’ (2007a, p. 191).

As soon as it was published, although it was clearly presented as a work of fiction, Grenville’s *The Secret River* attracted criticism from a number of historians. Because I use Grenville’s *Searching for the Secret River*, Grenville’s background to her *The Secret River*, as one of my exemplars, I propose to examine this criticism in defence of my own work of blended fiction and history.

Clendinnen, in *The History Question*, felt that Australian novelists in general, and Grenville in particular, were challenging the historians’ role as custodians and interpreters of history’ (Clendinnen 2006a, p. 15). In similar vein, McKenna said ‘we need to resist any tendency to embrace historical fiction as a substitute national history’ (McKenna 2006, p. 110), because ‘the contemporary novelist has become a popular historian … the boundaries between fiction and history have blurred’ (McKenna 2006, p. 96). Hirst also attacked Grenville, accusing her of thinking that ‘novelists, better than historians, can get into the heart and mind of past people’ (Hirst 2005, p. 86). Grenville replied to these charges (Grenville 2007b), emphasising the disclaimer
statement she made in the ‘Acknowledgements’ in The Secret River (Grenville 2006, p. 336), and adding:

Here it is in plain words: I don’t think The Secret River is history – it’s a work of fiction. Like much fiction, it had its beginnings in the world, but those beginnings have been adapted and altered to various degrees for the sake of fiction. (Grenville 2007b, p. 66)

Earlier writers had not attracted such strong criticism for using factual material as the basis for their fiction. For example, Debra Adelaide’s Serpent Dust, written in 1998, featured several voices, including those of Aboriginal people and first settlers, both male and female, convict and free men. Adelaide prefaced her work in a Note to the Reader:

This book is based on historical sources and uses factual information, but as it is a work of fiction, the result more than anything of my own imagination, historical parallels with actual people should be assumed only in their general and not particular sense. A list of books consulted while writing this novel appears at the end. (Adelaide 1998, p. iii)

Throughout the novel, Adelaide quoted excerpts from several of the books referenced, and showed none of Grenville’s reluctance to ‘try to enter the consciousness of the Aboriginal characters’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 193). Yet her novel was warmly received, apparently in the spirit of fiction in which it was offered.

Although Clendinnen says ‘Historians … are the custodians of memory – the retrievers and preservers of the stories by which people have imagined their personal and civic lives’ (Clendinnen 2006a, p. 43), she also acknowledges the importance of imagination in our perceptions of the past. In True Stories (Clendinnen 1999, p. 4), she writes of an incident of first contact between Aboriginals and French sailors, saying ‘We can only infer what happened by exercising our imaginations’ and ‘Reflection on such situations liberates our imaginations to taste experiences other than our own (Clendinnen 1999, p. 7). In Agamemnon’s Kiss, Clendinnen says:

Humans have a unique talent for stories: for telling them, for responding to them and for learning from them. They are the most economical technique we have for expanding experience. Sometimes we can have the sense that we are standing in quite different shoes; that we are experiencing the world from a different perspective (Clendinnen 2006b, p. 130).
There is also acknowledgement by these historians that fiction is, at least sometimes, more appealing to readers. ‘Readers are … willing to trust fiction as history’ (McKenna 2006, p. 98); ‘Novelists claim that a) people-making and b) fluent storytelling can’t be done by historians, or if they can, fiction does it better. I think those claims must be granted’ (Clendinnen 2006a, p. 32)

The objections of Clendinnen, Hirst, McKenna and others to The Secret River seem to reflect the contemporaneous unease over the ‘history wars’ as detailed in Macintyre’s ‘fascinating study of the recent endeavours to rewrite or reinterpret the history of European settlement in Australia’ (Mason, in Macintyre 2003, p. vii). In their responses to Grenville’s work, they were expressing a general concern that fiction writers were seen as better able to tell history than historians. However, as I have shown, these historians do not deny the power of fiction to move between history and fiction, weaving compelling accounts of an imagined past, contextualised, at least to some extent, in historical fact. Pons put the vexed point into perspective: ‘Ultimately, the novelist is a purveyor of fables, and it is no doubt unfair to burden him with the responsibilities of the historian (Pons 2001, p. 71).

The point must be for the fiction writer, myself in particular, to avoid any claim to be presenting an account of actual events, and to remind the reader that my artefact is, in Adelaide’s words, ‘a work of fiction, the result more than anything of my own imagination’ (Adelaide 1998, p iii).

Collingwood-Whittick (2013) raises the issue of a writer's unconscious bias, of an unconscious skewing or manipulation of character and circumstance, to present a kinder image. I have attempted to balance this possibility in 'Breaking the Silence' by presenting Jack as a sympathetic character, but revealing other interpretations of his character and actions through the points of view of the other characters, thus highlighting the subjective nature of experience.

My choice of fictional biography as the genre for ‘Breaking the Silence’ is simply because there is not enough information available about Jack Cozens to write an historical biography; the silences of so many years have obliterated his traces, and those who may have known at least some of his story have died. Grenville encountered similar family silences as she questioned her mother about the gaps in her family history: ‘…she didn’t always want to answer. “I don’t really remember.” she’d say,
and we’d move on’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 16). And when, in preparation for writing The Secret River, Grenville started researching, she found readily available information to fill in those gaps, ‘If it was so easy to discover, why had no one tried before?’ (Grenville 2007a, p. 19).

I faced the same question, and the same family silences. Jack Cozens’ own writings of his time in the AIF (Cozens 1920) revealed little of his personal life; the narration is impersonal, and recounts troop movements, accounts of battles, reproductions of speeches made by dignitaries, an itinerary of his travels and activities after Armistice. He reveals nothing of his emotions, little of his personal activities or connections, or of a personal nature. But research into the public record swiftly revealed the outline of his story. I had the official documents, and I had his cool detached accounts; how was I to write a story of his life from this?

For me, the answer lay in Southgate’s suggestion, ‘… historiographical issues may actually be better presented … through the medium of fiction’ (Southgate 2009, p. 85).

Southgate (2009, p. 196) goes on to suggest that it is not credible to expect ‘a Platonic-style conception of a past … an ideal absolute of truth’. Because, like Southgate, I believe it matters to make a clear distinction between history and fiction, and because of the dearth of factual material to be found regarding my grandfather, I chose to tell ‘Breaking the Silence’ as fictional biography, to better address Southgate’s ‘problematic mix … of truth and tangled falsehood’ (Southgate 2009, p. xi).

These considerations led me to choose fictional biography as a means of writing my family history, and understanding the impact of the secrets and silences within that history. The use of widely separated narrative voices broadens the viewpoint, allowing for multiple and subjective interpretations of actions, motives, and consequences.

5.6 Conclusion

My fictional biography, ‘Breaking the Silence’, is ‘…based on historical sources and uses factual information, but is a work of fiction, the result more than anything of my own imagination’ (Adelaide 1998, Note to Reader) and ‘a work of fiction, although it is based on reality’ (Atwood 2009, p. 537). My choice of fictional biography lies in the difficulties presented by the limitations of the official documents and the lack of further
information, and is an attempt to examine possibilities rather than offer prescriptive explanations, focusing on a silenced story which has formed an integral part of my own identity within my family.

Southgate discusses how ‘one apparently insignificant item of newly discovered evidence can completely disrupt previous memories and perceptions of the past (Southgate 2009, p. 92). It was the discovery of one piece of information, that of my grandfather’s use of an alias, that triggered my research, thus forcing me to rearrange my own memories, perceptions and descriptions of my family’s past (Southgate 2009, p. 92). Although the actual details of Jack’s life and crimes came solely from dispassionate official sources, nevertheless, I was able to assemble sufficient material to build a credible framework to support an imagined life. My task was to explore ways to create a narrative that would do justice to Jack’s story, and to the silenced story of his family, as a microcosm of stories of wives and families deserted as men adopted aliases to disappear into the AIF during WWI.

Dening’s comments on research sum up the literature review: ‘All my fetched (and valued) facts were facts fetched by somebody else. We are all scavengers of other peoples’ findings’ (Dening 1998, p. 20). Thus my bricolage of scavenged findings supports, informs and enriches ‘Breaking the Silence’.
6. FINDINGS AND REFLECTIONS

6.1 Addressing the research question

My research question asks how I could exploit the nuances of the research into the silences and secrets surrounding my late grandfather’s WWI enlistment under an alias, to write a fictional interpretation, which would disrupt the myth of the soldier hero, and examine the ramifications and impact of the alias on his family as a microcosm of other families similarly affected. Answering this question necessitated discovering the traces of Jack’s life story; I needed to learn what had led to his enlistment under an alias before I could begin to understand why he had done that, and the subsequent impact on his family.

Lacking personal knowledge of my grandfather, without any reliable witnesses to Jack’s life, and without any family stories or anecdotes to guide my research, I had only the public record upon which to rely to find the answers I sought. Initially, the AIF records revealed Jack’s adoption of an alias; further research uncovered the arrest warrant and the detailed police record. These three sources of facts – the alias in the AIF record, the arrest warrant, and the police record – comprised the secrets of my grandfather’s story.

Anna Funder, writing All That I Am, said ‘This story … is reconstructed from fossil fragments, much as you might draw skin and feathers over an assembly of dinosaur bones, to fully see the beast. These are the bones I found’ (Funder 2011, p. 365).

I sympathised; this was exactly how I felt, always unsure about the ‘skin and feathers’ I was choosing, hoping always to do justice to the complexity of the lives affected by Jack’s secrets. I constantly returned to my research question, frequently refocussing on ‘the nuances of the research’, that is, on the unexpected and subtle impact of each new discovery on myself, and on the many ways I was forced to rethink, alter and reconsider my plans. I was also confronted by the ‘what if…’ questions posed by Goodall in ‘Nightmares in the Engine Room’:

What if one of those characters lurking at the edges of the scene of knowledge turned out to be a really ugly customer? What if some of the better known characters revealed a murky undercurrent of thought and behaviour? … What if there was something weird about the motives of the scholar ferreting through all this in the library? (Goodall 2014, p. 201)
Goodall’s ‘what if …?’ questions brought my research and my creative writing closer together, colonising the spaces between official documents, rumours and supposition, and silence. Her third question ‘What if there was something weird about the motives of the scholar ferreting through all this…?’ made me aware of the ethical dimension of my research. I was deliberately uncovering secrets long kept by my father, his siblings and my grandmother. I faced self-imposed questions of ‘Did I have the right to ask these questions?’ and ‘What was my motivation for doing this?’, and I needed an acceptable answer before I could successfully address the research question. Goodall discusses how ‘…the relatively smooth surface of everyday life gets ruptured every so often’ (Goodall 2014, p. 206). She reflects that this occurs when ‘somebody decides they want more than can be delivered through the patterns of achievement and gratification laid out through social consensus’ (Goodall 2014, p. 206). Here was a perfect description of my grandfather’s situation – his decision to embezzle money, which was apparently the trigger for all that followed, was driven by that desire for more. Certainly he had ruptured the smooth surface of his life, of the lives of his immediate family, and, as I discovered his secrets, my own life. My intention was to heal that rupture, or at least explain it, and make it a part of my own story. This intention became my focus as I addressed the research question.

6.2 The use, misuse and consequences of aliases

While the discovery of my grandfather’s adoption of an alias was the trigger for my research, it is clear that an alias is a result, and not the underlying cause of his actions. Jack Cozens adopted an alias to hide his identity from the police, who sought to arrest him. Extracts from Victorian Police Report December 1917 – April 1918 detail an active search, with reports coming from various informants:

- Last seen at Albury Railway Station at 11pm 17/12/1917. Probably making for Sydney or Queensland. It is more than likely offender will try and enlist in one of the other States. It is considered he has not much money with him.
- There is no trace of the offender at Liverpool Military Camp.
- I have made inquiries at Victoria Barracks (NSW) but there is no trace of this man having attempted to enlist under the name ‘Cozens and no information concerning his whereabouts can be obtained in this district.
• The offender was seen in Sydney on the 21st December.
• I have made diligent enquiries … I have known Cozens since childhood and can easily identify him … I am anxious for this man's apprehension as he left Victoria owing my Father a fair sum of money.
• I am making every effort to locate him in this State, but I think he may go into the country as he is used to horses, cattle and farming generally.
• He will not go further than NSW for the present. Probably offender will enlist under another name in NSW.

(Extracts from Victorian Police Report file December 1917 – April 1918)

On 28th February 1918 a photograph of Jack Cozens, taken ten years earlier, was forwarded to the police, and this led to a positive identification by Private Frail, his erstwhile roommate at Rifle Range Encampment, Enoggera; ‘There appears to be no doubt that Albert Drummond is identical with the offender John David Cozens’ (Victoria Police files 3rd April 1918). The police were also able to determine that Jack had never lived at his given home address of ’corner Tank St and North Quay, Brisbane’, a boarding house run by a Mrs Spain. Further enquiries established that while Jack's given next of kin, Archibald Drummond, was genuine, Archibald had no brother; Albert Drummond was a fiction (not identity theft). However, once it was ascertained that Jack Cozens’ alias Albert Drummond was already serving overseas in the AIF the search was abandoned, and nothing further added to the file.

Jack revoked his alias by signing a Statutory Declaration on 7th August 1918, while in England awaiting a draft to France. Smith describes the process:

A number of instances have been located which indicate that soldiers serving under an assumed name frequently had a change of heart and reverted to their correct names whilst serving. Usually this simply meant the soldier would complete a Statutory Declaration and the records would be adjusted accordingly without any fuss (Smith 1995, p. 6).

Smith offers a possible reason for men choosing to revert to their real names; ‘when the likelihood of their return to their loved ones began to fade, they chose to reveal their true identity so that kith and kin would be advised of their fate’ (Smith 1995, p. 6).

An added result was that an enlistee now had the chance to ensure a portion of his pay was automatically allocated to his wife and family, and this was certainly true in Jack’s
case. However, the financial hardship of the wives may have been an unintended consequence in many cases. Smith says of men taking an alias:

A principal reason for this was to avoid the mandatory payment or allotment of a significant portion of their pay to their spouse. In the second decade of this century (20th C) the inability of a man to have entire control over his pay and how much he decided to pay his wife was an aggravation to many. (Smith 1995, p. 4)

This view indicates a social attitude almost inconceivable today, the idea of a man holding full financial control over his wife and family; ironically, at that time women had recently won the right to vote, even to stand for positions in Federal Parliament. However, the note in the police record indicating that Jack’s nominated next-of-kin, Archibald Drummond, was able to access his pay at the Wangaratta Pay Office would seem to indicate that it was common practice for a next-of-kin to access a portion or all of the soldier’s pay. Stockings (2012, p. 45) describes a case of a 16-year-old enlistee, sole breadwinner for his family, who signed up primarily to improve the family income from 30 shillings a week to 42 shillings a week, adding ‘and mum didn’t have to feed and clothe me’. In another example, Stockings describes an out-of-work miner who enlisted because ‘in the army I would be fed and my wife with a 3 shilling a day allotment would be able to live...’ (Stockings 2012, p. 46).

Smith emphasises that although many enlistees hid behind aliases, ‘a surprisingly large number of men served in the Australian forces under aliases … for the most part with honour and distinction’ (Smith 1995, p. 1). Indeed, ‘many men using aliases were decorated’ (Smith 1995, p. 7). Their reasons for using aliases ranged widely and included criminality, simple spelling errors, a German-sounding name, being underage or over age, or marital problems. Smith says ‘It is fair to say that a soldier who enlisted under an alias had something to hide’ (Smith 1995, p. 2). The taking of an alias by so many men in order to enlist, indeed to make enlistment possible, especially for non-criminal reasons, may indicate a recognition of the soldier-hero image, and a desire to match it. Jack echoes this in 'Breaking the Silence' when he takes 'A hero, not a criminal' as his motivating mantra as he escapes the police. And while, as Smith says, many of these men were decorated, the impact on their families – emotional, financial and social – is the element of the soldier hero myth I have sought to disrupt. The practice of using an alias was so widespread that some unit histories, for example that
of the 17th Battalion, even compiled lists of known aliases in the unit after the war (Smith 1995, p. 1). Possibly the best-known example of a soldier serving under an alias is the case of Private Simpson, renowned as Gallipoli’s ‘The man with the donkey’. Simpson’s true name of John Simpson Kirkpatrick was not revealed until after his death in 1915, and no reason for the alias has been ascertained.

Interestingly, few women in the forces used aliases. Smith argues this is because ‘some indication of qualification or experience was necessary before women were accepted for service in the Nursing Service which thus obviated falsification of names’ (Smith 1995, p. 9).

A longer lasting consequence of the use of aliases is the difficulty current family history researchers have in tracing a missing family enlistee. Toni White, consulting genealogist to the Australian Defence Force Unrecovered War Casualties Unit which is attempting to match, using DNA, remains of unknown soldiers in France with families in Australia, says that while some missing-in-action files may be up to 90 pages long, the searches are complicated by aliases, by amnesia in wounded soldiers, and by family secrets and silences.

Whatever the motivation for using an alias, it is clear that the alias served to create a new identity for the enlistee, and unexpected complications for their families, complications of financial, emotional and social stress.

Jack Cozens used his alias for less than eight months, but the consequences of the fiction he had thus created of his life lasted until his death in 1937. On his return to Australia in December 1919, he reverted to his own name, but he never returned to his old life. He never saw his mother or siblings again, he never returned to paid employment, and he never set foot in his home state of Victoria again.

It appears that the arrest warrant was never formally revoked or cancelled, nor was he ever called to face a court to answer for his crimes. Neither police nor Court records reveal any further entries in Jack’s file after 1918, when it was established that he had enlisted in the AIF under an alias. A Queensland Police Records Archivist offered several possible reasons for this:

- a warrant in Queensland may not have been followed up if the offence was not serious enough to be extraditable;
• as there was no central or State database, the local police at Buderim where Jack settled may have had no knowledge of an outstanding arrest warrant. Unless an officer was aware of Jack’s offence, and his presence in the area, he may have simply gone unnoticed;

• a man who had served his country in war may have been treated with some leniency, if the offence was not serious, and if he drew no further police attention;

• the sale of his land and goods by the bailiff may have satisfied his debts, and although this did not remove the criminality of his actions, it may have softened the urgency to find him.

Whatever the reason, Jack lived undisturbed by the police following his return to Australia. If he considered that he was hiding, he was doing so in plain view. Indeed, he is listed on the Electoral Rolls for Wide Bay from 1925 until his death in 1937. He applied for and was granted a lease on a soldier settlement block (which became a pineapple farm), he was active on the committee of the local Progress Association, and wrote impassioned letters to local papers on matters of fruit growing, and political movements. However, although he appears to have no fear of arrest, and was not classified as disabled, he was never again employed in the paid workforce after his discharge from the AIF.

Wives were officially classified as dependants, however ‘women’s labours could make the difference between subsistence and destitution for the family even if this was not always publicly apparent’ (Larsson 2009, p. 104). Although ‘a capable and hard-working wife was the most valuable asset’ a man could have on a farm, the Soldier Settlement farms ‘often proved disastrous … for a combination of reasons, including small blocks, the inexperience of settlers, lack of capital investment and falling produce prices’ (Larsson 2009, p. 110). Jack’s three-day visit to an Agricultural Show in Wales at the end of the war would have done little to prepare him for life on a pineapple farm in Queensland. ‘Life was not easy for most women living on a soldier settlement block’ (Williams 2009, p. 2) and Jack’s wife was forced to create additional income for the family, which she did by running a boarding house Ocean View at Buderim for several years, then, after the family of then seven children moved to Woombye, by cleaning the Woombye State School. Throughout these years, she also
took in laundry and ironing, and offered her services as a domestic cleaner. ‘Such home-based businesses allowed … [returned] soldiers to engage the unpaid labour of their wives, and still be seen as independent breadwinners in the eyes of others’ (Larsson 2009, p. 107). This was a very different life to the one Jack’s wife had enjoyed prior to the war, in Oxley, Victoria, where she was a well-to-do young matron, employing household help. It would seem Jack’s wife bore more of the burden of the practical consequences of the alias than he did himself.

6.3 The silence of the families

Many factors contributed to the silence of wives and families of deserting husbands. Certainly a criminal offence, such as in the case of Jack Cozens, would bring shame (by association, however unfair that may be), and social isolation within a conservative, law-abiding rural community such as Oxley, Jack’s home town in Victoria. But another contributing factor may be the difficulty of locating a deserting husband. The *Deserted Wives and Children’s Act 1840* attempted to ensure the deserting spouses could be held responsible for the financial maintenance of the family. However, until recent times the legislation was less effective than intended because of the multiple difficulties of disseminating identifying information widely, of limited police and personal resources (applicants were required to pay for police searches), widespread use of aliases, the reluctance of women to apply for assistance lest their children be taken into State care, and the necessity for women to sue their husbands for maintenance before welfare support could be granted.

Various reports in Victoria’s Police files relate to wives seeking assistance in finding their deserting husbands for the purpose of financial support (Harris 2016). One such application, from a Mrs Allis, is dismissed because ‘she still hasn’t paid the charges incurred in finding him two years previously’ (Harris 2016, Victoria Police files List 57). Another deserted wife, Jane Carey (Harris 2016, Victoria Police files List 80), was eventually informed that her missing husband had enlisted under an alias, but no further information regarding her request for assistance is given. The wife of John Oswald Kenny (her own name is not given in the records) applied for assistance when her husband deserted his army post in 1919, but this was denied and her children were
taken into care. No further information is available regarding her fate (*The West Australian* 02/02/1922).

Another reason for the silence of women in the public record may be the refusal of authorities at that time to recognise a woman in preference to her husband. Clark (2015, p. 7) describes a case where a young enlistee in 1915 gave his mother as next-of-kin, as his father had left the family some time earlier and was living interstate. The army ‘appeared to prefer a male next-of-kin and added the father’s address in NSW’ (Clark 2015, p. 7). The enlistee challenged this, but to no effect, and when he was killed in action, his separated parents fought bitterly for his personal effects, each claiming to be next-of-kin (Clark 2015, p. 7).

Records are vague about the specific ways a deserted wife managed to create an income for herself and any dependants. Research of earlier times shows that some women resorted to prostitution. Prior to the Crimean War:

> Many women resorted to prostitution, or worked in deplorable conditions for starvation wages, to avoid the workhouse. Even when outdoor relief was available, widows claimed only as a last resort, because of the risk of losing their children. Often, all, or all but one, of her children, were taken into the workhouse to free a widow for work, as a condition of relief being paid. (Lomas 2000, p. 124)

Deserted wives applying for assistance during WWI were subject to police checks, on the basis of which assistance would be denied or granted. One such check, on a Mrs Alice Donovan of Brisbane, implies prostitution, and reports that although her landlady:

> could find no fault with her … neighbours were continually complaining about her character and said that men came to the house at all hours. A man named McMurtery was often seen leaving the house in the early hours of the morning. (Queensland Archives 25156)

Larsson (2009, p. 107) observes how little evidence remains of the working lives of the wives of soldiers, even after the soldiers returned to Australia. Others echo this view. Referring to soldier settler farms, such as the pineapple farm Jack Cozens leased, Williams says the records:

> … do not mention how the women in the family contributed to the economic survival of the farm and the general well-being of the
family. This has been due in some part to farming being traditionally defined as typically Australian with the farmer tough and strong – a bushman and country man. This patriarchal definition of farming therefore places a divide between the public one of the farm and the private one of the home and family, contributing to the stories of women married to soldier settlers being unwritten, undisclosed and unacknowledged (my emphasis). (Williams 2009, p. 1)

The records show that my grandmother dealt with many challenges during her lifetime, including the impact of her husband’s criminality, the loss of everything the family owned when Jack was declared insolvent, a humiliating loss of social status, upheaval to settle in a new home far from everything and everyone she had known all her life, and the demands of raising seven children plus working at menial jobs to create an income. Following Jack’s death in 1937, she remarried a year later, and continued to work on her new husband's market garden farm. Only after being widowed twice, when she was elderly, diabetic and in failing health, was she able to ‘retire’. Her life was clearly eventful and, in many aspects, traumatic. But no written or oral record remains. She neither spoke nor wrote of her secrets; no letters remain to show whether she maintained any contact with friends made in the early years of her marriage in Victoria. All her offspring (all now deceased) spoke of her with love and respect, all emphasised how hard she worked, how steadily she supported her family. Yet none of them broke the silence that blanketed the secrets of their parents, secrets of which it seems incredible that they were unaware.

It was the discovery of a secret that set me on this journey to discover my grandfather, his story and the story of his family. That one secret became a cascade of secrets as I researched, revealing a family story I had never suspected. And if the impact was powerful on me, who had never known my grandfather, I could only imagine how it must have affected my grandmother, my father and his siblings, who lived with the knowledge and the secrets. As astonishing as the secrets themselves was the awareness that all of my father's family had kept silent all their lives; had carried the secrets to their graves. How powerful was the impact of those secrets on each of them that they never spoke of it to the next generation, neither ever confessing nor making light of it?

In 'Breaking the Silence' the characters of Charlie and Kate demonstrate this emotional impact; indeed one reason I chose fiction was because it offered the possibility of conveying this emotional aspect.
Much of the full truth of Jack’s story will never be told, can never be fully discovered now. Pons (2001, p. 69) describes the gap between ‘what is publicly revealed and what has been kept hidden … the secret part has to do with the inner, that is the emotional life … feelings of love especially’. These emotional aspects are revealed in the character of Kate as she discovers and comes to terms with each new piece of information, each time having to adjust not only her own identity beliefs but her emotional relationship with her father. Through her, I revealed some of the impacts of revealing family stories, as I experienced them in my research, in telling the story to other family members and in rethinking my own identity-story. That this story has met with mixed responses among my family serves to show how, even one hundred years after the events described, there is a desire to cling to the myth of the soldier hero.

May my attempts to imagine my grandfather Jack Cozens into being, through the persona of Jack Conway in ‘Breaking the Silence’, create an empathic understanding of the complexity of his life, his decisions and the impact on those he loved best.

6.4 Reflections on the creative writing process: Starting the journey

‘Who was my grandfather?’ Having discovered the secrets behind the silence of my grandfather’s life, I was intrigued to find out how a seemingly intelligent, relatively prosperous man could have ended up as he did – on the run from the law, his life destroyed, his family abandoned. There was no information to be found in the family history or documents such as old letters, no clues. But as my forensic searching of official records uncovered first one then more secrets, I quickly realised that my journey of discovery was as intriguing as the story I sought; perhaps I should consider a parallel narrative. As my resolve grew to not only discover, but to write Jack’s story, I faced a number of issues:

- What form would such a story take?
- Did I have the right to reveal long-kept secrets?
- Was it possible to tell the story without offending my family?

The early entries in my journal reveal how I circled around these questions, choosing first one approach, then a different one, as information came to light, and my ideas crystallised.
To address the first question – initially I thought a biography would suit the story. I hoped to discover as much as possible of Jack’s life – I still believed that there was much as yet undiscovered – and weave that around a biographical narrative of my journey of discovery. I planned a combination of artefact and exegesis in a single narrative, perhaps a metafictional biographical narrative in the style of *Louisa* by Brian Matthews (1987) or *HhH* by Laurent Binet (2012). These both interweave the narrative with interruptions, asides, corrections and comments by the narrator/author. This approach appealed, and I planned to create Jack’s story counterpointed against my own, richly referenced with material to contextualise and intensify the narrative. However, I swiftly realised that both the examples chosen were based on public figures with an abundance of research material available. Faced with very little official information and no personal family information, I modified my choices, and decided to use two fictional narrative voices to achieve a similar, but more conventional form of fictional narrative.

Did I have the right to reveal long-held secrets, and could this be done without offending my own family? As I began the project, Jack’s second daughter was still alive, in her 100th year, and of deeply unreliable memory. My late father had never forbidden discussion of his father, but had dismissed the topic as of no interest. However, the reactions of my siblings and cousins varied from shock to amusement, and from horror at the prospect of family secrets being told, to a wish to know more. Goodall says that ‘writers … must have motive’ (Goodall 2014, p. 206), which springs from, and from which springs, the impetus to write the story in the first place. The reactions of others to my plan to write Jack’s story forced me to examine my motives. Why did I want to write this story, what compulsion was driving me? Beyond a scandalised fascination with my initial discovery of the alias, I felt a need to uncover the stories the family had refused to tell, and to better understand my father in doing so.

My initial attempts to create the planned narrative, combined with my concerns about revealing family secrets came into sharp focus when I realised that there was far less factual material to be discovered about my grandfather than I had hoped. Atwood describes her impulse to write; ‘To set down the past before it is all forgotten. To excavate the past because it has been forgotten’ (Atwood 2003, p. xix). Faced with the same contradictory compulsion, I needed to rethink my whole approach. Biography
demands verifiable facts, lots of them, and these were not to be found. However, by changing my approach, by turning to fictional biography rather than biography, by fictionalising names, by creating a parallel fictional narrative of Jack’s story counterpointed against my own, even altering the time line for the younger character, I could comfortably address the questions of form and integrity.

6.4.1 Shaping the artefact

Jack’s fictional life story would be central to my narrative – Jack’s life as he lived it, and Jack’s life as discovered by his granddaughter. The decision to use dual third-person viewpoints opened up the perspectives possible, and allowed an outsider's view of each character to complement the narrator's view. To create this as fiction, I needed to make many decisions simultaneously, decisions regarding the plot outline, the context of his life and of his granddaughter's life, a timeline for the action, the voices and nature of the characters and more. Hamilton says ‘the process of writing is messy and illogical, and it may take a while before you get the design right. Only rarely will you know where to start at the commencement of your labours’ (Hamilton 2012, p. 130).

How true this was. I made many false starts, many ‘perfect’ inspirations evaporated once I tried to realise them in words on paper. I had in mind a few key scenes, and wrote these in some detail. This gave me impetus to start to shape the characters, and to set them in relation to each other. These key scenes that intrigued me were:

- The discovery of the mystery and the secrets by Kate (the granddaughter).
- Jack’s situation and feelings as he waited for the late night train that would remove him from the reach of the arrest warrant, and simultaneously end his life as he had known it to date.
- The story that Jack would offer if he were confronted to explain his past.

Creating these scenes, even in embryonic form, forced the decisions of time, context, and structure. Gradually the two main characters crystallised into ‘real’ entities about whom I cared, and in whom I believed, even when they behaved in unexpected or
unlikeable ways. The timelines I created for the main characters, plus the facts my research was uncovering, helped me to maintain control on the narrative. Goodall (2014, p. 203) warns of the risk of ‘taking improvisation too far and losing the logic and shape that are integral to an effective plot’. To avoid this, she suggests that ‘research can help anchor the inventive dimensions of the story’ (Goodall 2014, p. 203). Thus warned, I kept my timelines and my research materials in focus, switching my attention between the artefact and the exegesis, developing each in parallel. Biggs discusses the value of ’using constraints … as stimuli’ (Biggs 2014, p. 77). Certainly the constraints of the factual aspects of my research, combined with my self-imposed constraints of timelines and context, both controlled and stimulated the writing.

Structuring the story, deciding on the sequencing of the narrative, was a decision that grew out of my concern to introduce Kate early, to give her a strong motivation to uncover the story she had stumbled onto by chance. At the same time, I felt a moral imperative to reveal Jack’s story from an empathic narrator’s viewpoint – not telling the story for its shock impact, but in a genuine attempt to understand why he had acted as he did, and why his family had decided to let his story die with him. My aim was to both tell the story and seek the deeper meaning; this aim lay behind each choice of what to include, what to create, what to omit entirely. In this way, the writing depended on discipline to adhere to the timelines, and to include only the material that moved the story forward and created the empathic view I sought. Other genre choices would have resulted in a different narrative; keeping my focus on the strictures and freedoms of fictional biography, I was able to use the research material to propel rather than stifle the fictional narrative. For example, I was able to include in the narrative, almost verbatim, the actual arrest warrants, the newspaper reports of his crime and his flight from justice, his AIF enlistment and war service documents, even the statutory declaration which signalled his return to his real name.

The narrative structure begins in Kate’s story, as she is unexpectedly confronted with a mystery surrounding her (supposedly) late grandfather. The narrative then switches to Jack’s story, and details, over many chapters, his young life, his personal and career successes, and his wrongdoing and eventual downfall, his army life, his return to Australia and his life until he finally faces his son, only to be rejected. The narrative line returns to Kate as she searches for and eventually finds Jack, and the final section covers the convergence of their two lives, until his death. This structure allowed me to
introduce Kate and her motivations early, but also to present Jack as a sympathetic character, a weak man who makes very poor decisions with terrible consequences, rather than an inherently evil man. When Kate eventually meets Jack, she likes him and wishes to know him better, as well as to hear his story. Her family loyalties are stretched; Jack is, unsurprisingly, an unreliable narrator, but in the end, Kate has learned his story, from Jack and from others, and the narrative closes with Kate able to assimilate the contradictions and complications into her own sense of her identity within her family. In this way, I was able to address the research question – How could I exploit the nuances of the research into the silences and secrets surrounding my late grandfather's WWI enlistment under an alias to write a fictional interpretation which would disrupt the myth of the soldier hero, and examine the ramifications and impact of his decisions on his family, as a microcosm of other families similarly affected? Creating the artefact, constructing the narrative, seemed a manageable task at the outset. As I first put pen to paper, and as I stepped out Kate’s journey of discovery in my own life, my euphoria seemed enough to carry me through to the completion. However, as could be expected, I soon encountered ‘an inability to see [my] way forward’ (Atwood 2003, p. xxii). Working on the exegesis and artefact in parallel helped the process. In Goodall’s words:

> I was learning how practice-led research can dig deep into the imaginative process. A kind of knowledge-based dreaming can take over and researched elements start to lead the way. (Goodall 2014, p. 204)

Certainly the researched elements, and my timelines, did start to lead the way, albeit cautiously – like Virginia Woolf, I found that ‘writing the novel is like walking through a dark room, holding a lantern which lights up what is already in the room anyway’ (Atwood 2003, p. xxii). The researched material became, as I wrote, ‘what was already in the room’; my task was to sidestep the obstacles, make use of the furnishings, avoid tripping. Many writers claim not to know precisely where their writing would lead (Atwood 2003, p. xxi), and certainly this sense of finding a credible path through a labyrinth stayed with me throughout the writing of the artefact. As I worked, I discovered, again and again, ‘the point at which consciousness needs to resign its controls, and the equally vital point at which it must resume them again'

(Goodall 2014, p. 207). Achieving this balance between conscious control and creative
wandering is described as ‘not trying to sort it all out too early … a balance between revealing knowledge and also being unknowing’ (Haseman & Mafe 2014, p. 221). This is, they acknowledge, ‘not a very comfortable position to put oneself in … but for the reflective practitioner very rewarding (eventually! hopefully!’) (Haseman & Mafe 2014, p. 222). For me, the retreat into reflective periods became deeply rewarding: in reflection, especially through journal writing, I was able to dispassionately evaluate progress, while allowing the creative impulse to sort through the decisions and puzzles, so that when I resumed writing, a sense of inevitability guided each new step. Even so, throughout there was a sense of watching, rather than directing, a stage play complete with a complex plot, interesting characters and an ending which surprised and moved me.

Writing the artefact and the accompanying exegesis has been a journey both exhausting and exhilarating. When I set out, my late grandfather was a mystery; as I complete the journey, I understand more of the context and circumstances of his life, and especially of the heartache and difficulties experienced by my grandmother and other women in similar situations. I have been astonished at what I have learned of the stories hidden within my family, and the invisible stories of hardship, grief and suffering of the women and families during the early years of the 20th century. This burgeoning awareness of the scale of the suffering of deserted wives, the difficulties they faced, and the few choices they had, was what encouraged me to create a story which turns attention to the issue of deserted wives in war. Above all, the journey has given me a sense of my grandfather's life, an awareness of the difficulties faced by deserted wives a century ago, an empathy with my father who felt the need to keep the secrets, and a deepened sense of identity within my family.
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BREAKING THE SILENCE

Bronwyn Cozens

Creative Artefact
BREAKING THE SILENCE

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The tram clanged to a standstill opposite the entrance to the hospital.

‘Royal Brisbane. All out for Royal Brisbane Hospital.’ The conductor stepped aside as Kate joined the swirl of departing passengers pushing between others eager to climb aboard.

She pulled her coat close against the chill wind, and crossed to the flower kiosk at the hospital entrance. A cluster of buckets offered fragrant red and pink roses, early jonquils, and glowing orange gerbers. Jonquils – Gran would enjoy the first signs of spring. She selected a generous bunch, wincing at the price as the girl wrapped them.

A bell in the green-tiled foyer chimed the start of visiting hour and the crowd at the entrance surged inside. Sheltered from the chill wind, Kate paused, smoothing her blonde hair, dabbing her fringe into place. *Come on, stop delaying.* She hurried along the corridor, wrinkling her nose at the sharp smell of disinfectant. *I should’ve chosen the roses.* The soles of her shoes squeaked on the linoleum floor as she hurried around the last corner, and into the ward. Six beds on each side of a long room, separated by green curtains. She hesitated in the wide doorway, and gazed around. There was Gran, second bed on the left, dozing. Smiling, Kate hurried toward her, remembering her mother’s warning. *She’ll probably be sleepy with the painkillers, a bit confused. Don’t expect her to be her old self.* That may be a blessing, Kate thought, Gran’s *old self* could be sharp-tongued, impatient, fiery-tempered.

The elderly woman lay flat in the bed, her head raised on a thin pillow, her sparse white hair scraped back into a bun, her bony arms neatly aligned on the tightly tucked coverlet. She didn’t stir as Kate pulled a chair to the bedside and sat, trying to ignore the smell of urine and sickness. Now what? She glanced at the animated clusters of visitors around the other beds, wishing her mother had come with her. Should she wake Gran? She laid the bouquet on the bed, and waited.

Kate was faraway in thought when a small movement alerted her. Gran was awake, watching her, expressionless.
‘Who are you? What do you want?’

‘Gran, it’s me, Kate. I … I’ve come to see how you are …’

‘Well, why didn’t you say so? You know I can’t see without my glasses. Where are they?’

Kate smiled in relief. Gran was her old self, it seemed. She found the heavy, tortoiseshell-framed glasses in the top drawer, and eased them onto Gran’s face. ‘See, it’s just me.’

‘Hmph. Visiting time, is it? What have you done with your hair? It used to be so pretty. Now … hmph! Have I had my lunch yet?’

‘I expect you have, Gran. It’s almost three o’clock, you've slept through most of visiting time. They’ll bring you a cuppa soon. Look, I brought some jonquils. Lovely, aren’t they?’ Kate held up the flowers, then leaned to kiss the old woman. ‘You need face powder, you’re too pale. How’re you feeling now? Has the pain eased?’ She pulled the chair closer, and took her grandmother’s hand. ‘Is there a vase here? Shall I ask for one?’

‘Quiet, Katie. You wear me out with your questions. Just sit…’ Gran’s eyes closed and her head lolled to the side.

‘Gran…?’ Had she really drifted to sleep as easily as that? Was she dead? A ripple of panic slid across Kate even as she watched the old woman’s chest rise and fall in steady breaths. No, she really was just asleep. What had Mum said? Don’t be alarmed, Kate, she’s affected by the drugs. Talking nonsense, falling asleep in the middle of a sentence, that sort of thing.

Kate gently stroked the bony hand in hers, gazing around the bright ward. Visitors clustered around each bed, awkward with anxiety. The bedside tables were crammed with flowers and cards, there was a pile of folded white towels on a trolley, and overseeing the room, a young nurse, barely older than herself, penciling notes at the desk. Wide beige-curtained windows opened onto a view of city buildings, and the air buzzed with murmurs of conversations. She jumped at a hand on her shoulder.

‘Hello, Katie, I didn’t expect to see you here.’

Kate spun round, looking up into her father’s clear blue eyes. ‘Hi, Dad. I skipped afternoon lectures. Just this once. Hey, is Gran okay? She keeps falling asleep on me.’
Charles’ tanned face creased in a warm smile as he slipped his hat off and bent to kiss her. He pulled a chair alongside the bed, combing his thick greying hair back with his fingers. ‘I’ve just been talking to the Sister. Apparently she’s as well as can be expected. She’s old, and after a fall like that, she has to deal with the shock as well as crushed vertebrae. They said that sleep is how her body copes; she’ll drift off all the time now. Mind you, she’s on some powerful painkillers, so we shouldn’t expect much sensible conversation. But she’s comfortable enough. How’s uni going?’

‘Great news. That’s why I took the afternoon off – I wanted to tell Gran.’

As if on cue, the old woman opened her eyes and peered at them. ‘Have you brought me a cuppa yet?’

Charles stood to kiss his mother. ‘They’ll be along directly, Mum. But Katie’s got some news for us while we wait, haven’t you, Katie.’ He smiled at his daughter as she reached into her bag to pull out an envelope.

‘My Honours project has been approved!’

‘Hmph. Thought you were going to tell us you’re engaged. How old are you now, Kate? Time to be thinking of settling down, girl.’ Gran scowled at them both, and Charles smiled back.

‘Kate’s too smart to settle down just yet. Give her time.’ He turned to Kate. ‘What’s so special about this project? Why haven’t I heard about this before?’

Kate flapped the letter in excitement. ‘I applied for a variation of my original plan. Didn’t want to say anything until it came through. And I received approval today. Now I can start some serious research.’

‘That’s terrific, love. Is it to do with your Australian history studies?’ Charles was beaming with pride.

‘Our history. Your history. I’m going to find out all about your father’s time in the AIF in France, where he fought, where he was killed. I hope to discover his movements along the battle sites and trace his footsteps. And of course, I will try to locate his grave. And then I will write his story.’

Gran laughed, a high bitter cackle. ‘No good comes of all this fancy education. Never did, never will. Where’s my tea?’
Charles glanced at his mother, then turned to Kate, his face grim. ‘We need to talk about this, Kate. Not here. Don’t say any more for now.’ He turned back to Gran. ‘And what did the doctors say today, Mum?’

‘It’s my back that’s broken, Charlie, not my ears. I heard what Kate said. I’m waiting for you to leave so I can speak privately to her.’

‘What are you both talking about?’ Kate’s excitement crumbled, and tears trembled in her voice. ‘I know Grandpa Will was my step-grandfather. I haven’t forgotten that. And I have no intention to hurt his memory. But I’m talking about my real grandfather here, the man who was killed in France in 1918. Your real father, Dad. He was a war hero. He fought and died in France. It’s only right that I should research his life, and honour his memory.’

Charles cleared his throat, ‘You can just forget the whole idea, Kate. Find another project. This one is not going to work, take it from me.’

‘What are you saying? Haven’t you ever wanted to know more about him? What about your old friend, Mr Parr? I remember you said he fought with your father, knew him before he was killed. Didn’t he tell you stories? What about that journal of your father’s? You showed me that once, you must have been interested.’ She hesitated, staring at her father’s solemn face. ‘I don’t understand what’s happening.’

Gran laughed again, a thin unpleasant sound. ‘You don’t understand. Hmph. Who cares what you understand? I have never understood, and it was my life. Mr Bloody Parr, indeed! Go away, both of you. Go away. Now!’

Horrified, Kate realised that Gran was crying, not laughing. She stood to move closer, but the bell shrilled to signal the end of visiting, and at once the nurse appeared at her elbow, hustling her away toward the door. ‘Better to go, love, she gets upset. It’s the pain, you understand. I’ll give her an injection, she’ll be fine.’

Charles was beside her as she stopped in the doorway, turning to wave goodbye. But the green curtains hid Gran already, and Kate gave in to her tears. He hugged her awkwardly, but she pushed him away.

‘Dad, I’ve no idea what you’re talking about, but I am going to do this research, with your help or without.’
‘I’m begging you not to, love. This isn’t the time or the place to talk about it. And I don’t know where to begin to explain. Or even if I can. But I am asking you, for all our sakes, find another project. Please.’

Kate stared him, chilled by his urgency. ‘All right. I’ll go back to my original idea.’ She spoke slowly, her thoughts swirling in confusion. ‘A demographic study of early pioneer settlement and subsequent prosperity. Okay?’

‘Thank you.’ He hugged her. ‘Thank you. I’ll explain one day. But not now. Maybe when you graduate. Is that a deal?’

Kate hesitated, then nodded. ‘It’s a deal.’

*But I won’t let this go. I’ll find out what’s behind this weird reaction long before then, I promise you.*
PART II
CHAPTER 2
March 1908. Wallsley, Victoria.

As loser of the mixed doubles match, it was Jack’s task to buy the drinks. He balanced the tray of lemonades across the wide lawn, pausing to admire the tableau of his tennis partners relaxing on the grass. His sister, Amy, her fair hair glistening in the sunlight, was leaning close to her friend, Mary, both laughing. Stretched along the lawn, facing them, William, his dark eyes sparkling, was no doubt spinning some unlikely story.

Jack smiled as he approached the group. ‘I have to say, you look like that French Impressionist painting, you know the one? Something about a picnic in a park?’

Mary smiled up at him as he passed glasses to the young women, then to William.

‘Here’s to tennis. And to good company!’ Jack raised his glass as they echoed, ‘Tennis. Good company.’

‘Talented and beautiful good company,’ William laughed. ‘And I don’t include you in that, Jack.’ He turned to the young women. ‘I’d love to paint you, Mary. Would you allow that, do you think?’ William winked at Jack, then lay back on the grass, twirling a blade of grass in his fingers.

Mary turned to him, her brown eyes wide. ‘Are you an artist? I hadn’t realised. I … I’m not sure … Yes, why not!’ She laughed. ‘What should I wear for this event?’

William smiled, his expression innocent. ‘Oh, you shan’t need clothes, my dear. I was thinking of painting you, not some old canvas.’

A moment’s silence, and Jack held his breath, suppressing a chuckle. He had seen one young woman slap William after this proposition, and several others storm away.

Mary stared, her mouth twitching. Then she burst into warm, bubbling laughter.

‘William Dempsey, you are a devil. I should have known you would say something bold.’

Jack joined the laughter, adding ‘He is a devil, Mary. You’d do better to choose me.’

‘And who suggests I should be choosing anyone then? You sound like my father!’

Amid the laughter, William jumped up. ‘Look, there’s a court free. Hurry up, you lot.’
'Not me, I’ll watch this time. What about you, Amy?’ Mary turned to Jack’s sister.

‘Let’s watch them …’

‘Come on, Jack, we’ll play for their favours.’

Shaking his head, laughing, Jack followed William back onto the court. Despite their close friendship, they rallied hard back and forth through the hot afternoon, neither man willing to concede. Gradually, Jack gained the advantage, taking one set, then another, until William dropped to his knees in mock-exhaustion. ‘You win! All honour, all favours, and all the girls are yours!’

Laughing, breathless, they shook hands over the net and strolled back to the watchers.

‘I’ll miss this. Two weeks in Melbourne coming up for me. Let’s hope this good weather holds ’til I’m back.’ William shrugged into his jacket.

‘Work or play in Melbourne?’ Amy smoothed her long skirt, and slid her racquet back into its bag.

‘Both. My brother’s getting married, and I’m to be best man. And since I’ll be in Melbourne, the bank’s set up some training with a financier from Britain. I wish you were all coming too. Party time!’

‘You’ll have a fine time even without our help. You always do.’ Jack was smiling, but both girls swung to him, aware of an edge in his tone.

‘Now, now, no tales out of school. All work and no play … The wedding will be a rather splendid affair. St Paul’s Cathedral, then on to the Grand Hotel. Joseph’s done well for himself, he’s marrying money!’

‘William! That is no way to speak of the bride. Shame on you.’ Mary wagged her finger at him.

They all laughed at his brief consternation, and turned their attention to the serious business of afternoon refreshments.
June 1908

‘There’s no help for it, Jack. I’m done for. Here, read her letter for yourself.’ William’s red-rimmed eyes shocked Jack; never had he seen his friend so distressed. ‘She’s told her parents. Her father wrote to my father, and the decisions have been made. I’m to marry her. Lord, I can barely remember her name, let alone her face. How could I have been so stupid?’ He scrubbed his hand through his dark hair. ‘Look at me. Twenty-seven years old, a confirmed bachelor, and I wreck my life with too much to drink and a pretty bridesmaid.’

They sat in silence, their beers untouched between them.

‘A confirmed bachelor? I thought you had your heart set on Mary. I thought …’

‘I did, I did! I’m crazy for her. She’s lovely, she’s the only daughter of wealthy parents, and she's available. But what can I do now?’ He groaned. ‘Lord, what a mess. What’ll become of me? And a baby coming. Me, a father? Now there’s a laugh.’ He snatched up his beer and took a long gulp. ‘Betty. That’s her name. My wife to be.’ His face crumpled again, and he shook his head slowly.

Jack gripped William’s wrist across the table. ‘It’ll work out, you’ll see. A baby! We should be celebrating …’ But he could hear the grief in his own voice, and stopped.

‘Will you speak to Mary for me? I can’t face her.’ William’s voice cracked. ‘Tell her I am so sorry. Tell her … Oh God, I am so ashamed. Don’t tell her anything. Maybe she’ll forget I ever existed.’

Jack sat alone for a long time after William left, appalled by his friend’s dilemma. But another idea glimmered under his shocked concern. Mary was no longer William’s special friend. She was as fancy-free as she always claimed to be. With William out of the running, perhaps, just perhaps … Dusk had fallen before he gathered his coat and hat, and strolled home.

In the end, it was Amy who told Mary. Amy was barely a year younger than Jack, and he had no secrets from her. He put the story as delicately as he could, but Amy understood immediately.

‘William’s a fool,’ she declared. ‘A handsome, charming, conceited fool. I feel sorrier for his bride than I do for him. No good can come of this.’ She lifted her head and
gazed directly at Jack. ‘And what difference will this make for you, Jack? Is Mary to be your sweetheart now?’

Jack winced. ‘Is it so obvious?’

Amy laughed. ‘Only to a sister, I think. But have a care, Jack. A girl like Mary has high expectations. She is used to the best of everything, and expects that to continue’. She smiled at her brother's wry expression. 'Listen, perhaps it will be best if I tell her about William’s impending marriage. When’s it to be, anyway?’

‘Next Wednesday. July 1st. He’s asked that I be his best man. Of course I agreed.’

‘Next week? As soon as that? Yes, of course, it must be so. Let me speak to Mary, I’d hate for her to hear of this through the inevitable gossip. And don’t worry.’ She smiled at Jack’s frowning face. ‘I’ll put in a good word for you. Leave it with me, you look after your friend, as best can be done now.’

Jack was William’s sole companion at the wedding; William’s parents had refused to attend. No church could be found to bless the union, so the couple stood before the Registrar in a small dark-panelled room in the heart of Melbourne. Betty was smaller and prettier than Jack had expected, a fair-haired baby-faced girl, dressed in a simple cream outfit. Her father was grim-faced, but her mother, all smiles and dimples, added a note of cheer and grace to the occasion.

‘Not twenty-one yet,’ William had muttered as they waited outside for Betty to arrive. ‘I’m to marry a child.’ But through the brief ceremony he had spoken with calm respect, responding in a soft clear voice, and chastely kissing the bride.

Inwardly, Jack breathed a sigh of relief. The previous evening William had conceived a number of wild plans to escape, to stow away on a ship to South America, to run away to prospect for gold in Western Australia, even to jump in front of a tram. Jack had persuaded him to stay, to face the consequences, to make a success from a poor beginning. Now the honourable thing was done, whether wise or not. William was a husband, and would soon be a father, and Jack congratulated the couple with all the warmth and enthusiasm he could muster, admiring the bride’s new ring, and wishing her every happiness.
The small bridal party spoke little through a formal afternoon tea in the Gardens before Jack left for the long train trip home. As he gathered his coat and hat, he handed William an envelope. ‘With congratulations and good wishes from Amy and Mary.’ He turned to Betty. ‘My sister and her friend made a pretty card for you both. I promised to pass it on. Almost forgot.’ He shook hands with each in turn, trying not to see the pain in William’s face, seized his overnight bag and hurried away.

The first letter arrived three weeks later. William was settling into the city branch of his bank, although in a junior position, ‘a very small fish in a rather larger pond than I have been used to, I’m afraid.’ He spoke warmly of his wife and their rented house; she had a knack for growing vegetables; a stray kitten had joined their household; a local dairyman delivered fresh milk daily.

Jack showed the letter to Amy, and repeated the news to Mary, taking care to speak well of William, and to emphasise Betty’s prettiness and sweet nature. He didn’t mention William’s deep humiliation in accepting financial support from his in-laws, to give his wife the comfort she expected. Nor did he pass on William’s greetings to ‘the tennis group’.

His replies to the young couple were less guarded. He responded warmly to William’s news, and over the next three months, he wrote of his burgeoning closeness with Mary, and his hopes. In early October, he wrote:

*I am overjoyed to tell you that Mary and I are following your fine example, and we are to be married next year.*

*William, will you return the favour, and be my best man?*

Mary added a brief note to the letter, saying how eagerly she looked forward to meeting Betty.

If there was any coolness in their exchanges, Jack ignored it. Mary wore his engagement ring, and although she was less bubbly, a shade paler than previously, he attributed it to an attractive maturing on her part. He laid out his plans for their life together, and ensured she knew every detail of the three properties to which he already held mortgages. Two of these had been returning rents for a few years already, and were almost paying for themselves now. The third was a new purchase, a house on a
pretty riverside setting, a short walk from the township. Jack took Mary to inspect it as soon as the contract was signed, and he was gratified by her evident delight.

‘This is perfect! I love this sheltered verandah. Will it get the afternoon sun? Is there a kitchen garden dug yet? Can we keep a house cow in that paddock?’ She moved from room to room, pink with excitement. ‘Our first home! It needs some paint, and we shall buy new furnishings. What do you think?’

The next months were busy with plans for the wedding and for the new home. Jack spent his spare time painting and whitewashing walls. With help from friends, he selected paving stones from the local quarry, and laid a pathway around the house. While a local carpenter constructed a chook yard and a cow bail, Jack dug over the neglected vegetable patch, and fenced the area. Mary inspected, added suggestions, expressed her delight. And she and Amy chuckled together over Jack’s transparent happiness. Jack felt that life could hardly be better.

William’s telegram on 18th December shocked him deeply.

_Come immediately. Betty and infant gone. William._

He caught the morning train, and took the tram to William’s house, but it was empty. He peered through the window, and at once a neighbour leaned over the fence.

‘They’ve gone. The wife was in a bad way, and the ambulance took her away last Tuesday. Ain’t seen hide nor hair of either of ’em since.’

‘What hospital? Where…?’

‘Her father’s the landlord here, don’t you know. You best ask him where to find them. Debt-collector, are ye? He’s a bit of a wild one, that Mr Dempsey, I reckon.’

Jack stared at her, his face expressionless, and softened his voice. ‘Thank you for that. And where would I find Mrs Dempsey’s father, then?’

He took the tram back into the city centre, and followed the directions to the offices of Joseph Glasson, Stock and Station Agent. A black crepe ribbon was pinned to the door, and a hand-written card advised that Mr Glasson was attending a family funeral. In growing dread, Jack hailed a cab and clambered aboard, repeating the name of the church given on the card. They arrived only seconds later, and the cabbie turned to Jack. ‘I’d be robbin’ you if I took your fare, sir. It’s only half a block.’ Confused, Jack swung around just as pallbearers emerged from the church, carrying a gleaming timber
casket. He pulled off his hat, and watched as they lifted the coffin onto the hearse, but he felt his heart freeze as he saw William step from the church, following the casket, and carrying another tiny identical casket in his arms.

‘No, no.’ Had he moaned aloud? It hardly mattered. William looked across at him, nodded briefly, and slowly, gently, placed the tiny coffin alongside the larger one. Without a word, he walked to Jack, took his arm and drew him to the hearse.

‘Stay by me. Don’t leave me alone. I can’t bear this …’. William was white-faced, his hands trembling. ‘You remember Mr and Mrs Glasson?’

Jack grasped Betty’s father’s hand, tears springing to his eyes. ‘I am so sorry, sir. And Mrs Glasson …’

He barely recognised her. Her smiles and dimples were gone, she was smaller and greyer than he remembered, and she did not seem to know he was there, her full attention held by the two coffins.

The brief ceremony at the graveside was too much for her. As first one coffin then the other was lowered into the ground, she crumpled to the ground. William took her in his arms, but Betty’s father pushed him away with such ferocity that William could no longer restrain his grief, and he crouched alone, sobbing like a child, as Jack stood at his back, helpless and horrified.

Glasson glanced after the minister and attendant, who were lifting Mrs Glasson to her feet, supporting her as she stumbled away. His face was red, twisted with grief and rage as he turned back to William.

‘Get out of our life, you despicable …’ He took a step forward, and for a second Jack thought he would kick William. But he stopped abruptly, and stood taller, suddenly seeming larger, more threatening. ‘I want you gone from the house by morning. And never return, you hear.’

Jack thought William would flare with anger, but he simply slumped even lower.

‘I’ll take only my clothes, I’ll take nothing that is not mine, I assure you.’

Glasson snorted, it was almost a sob. ‘What else could you take? What is left?’ He raised his hand and pointed at William. ‘In God’s name, I curse you to hell.’

‘Sir! I must protest.’ The minister was back.
But Glasson ignored him, pointing at both Jack and William now, ‘To hell with you both.’

The minister pulled at Glasson’s arm, and the big man suddenly turned, shaking his head, and strode away.

Jack helped William to his feet, and they stumbled away, weaving between the graves, away from Glasson and from the open grave of his wife and son.

The hotel they finally found was near the docks. A noisy refuge, with waves of clatter from the passing carts and trucks, and shouts from workmen crowded in front of the bar. Jack and William sat in miserable silence, letting the noise wash over them.

William downed his third Scotch, and stood abruptly. ‘Right. That’s enough. I have to get away.’ He stared around, swaying slightly. ‘First, I need to pack. Then I’ll take a ship. He’ll never find me, the bastard.’

‘Who? Glasson? Betty’s father? Has he threatened you?’

‘He hates me. When Betty … when she … he wanted to kill me. Betty’s mother stopped him then. But nothing will stop him now.’ He glanced around. ‘Where are we, Jack?’

‘No idea. But we’ll take a cab to your place, if that’s what you want. You can get your bag packed, then we’ll make a plan. Come on.’

It was dusk when they arrived back at the wharves, and almost midnight by the time William had persuaded a ship’s captain to take him on as a deckhand.

‘We go where the cargo takes us,’ the captain muttered, ‘and don’t expect no different.’

Jack took a room in a nearby hotel, but when he found his way to the dock in the morning to farewell his friend, the berth was empty, and Jack realised he had not even noted the ship’s name. William was gone. Jack trudged through the city, back to the railway station, and home.
‘You must have some idea of where William is?’ Amy frowned over her embroidery. ‘He can’t just disappear.’

Jack leaned back on the sofa, next to Mary, his long legs stretched across the rug. He had brought Mary out to visit his mother and Amy, and the two young women were eager for the latest news. ‘It’s a cargo boat, Amy. There is no regular pattern of movement, the ship simply goes where the trade takes it. He could be anywhere – New Zealand, England, even America.’

‘You haven’t heard from him at all?’ Mary shook her head, her dark hair gleaming in the reflected light. She had been silent, listening to Jack’s carefully phrased description of the funeral and William’s departure.

Jack smiled and took her hand, marveling again how tiny her hand was in his. ‘No letter, but I guess he’ll write when he’s got some news for us.’

‘I wish you’d remembered the name of the ship, Jack. We could have watched for it in the shipping news.’ Amy put her embroidery aside. ‘I’ll make tea, shall I?’

Jack glanced after her, and turned to Mary. ‘I don’t think he’ll be here to be my best man. Perhaps I should ask my brother to be ready to stand in.’

‘That’s months away. But maybe you’re right, maybe you should ask him to be ready, just in case.’ She smiled. ‘There’s so much preparation for this wedding. I hadn’t anticipated all this fuss, but Mother insists. Amy is such a good friend, but I think even she’s daunted by Mum’s plans.’

‘Well, you are her only daughter. I suppose she wants to make the most of her one chance. Have you decided on your wedding dress yet?’

‘Certainly not!’ Mary pretended indignation. ‘To even ask is bad luck! Besides, Mum is determined to take Amy and me to Melbourne, to have our dresses made. That should be fun!’

Amy set the tea tray down. ‘It’ll be the wedding of the year, if Mrs Harrison has her way. She has a list of seventy guests already.’
Jack laughed softly. ‘I am not sure whether to anticipate the day with pleasure or with terror. At least I know that all eyes will be on my beautiful bride, luckily the groom is all but invisible. But I can see the sense in a simple ceremony such as William and Betty had.’

Mary turned a serious face to Jack. ‘You know, I once admired William. I thought he was quite the man about town. But I was wrong. You are twice the man he was. I appreciate your steady ways, Jack. And I am proud to be wearing your ring.’ Despite her blush, she held Jack’s gaze, and he felt his heart melt.

‘Oh, Mary, thank you.’ He gripped her hand, unable to say more.

Amy rattled the teacups. ‘Enough seriousness. This tea’s getting cold while you two sweet-talk.’

Their laughter lightened the mood, and Jack sipped his tea, listening to the chatter of the two girls. It was true, he reflected, he did have some dread about the wedding day, and married life. Certainly he had learned from William’s experience, and he treated Mary with chaste respect. But what would he do after the wedding? Would he be able to consummate the marriage? Was he really ready to father children? Whenever he thought of a future family with Mary, his joy dissolved as he remembered William’s half-drunk ravings after Betty’s funeral.

Jack, I never want to experience anything like that again. I have never been so helpless, or so scared. She cried for her baby, knowing he was already gone. She cried for me, not even recognising me then. Toward the end she just cried. She sounded like those pitiful lambs after the cruel crows have done with them.

Jack shook his head, pushing away the disturbing memory. He and Mary would make a wonderful life together, and, yes, there would be children. He would work hard, seek promotion, find ways to give her the comfortable life she had always known. It would be all right.

1st September 1909.

‘Bert, help me with this, will you? I can’t even fix my own tie!’ Jack laughed.

‘It’s called pre-wedding nerves.’ Bert fixed the offending tie, and patted the knot.

‘There, that’s done.’ He stood back. ‘I reckon I was as nervous as you, or maybe more.'
But look at me now, five years on – three kiddies, quite the old married man.’ He patted Jack’s shoulder. ‘You’ll be all right, Jack. She’s a great girl, plenty of spirit, and pretty too. A year from today, you’ll look back and laugh at your nervousness.’ He pulled his watch out. ‘Time to get to the church!’

The pews were crowded, but Jack stood resolutely facing the altar until he turned at the first strains of the music for the bride. And there she was. Mary looked smaller, more fragile, in a fluffy confection of creamy lace, her face hidden, her dark hair visible through the filmy veil. She walked slowly along the aisle toward him, her gloved hand resting on her father’s arm. Mr Harrison stared at Jack as they approached. Stared, or glared? Jack felt a tremble run through his body. But as they reached Jack and Bert, Mr Harrison smiled warmly at Jack.

He’s as nervous as I am!

The minister cleared his throat, and the familiar words droned. Dearly beloved, we are gathered… If any man can show just cause … Who giveth this woman?... Do you take... for better for worse... let no man put asunder... I now declare you man and wife.

Jack’s heart thumped, with relief as much as with joy, he realised. With shaking hands, he lifted the veil back from Mary’s face, moved to see her brown eyes glittering with tears.

‘Hello, Mrs Conway,’ he whispered, and they both smiled and relaxed, turning to the congregation, then starting their long walk back down the aisle and out into the chilly spring sunshine.

The next few hours passed in a clamour of kisses and cooing over the new ring for Mary, backslapping, warm handshakes and ribald comments for Jack. The reception, the tables laden with sweet dishes, the buzz of chatter, it all swept over Jack in a blur; his focus was on Mary, on his astounding good luck in winning his lovely bride. As they raised their glasses to toast ‘Absent friends,’ Jack whispered to Mary. ‘I almost expected William to leap out and shout “Surprise”.’

Mary smiled, her eyes wide in surprise. ‘So did I!’

Then it was over and, amid shouts and tears, Jack and Mary were in the coach, on their way to Melbourne.
‘The happiest day of my life?’ Mary laughed as she pulled off her gloves. ‘I’m not sure I’d put any daughter of mine through such an ordeal.’

Jack took her bare hands in his, turning them over, examining them as if he had never seen them before, before leaning to kiss each open palm. Still holding her hand, he leaned back in his seat, letting exhaustion wash through him. ‘What a remarkable day! But I’m glad it’s over, to be honest. Your parents were terrific, they’ve done us proud, bless them. Now we can get on with our ‘happily ever after’ life.’

‘I take that as a promise, Jack.’

But there were sad times too. Within a year, Mary had miscarried twice, and each time, they both thought their hearts would break. Her third pregnancy seemed blessed though. Mary was radiant in health, energetic, and calmly optimistic.

‘It all feels different this time. This one’s for keeping’ she declared. Charles David was born with very little fuss early in the autumn of 1911.

He was beautiful. Jack hardly needed telling, but everyone assured him it was so, this was the bonniest baby ever. Jack couldn’t get enough of holding him, gazing at him, marvelling at the miracle of this tiny new life. In his heart, in whispers to the baby and aloud to Mary, he vowed to give his son the best life possible.

Jack’s fortunes at work rose too; he was promoted to Senior Clerk, responsible now for a far wider range of accounts and duties. At the same time, he was advised to study Bookkeeping, and he started evening studies, with the support of his Shire Council. In return for this, his wages increased, and he was able to hasten his various mortgage payments. His fears about being able to provide well for Mary and his family lessened, but he made it clear at work that he was always open to new opportunities, new ways to increase his income. His life was busy, focused and happy, and he was invited to join the committees of the local Red Cross, the District Cricket Club, and the Anglican Sunday School. Mary relished being the wife of an upcoming businessman, and Jack often returned from work to find her glowing with pleasure after hosting a ladies’ group for afternoon tea.

In June 1913, three months after Charlie’s second birthday, Mary told Jack she was expecting again. He was delighted, though he had secret doubts that he could or would ever love another child as he loved Charlie. Again the pregnancy progressed uneventfully, with Mary in splendid health, and eagerly anticipating having a baby in
the house again. She loved their home, and was unwilling to move to larger premises, so Jack extended his mortgage and arranged for an extra room to be built on the rear of the house.

Then, in the winter of 1913, the coldest winter in years, three events changed everything: Jack’s father died, suddenly and unexpectedly, of a heart attack; Mary’s midwife informed her that she may expect twins; and William returned.
Jack’s father’s sudden death took everyone by surprise. Old Mr Conway was the Rate Collector for the shire, a robust active man who, despite his years, preferred to spend his days visiting outlying properties, rather than sitting behind a desk in the office. His schedule was not regular, so it was only when his horse returned to the stable riderless that the alarm was raised. He was found sprawled lifeless against a tree, facing the snow-capped hills, a small vial of tablets spilled by his side.

‘Must have dismounted, tried to relieve the pain,’ the doctor decreed. ‘His heart was weak, and he knew it. Ignored my advice to ease up. Will you go out and tell your mother and sister, Jack, or shall I?’

It was well after dark when Jack returned home, leaving his mother and Amy in the care of concerned neighbours. He had asked the doctor to tell Mary of his mission, to alleviate her concern as the hours passed. So he was unsurprised to see a lantern hung out to welcome him. However he did not recognise the horse tied to the verandah post, and was astounded when William stepped out to greet him as he rode up.

Mary bustled out behind him, Charlie in her arms, sleepy and fractious. Her warm smile jolted Jack from his momentary strange impression that he was the visitor, intruding on a scene of domestic bliss, and he swiftly mounted the steps to enclose her and the child in a hug. ‘Hello, my darlings.’ He turned to William, and shook his hand warmly, ‘And welcome back, William. Good to see you!’

‘On a sad day though, Jack. I’m sorry to hear the news of your father. He was a fine man. Always kind to me.’

‘Doc Cartwright told you then?’

Mary nodded.

‘Mum’s in a bad way. Amy called on friends to stay with them tonight.’ He stroked Charlie’s soft blond hair. ‘And what’re you doing awake at this hour, little fellow?’

‘Yes, he’s ready for bed …’

‘My fault, I’m afraid,’ William interrupted, ‘I may have over-excited him. Not used to children. And you will soon have two more, Mary tells me.’
‘What …?’ Jack turned a puzzled face to Mary, who blushed.

‘The midwife came by today, Jack. She tells me we are to expect twins.’

Pure searing rage flashed through Jack … She told him first … but he instantly suppressed the thought. He gently lifted the sleepy child from her arms, and pulled her close. ‘Good lord! Well, that’s a surprise! A good surprise,’ he added, seeing Mary’s quick frown. ‘Inside with you, out of this cold.’ He turned to William. ‘It’s great to have you back, Will. Are you free to ride with me out to Mum’s place tomorrow morning? I want to hear of your doings all these years. We’ll get on the road before nine o’clock, all right?’ He blocked the door with his body as Mary stepped inside, so William had no choice but to shake his hand, and turn away into the night.

Mary was placing his supper plate on the table when he returned from tucking Charlie to sleep.

‘Where’s your supper?’ He glanced at the stack of plates on the sink.

‘Forgive me, Jack, we … that is, I ate earlier … William accepted my offer of a meal, and we didn’t know how long you would be …’

_We … we… Am I jealous? After all this time?_ Jack shuddered, pushing the uncomfortable thoughts aside. ‘I’m done in, Mary love.’ He reached to hug her. ‘Come here and tell me the news again. What else did the midwife say? Twins, eh! That will keep you busy. How about we look out for a girl to help about the house now. D’you know of anyone suitable?’

They sat close by the fire as Mary repeated the details of the midwife’s visit, and Jack told what he knew of his father’s death, and of his mother’s shock and grief. Mary wanted to visit her mother-in-law, to offer help, but Jack insisted she remain at home.

‘Looking after Charlie, and now protecting our new babies – that’s enough to keep you busy for now. Mum and Amy would be appalled if you put yourself at risk now. No, you stay here, and maybe start asking around about getting help. D’you want me to place an ad in the paper? Shall I ask Amy if she knows of anyone suitable?’

‘Jack, I’m fine, truly I am. Yes, I will look out for a girl to help, but not yet. Maybe later …’ She yawned. ‘It’s late, Jack, and so much has changed from when we woke this morning. And you’ve got an early start. Come to bed.’ She turned to hug him.
‘You’re shivering! Oh Jack, this has been an exhausting day for you. Poor Jack.’ She stroked his hair, as he leaned gratefully into her warm body.

Their lovemaking was sweet and slow, and Jack was moved almost to tears as he spooned sleepily into her back afterwards. Her breathing slowed until he thought she was asleep, but she roused, turned her head and murmured ‘It was a relief to see William alive and well, wasn’t it.’

She was truly asleep before he answered, and he lay awake for some time, puzzled that she would think of William at such a moment, and shaken by his own deep sense of foreboding. He was pleased to William home, of course he was. So why was he so disturbed? A trembling started in his chest and spread through his whole body, and, certain that Mary slept, he slid from the bed and tiptoed outside away from the house. In the freezing dark, he felt the grass already crunchy with frost under his feet. Staring up at the brilliance of the stars, he gave in to the harsh gulping sobs welling from his chest, allowing the shock and grief of his father’s death wash through him. Hot tears streamed down his face, and he wrapped his arms around himself, pushing a hand over his mouth to stifle his shuddering gasps. Eventually, as his sobs calmed, and his breathing quietened, he realised that his grief was also mingled with some fear about the coming babies. So much could go wrong. He could lose Mary, as Will had lost Betty. And would he be able to love another baby, let alone two, when his heart was so completely given to Charlie? But beyond that, beyond anything he could clearly comprehend, he also had a profound sense that something was lost, something had been irreparably broken, and that nothing would ever be quite right again.

Soon after sunrise, Jack was stoking the kitchen fire, water already heating in the kettle, when he heard Charlie calling ‘Daddy, Daddy.’ He scooped the toddler from his cot, and hurried back into the warmth of the kitchen, where he stripped the sodden nappy and let the boy stagger around naked, chasing the cat, until the water warmed. He was bathing Charlie when Mary emerged, rubbing her eyes sleepily, pushing her dark hair back over her shoulders. He smiled at her, ducking and laughing as Charlie splashed bathwater in his excitement. As he watched the two people he loved most, his fears of the night receded. How could he have doubted this happiness? Mary bent over
Charlie, tickling him and splashing water over his shoulders, while he chuckled and splashed her back, babbling his baby talk.

After breakfast, Jack hugged them both, pulled on his warmest coat and hat, and hurried out to saddle his horse.

He shouted a farewell to Mary as William cantered up, and leaned down, smiling warmly, to shake Jack's hand. At once, Jack relaxed. This was the old William, his friend and confidante. Of course he would welcome William back into their lives, and show William just how lovely a settled family life could be. And William would want the same, surely. Jack grinned as he swung into the saddle, thinking how they would survey the young women of the district and find a lovely new bride for William. The two set out, trotting steadily through the bare avenue of the little township, and past the misted paddocks. Will repeated his condolences, and answered Jack’s questions. Yes, he had approached the bank manager, and was to start back in his old job the following week. And yes, he had visited his parents, a cool reunion, and he was boarding with an elderly widow in town. He prattled on about his adventures, telling of his travels and life aboard a cargo ship, and how he had jumped ship when it finally returned to Fremantle. He had spent almost a year working as rouseabout and bookkeeper at a Western Australian cattle station, refreshing his accounting skills for an eventual return to banking. ‘Too bloody hard, working as a deckie or as a rouseabout, it’s a young bloke’s caper, that. Good for an adventure, but I’ve had enough. I’ll appreciate my desk job now, I can tell you.’ He laughed, gazing around at the wide bare paddocks. ‘There’s places I’ve been where the people would never believe how empty this country is. And such poverty! I thought I knew what poor meant, but there’s people living like animals … We’re lucky here. And I intend to get luckier, I can tell you!’

They rode in silence for a few minutes, then Will spoke again. ‘London’s the place, Jack. That’s where a man could really do well. I almost stayed on there, but by the time I sobered up, we’d set sail again. Missed my chance. Mind you, they don’t think too highly of us colonials.’ He slowed his horse, and fell in behind Jack as they forded the creek, then rode up alongside him again. ‘Enough of my story. What’s been happening here? You seem as happy as a pig in mud. Lucky man, I say. And what about Amy, what’s she up to these days?'
‘She’s fine. You can see for yourself in a minute. Open the gate, will you?’ he added as they slowed at the entrance.
Amy was frosty. She met Jack and William at the door, unsmiling, wiping her hands on her apron. ‘I’m glad you’re here at last, Jack. Mother needs you, plans must be made.’ She turned to William. ‘Forgive me, William, but this is not a convenient time for a visit. Perhaps some other time … ’

‘My deepest condolences, Amy. If there is anything I can do, please …’

‘Thank you, yes,’ Amy interrupted him, and turned back inside.

The two men exchanged a look, and Jack shook his head slightly. ‘I’ll see you back in town, Will.’

‘Righto. Let me know if I can help in any way.’ Will remounted, and patted his horse’s mane. ‘Let’s go, old boy.’

‘Jack, I thought you’d never come. Make me a cup of tea, will you? Amy’s so busy …’

Mother barely turned her head to greet him as he entered, staring into the flickering flames in the fireplace.

Jack glanced at the full teacup, untouched, at her elbow, and turned to Amy. ‘Go get some fresh air, Amy, you look all in.’ He winked at her, and hugged his mother gently. ‘Amy’s off to feed the chooks, I’ll fix us a cuppa.’ As Amy hesitated, he added, smiling warmly at her, ‘We’ll talk when you’re back.’

He poured fresh tea for them both, and sat close to his mother. For a few minutes, they sat in silence. Then she startled him by exclaiming, ‘I’m surprised to see you keeping company with young William, Jack. He’s a worthless fellow. Your father thought so too.’

‘Goodness, did you recognise his voice? Don’t miss much, do you.’

‘Amy told me. She was watching you ride up.’ She stared into the fire, then shook her head sharply, and looked straight at Jack. ‘Your father’s gone. What are we to do, Amy and me? What will become of us now?’
Jack put down his cup, and hugged her. ‘You’ll be fine, Ma. I’ll look after you, I promise. And Bert will help too. There’s no need to worry about that. But we need to make some decisions now, about the funeral and suchlike.’

From outside, Amy called him, ‘Jack, can you give me a hand here?’

‘Scuse me, Mum. I’ll see what Amy needs. Back in a minute.’ He closed the door softly, to keep out the cold wind.

Amy was leaning on the woodshed, a bucket of firewood at her side.

‘Here, I’ll carry that, Amy. Yes, I know, you can do it. But just this once, I can give you a hand.’ He bent to seize the handle, but she stopped him with a hand on his arm. With surprise, he noticed her chapped and swollen fingers. He looked at her, looking intently for once. *She’s not a pretty young thing any more. We’re getting older…*

‘No, that’s not why I called you. There’s something I need to tell you. Father had a great deal of money in his pockets. Not the rates money, I know that was in the bag. But in his waistcoat pocket, and inside his jacket. Nearly a hundred pounds, Jack. More money than I’ve ever seen. More money than he’s ever shared at home here, let me say.’

‘Good grief, Amy.’ Jack straightened up and stared at her. ‘I thought he was just battling through, he never seemed to have much … Where is it?’

‘Hidden amongst my clothes, in the dresser.’

‘Do you want me to bank it for you?’

She shook her head. ‘Jack, I have his bankbook. There’s less than five pounds in the account. Where has all *this* money come from? I don’t know what to think. Except that I wish he’d found money to buy Mum a new dress now and then.’

‘Good lord! Maybe he was asked to look after it, or carry it to the bank for somebody … uh-oh. More visitors? Who is this?’

‘Looks like the minister. He promised to visit Mum this morning, and to help with our plans. Put the kettle on again, will you, while I greet him. Not a word about the money for now, right?’

Over the next hour there were prayers and tears and kind words and more cups of tea. And when the minister stood to leave the funeral plans were in place, and Jack had a
list of errands and duties to complete. He hugged his mother, and promised to return the following day. But secretly, he was glad to be leaving, to have purposeful work to fill his day.

As he saddled his horse, Amy slipped him a small packet. ‘I’d feel safer if this wasn’t in the house, Jack. You keep it safe, will you?’

‘I’ll give you a proper receipt then. No, not a council one. A personal one, just for your protection if anyone comes looking for it. You can tell them I have it in safe keeping. How much is there exactly?’ He pulled a notebook from his saddlebag, tore out a page and scribbled a note, signed and folded it. ‘Keep this safe. We’ve enough else to worry about for now. This matter can wait.’

The funeral a few days later was a cold, rain-soaked affair. Jack and Bert shivered as pallbearers, while Amy comforted their mother. The tiny church was filled with friends; steam rose from damp shoulders as people crowded into the pews. Most spoke softly to Mrs Conway, before shaking hands with Bert, then Jack. *A good man. He’ll be missed around here. Look after your mum, boys.* Then the minister led the pallbearers and their burden in, and stood, head bowed, as they settled the coffin and stood back. He cleared his throat and started chanting the familiar comforting words. Jack gazed at the gleaming timber of the coffin, half-listening to the service, when a phrase jolted him into awareness. *We brought nothing into this world and we carry nothing out.* The bundle of banknotes! What was that about? In a moment of insight, Jack realised it was very likely somebody right here in the church knew the answer. *There’s possibly more. Maybe he had a stash of money. Hidden at his place somewhere? I need to get out there ...* He glanced around, and staring right at him from a back pew was William, ashen-faced. As their gaze met, Jack remembered the last funeral they had attended together. The grim misery, Mrs Glasson’s collapse, Mr Glasson’s curse. Jack shuddered; he’d forgotten that, now he remembered how the distraught man had swung his pointing finger to include Jack too. What were his words? *I curse you both to hell.*

Now William gave him a look of such misery, Jack was startled. But William dropped his gaze, and sidled out of the pew, stepping quietly into the aisle and away. There was nothing for it but to let him go.
As they carried the coffin outside to the freshly-dug grave, Jack looked for William’s horse, but it was gone. Clearly he had left.

The freezing rain fell steadily as the mourners huddled under inadequate umbrellas. Mercifully, the graveside committal was brief, and as soon as the minister announced that everyone would be welcome to refreshments back at Mrs Conway’s, the mourners moved to their horses and buggies.

Through the endless afternoon of condolences and cake, Jack said little. The miserable graveside ceremony, the shock of his father’s death, and the sight of his mother’s grief shook him more deeply than he would have anticipated. The older men, old Conway’s peers, gathered around the fireplace, rumbling about old times, and tapping their pipes into the flames. Among the crowd the women bustled, freed of gloves and hats, passing plates of scones and sandwiches, and murmuring soft words of comfort. A few children sat quietly, hushed by cake and lemonade, waiting for something exciting to happen. Eventually a young man produced a mouth organ, and played softly. The sentimental melodies stilled the chatter, and soon after, the mourners started to shake hands, gather coats and hats, and drift away into the dusk.

As Amy cleared away platters of uneaten food, and settled her mother by the fire, Jack grabbed another sandwich and pulled his jacket close.

‘I’ll chop more firewood, Amy.’

‘Thanks, Jack.’ She smiled tiredly at him as he passed her in the doorway, and again he thought how quickly she had aged. Perhaps her life with their parents had been more difficult, more complex than he had realised? He would talk to her about this, about how he and Bert might help now.

Bert was saddling his horse in the yard. Jack stopped in surprise, and put down the firewood basket.

‘I thought you were stopping here tonight, Bert.’

‘I can’t. Business in Melbourne calls . . .’ He tightened the straps, and led the horse around to the hitching post. ‘I’ll grab my bag and say goodbye.’

‘Hang on, Bert. I need to talk to you before you go. About Dad. About money.’ Maybe he knows what the bundle of cash is about.
‘Times are hard, Jack. I was hoping you’d see your way clear to helping Mum and Amy. For now, anyway. I’m up to my neck with the business. And the family seems to need more every year.’

‘No, it’s about some cash …’

‘Forget it.’ Bert’s voice hardened into anger. ‘I’ve said I can’t help, and that’s an end of it. I’m sorry but that’s how it is.’ He glared at Jack, and swung away, mounting the three front steps in one stride, and slamming into the house.

Angry and confused, Jack started after him, then thought better of it, and turned back to the woodshed. He chopped a good supply of firewood, gathered it into the basket, and walked back around the house in time to silently join his mother and Amy as they farewelled Bert.

Later that evening, after their mother had gone to bed, Amy and Jack sat talking quietly over the embers.

‘Nobody has approached you about the money, Amy?’

She shook her head.

Jack sighed softly. ‘Me either. Not sure where to start with it.’

Amy put her finger to her lips. ‘Nothing wrong with Mum’s hearing.’

Jack smiled, and raised his voice slightly. ‘Yes, another cup of tea, then I’ll head home. It’s been a long day.’
CHAPTER 6
August 1913. Wallsley, Victoria.

‘Can you spare me a minute please, Jack?’

‘Of course.’ Jack blotted and closed the ledger, and followed Evan Whitford, the Shire Clerk, into his office. Jack had returned to work only that morning, uncomfortably aware that his continued absence put a greater workload on others. He still had to complete his late father’s affairs, but he had achieved much in the past few days, with Amy’s help. Neither had found any clue about the bundle of cash, no mention of it in his papers or his Will. Nor had Jack found any further cash, despite a careful search of the shed and stable, telling his mother that he was checking for any urgent repairs. He had not mentioned the cash to anyone else, not even Mary, and he regretted this, his first secret from her. But an uneasy instinct kept him silent.

‘Close the door, Jack.’

Is this bad news coming? What ...?

‘Sit down, Jack. First, my deepest condolences. Your father and I have worked together for more years than I care to count, and I regarded him as a friend as well as a colleague. He will be greatly missed.’

Jack nodded his thanks, tensing himself for bad news. Was he to lose his job? Was this about the cash Amy had found?

‘You’ve almost completed your correspondence studies, right?’ He continued as Jack nodded. ‘You could expect your next promotion on the basis of that. But your father’s death has left us in a bit of a hole here. Nobody to take his place, nobody trained up and ready. So how would you feel about taking on his role as rate collector? It is a promotion, but not the one you may have hoped for. What do you think? Or would you like to consider it awhile? Of course, there’d be a raise in your pay, that goes without saying. Well? You’ll take it? Good, good.’ He reached to shake Jack’s hand. ‘I’ve got his books here, perhaps you could glance through them this afternoon, then make a start tomorrow? The work is behind schedule …’

Jack spent the afternoon tidying away his clerical files, and familiarising himself with the rates collection files. Although he and his father had both worked for the shire council for several years, their paths had seldom crossed at work, and their duties were
entirely separate. Jack quickly realised that although he had much to learn, he was looking forward to the autonomy of working out among the community.

He tried to explain his new duties to Mary over dinner that evening, but she was too excited about his promotion to concentrate on the details.

‘We must celebrate! Maybe we could combine this with a gathering of friends to welcome William back?’ She reached for his hand, watching Charlie messily spoon his food. ‘And more money will be helpful. With the new babies coming, and more expenses.’

Jack’s eyes widened in surprise. ‘I’m sorry, love. I had no idea you needed more housekeeping. You should have told me.’

Mary turned to help Charlie. ‘I didn’t like to say anything … And we manage well enough. But a little more will make things easier.’

‘Silly girl.’ He pulled her close. ‘Am I such an ogre? Huh? Or is my wife putting aside pin money for a new hat?’ He laughed at her indignant expression. ‘And about a party – maybe we could wait a couple of weeks, in respect to Mum? After all, my promotion is only because of Dad’s death.’

‘Oh Jack,’ Mary clapped her hand over her mouth, ‘I’m so sorry. That was insensitive of me.’ Her eyes filled with tears. ‘I really am sorry.’

‘Mummy’s a crybaby!’

They both laughed as Charlie turned his attention to his dinner. ‘Even my tears don’t distract him from his tucker.’ Mary ruffled the boy’s hair, and smiled at Jack. ‘All right, we’ll talk about it in a couple of weeks.’

Jack settled into his new role easily. He loved being outside and away from the office. His days were divided between attendance in various regional offices, and riding out to visit outlying properties. He knew many old-timers in the region, and quickly came to know more. Everywhere, he was welcomed as Old Conway’s son. Obviously his father had been a popular man. To his surprise, he was given gifts of produce at many properties; eggs or freshly cut corn cobs, once even a bag of hops. He mentioned this to Amy, and she told him that their father had frequently brought home extras like that. ‘People loved him, Jack. He had many friends.’
But seeing her peaked face, Jack realised that the gifts had probably become an essential part of their household supply, and he found ways to drop in every few days, to pass on much of the produce.

The bookwork was more complex than he had expected, and he often puzzled for some time over entries, before adding in the latest payments. The bookkeeping systems his father had followed were unlike anything he knew, and he guessed his father was using an archaic form, one that had passed out of general practice but had served him well over the years, and he had not seen any need to change. Jack frequently found what appeared to be errors – wrongly dated receipts, or discrepancies between receipts and ledger entries. Had his father been losing his memory over these last years? How could the anomalies be explained? Jack puzzled over the matter, making careful adjustments to keep the figures balanced. He was mortified that, despite his keen attention to his accountancy and bookkeeping studies, he was stumped. None of the errors were large, but they were so consistent that Jack finally decided to seek help in understanding the methods used. He had generally started out on the road before Evan Whitford arrived each morning, so he left a note, asking for an appointment. To his surprise, Evan was waiting when he returned late that afternoon. Jack thanked him for waiting, and quickly outlined his concerns.

Evan listened attentively. ‘Yes, I thought it might be something like this. Have you spoken to anyone else about it? No? Good man.’ He rubbed his hands together briskly. ‘Probably easiest to discuss this over a beer, Jack. Will Mary be alarmed if you’re a bit late? Bring the ledger, you can show me what you mean.’

Evan guided Jack to a quiet corner in the pub, and ordered two beers. ‘Now, show me exactly what’s troubling you.’

The two men leaned over the wide ledger, Jack pointing out entries in the dim light, running his finger down columns and across pages, talking softly, earnestly. ‘I have to admit, Evan, I just don’t understand the methods used here. Nothing I’ve learned seems to help.’ He shook his head, and paused for a sip of beer. ‘I probably should have come to you sooner, but I really did think I’d make sense of it.’ He stared a moment longer at the pages, then sat back. ‘I don’t know. I just don’t get it.’

Evan reached across and closed the ledger. He took a long swallow of his drink, leaned back, crossed his legs, and relit his pipe.
‘Yes, I do see exactly what you are saying, Jack. Now you listen to me. Some of our ratepayers have great difficulty meeting their obligations to the shire. But they are fine citizens, and it is our moral duty to do whatever we can to support them, and to make their lives just that bit easier. You’d agree with that? Of course you would. You were promoted to this position because you are your father’s son, and because I believe you will carry on the fine tradition of community service he has helped establish.’ Evan puffed on his pipe, letting the silence stretch out.

Finally Jack spoke. ‘Of course I will. I want to do this right, and I certainly want to help people … But …’

‘And help your own family at the same time, need I add? Your father’s accounting methods are fine methods, Jack. A little hard to untangle sometimes, but that is where their beauty lies. Are you with me?’

Jack stared at him, a sudden hot hand clutched at his heart. My father fiddled the books. My father!

As if reading his mind, Evan put a hand on Jack’s arm. ‘See what an excellent system it is. Not even his own son knew. It’s the way things are done, Jack. No need to change old habits, now is there?’

Jack stared at the closed ledger. ‘But … but it would add up to considerable sums.’

‘Yes, it does.’ Evan was watching him closely, and Jack could feel a sweat breaking out on his lip.

‘But Dad never had anything to spare, he always seemed to be broke.’

‘Ah yes, well, that would be because of his gambling, you see.’

‘Gambling?’ Jack heard his voice squeak in astonishment. ‘A gambler? My father? I don’t think so.’ Even as he spoke he remembered the bundle of cash. Evan must be right, the cash was winnings from gambling. Thank God he hadn’t mentioned it.

‘Well, he hasn’t left much for the family to go on with, has he? Where d’you think his money went, Jack? You’re a very different fellow, I know. You have ambitions, you’ve told me so yourself. And plenty of responsibilities – the mortgages, keeping your wife and family comfortable, and the care of your mother and sister. I’m well aware of that. If you just carry on doing business as we’ve always done, you’ll find yourself well placed to meet those responsibilities with ease. And more. For instance, have you
considered buying the house your mother currently rents? The mortgage payments would be the same as the rent you pay, and in a few years, you’d own the place. I can make that happen for you, if you like?

Another silence stretched between them, both men quite still. Jack stared at his hands, and Evan leaned back, apparently at ease, puffing languidly on his pipe and watching him. ‘It’s a lot to take in, Jack. But I need your commitment. I need to know you’ll uphold our tradition, if you like.’

‘Evan, I just don’t know …’

*I can say no. I’ve still got time to say no.* But with a thrill of illicit excitement, he knew he wouldn’t, and the moment passed. *I can be rich. Dad did it …I can give Mary the life she expects …*

‘Let me put it another way then.’ Evan’s voice was still soft, but with an edge of steel now. ‘There’s more people involved than just you, Jack. Others depend on our tradition. It’s in everybody’s best interest to maintain things as they are. Anyway, I’d hate for any dark stain to appear on your late father’s fine reputation.’ He waited another few seconds, then added, ‘I’ll order a couple of brandies, shall I? To celebrate our fine traditions.’ He signalled to the bargirl, and turned back to Jack. ‘I hardly need to tell you, none of this is ever to be mentioned to anyone else. Come to me with any issues. We two can sort it out.’ He reached to shake Jack’s hand. ‘Good man.’

Jack drew in a long slow breath, struggling for calm, and hoping his face betrayed neither his pounding heart nor his growing excitement as he stared at the opportunity opening for him. ‘Thanks, Evan. Thank you.’
CHAPTER 7

September 1913. Wallsley, Victoria.

The idea of a party resurfaced when Mary’s mother visited the following week. Mrs Harrison was scandalised. ‘You can’t be thinking of entertaining in your condition.’

Mary laughed. ‘For heaven’s sake, Mum, this is the twentieth century, not the middle ages. If I leave it until after the babies are born, I’ll be too busy to even think of parties.’

‘Quite rightly so,’ Mrs Harrison muttered indignantly. ‘You young moderns have some mad ideas.’

‘Come on, Mum, we need to get Will back into the swing of things. You’ll relish the chance for a little matchmaking, admit it. Why, last time you saw Will, you positively flirted with him yourself!’

‘What nonsense you talk. William Dempsey is a charming rogue, nothing more. I know, I know, Jack, he’s your friend, and he’s certainly Charlie’s favourite visitor. But I’ll not be matchmaking on his behalf. And I’m pleased to see that Amy is resisting him.’

Jack laughed. ‘Resisting him? She positively freezes over when he comes into view. She won’t enter the bank alone since he’s back. Amy’s a lovely girl but she’s got some old-fashioned ideas. I think she’d like to see him in mourning for ten years, at least.’

‘Well, I think she shows uncommon good sense. Mary, you’d do well to follow her example.’

Jack winced at the sharp tone, expecting Mary to react angrily. But to his relief, she laughed. ‘Well, the party’s to be here next Saturday afternoon, Mum. I’d love you to be here, but I understand if you’re busy elsewhere.’

Mrs Harrison snorted. ‘I suppose I’m expected to bring a plate?’

‘Your wonderful date slice would be very welcome. Or fruit cake, if you’d rather.’

After she had left, Jack hugged Mary, chuckling. ‘They say girls grow like their mothers as the years pass, but I reckon you’re going in the opposite direction. Or is it just that being pregnant suits you? If so, we’ll have to work at keeping …’
‘Stop it!’ Mary laughed. ‘Don’t even think like that! Three little ones will keep me busy enough, and any more may be just what turns me cranky!’

Saturday was clear and sunny, and the party spilled across the wide verandah and onto the grass, where Jack had set up a trestle table and a few chairs. Children scampered about, led by Charlie, jumping over Mary’s flower beds and trying to catch the cat which retreated further and further under the house. William was popular, and old friends were pleased to see him again, and curious to hear of his adventures. He revelled in the attention, and Jack listened to stories repeated, slightly inflated and altered with each telling, and with each fresh glass of beer. Amused, he turned to William.

‘And in all these adventures, did you find a new sweetheart? Have you thought of marrying again?’

Heads turned. Clearly others were interested in the reply. William smiled. ‘You know, I never have, because there was only ever one girl for me.’ He raised his glass. ‘To sweethearts.’

‘To sweethearts.’ The toast was enthusiastically echoed.

Mary broke the thoughtful silence that followed. ‘Betty was a lucky girl, Will. I wish I’d met her.’

Jack frowned at her words. Lucky? She died. That’s hardly lucky.

But Mary turned away as Charlie shrieked from under the verandah. ‘Jack, get him out. Quickly. What’s wrong, Charlie?’ She gathered the boy up, wiping away tears, and dirt and blood from the scratch on his arm. ‘You shouldn’t tease Timmy, Charlie. He won’t scratch you if you leave him alone, you’re big enough to know that.’ And Mary’s comment was forgotten as conversations resumed, and children were rounded up for soothing milk and cake.

Amy had refused to attend the party, so Jack repeated William’s comment to her when he visited a few days later. He had called in to tell them of his plan to purchase the house. Their mother was kneading bread in the kitchen, and shooed them out into the garden. ‘I know you two need to talk about how we’re to manage, but I don’t want of hear any of it. You sort it out.’
‘So you’ll be our new landlord?’ Amy sounded shocked.

‘No. You’ll be the new owner, Amy. I’m putting the papers in your name. I’ll need you to come into town and sign the final deeds in a couple of weeks.’

‘What!’ Now Amy really was shocked. ‘You can’t do that, Jack. You need all your money for your family.’

Jack patted her hand. ‘You’re my family too, Amy. And things are looking up at work, new opportunities. Which reminds me. That bundle of cash is yours to keep. Wait, hear me out. It seems Dad had some luck gambling. I’m assured the cash represents legitimate winnings from a bet. What he bet on, I’ve no notion. But the upshot is that the cash is yours. Yours and Mum’s.’

‘Dad was a gambler? Surely not.’

‘That was my first reaction too, I had no idea. But it seems it’s true.’

Amy tipped her head. ‘You know, I remember Mum accusing Dad of wasting money on gambling once, during an argument. But I thought no more about it, I assumed she was just making angry accusations. Maybe she knows … Should I ask her?’

‘Probably best not to. Least said, and all that. Fact is, I’d rather this was never mentioned at all, except between you and me. Here’s what I thought. I’ve put a decent deposit on the place, and I’ll pay the mortgage out over the next few years. But if you keep that cash safe, and try not to use it unless you must, it would serve to pay out any remaining debt if anything should happen to me.’

‘Anything happen to you? Honestly, Jack, this conversation is like a wild dream. Or nightmare.’

‘Hardly a nightmare to own your own home, is it? Calm down, Amy, everything’s fine. Now, how about I put the cash into a bank account for you?’

‘Then I’d have to deal with William. No, I’ll keep it under my mattress.’

‘Will’s not as bad as you think. He made a pretty speech about Betty last Sunday, I wish you’d heard it.’

Amy twisted her mouth in a sceptical smile.

‘No, really he did.’ Jack nodded to emphasise his words. ‘I asked if he had found a new sweetheart on his travels, and he replied that he never had because there was only
ever one girl for him. It was quite touching. Luckily Charlie created a scene to distract everyone. And another time Will told me that he would love to settle down, because he wants to have what I have – a happy little family.’

‘Wake up to what you’re saying, Jack. Of course Will only ever had one sweetheart – Mary! You knew that. Don’t tell me you have forgotten how it was when he got poor Betty into trouble? And of course he wants what you have. Only you think he wants something like what you have. You’re wrong – he wants exactly what you have. He wants Mary.’ Her voice trembled with tears, but her eyes flashed with fury as she spoke. ‘How can you be so blind?’

Jack frowned and shook his head slowly. ‘I can’t accept that, Amy. You are not being fair to Will. Yes, he is genuinely fond of Mary and Charlie, but not in the way you suggest. You’re wrong, absolutely wrong.’ He could feel anger building in his voice. ‘A bit of green-eyed jealousy, perhaps? Maybe you’re a bit in love with him yourself?’ He glanced up into her appalled face. ‘Sorry, Amy, sorry. That was uncalled for. Sorry.’

They sat in silence, both with lips compressed, faces down, staring at their hands. Finally Jack stood.

‘Amy, I’m truly sorry. I promise I’ll never mention him to you again. Never. I’ll bring the cash out next week, and we can arrange a time for you to sign the papers.’

Amy didn’t move.

He picked up his hat. ‘Tell Mum goodbye for me, will you.’

His stomach churned with unease as he rode away. Certainly Amy was always a bit sensitive, but such an outburst was totally out of character. Was she unwell? Did she have worries she was not telling him about? He decided to ask Mary to visit her more often, see if there was some comfort or help he could offer. Satisfied with his plan, he allowed his horse to slow to a quiet trot, as he relaxed into enjoying the late sunlight slanting hazily through the trees.
Over the months, Jack came to understand, follow and trust the same accountancy methods his father had used. And he came to agree with Evan Whitfield, there was a beauty in the sweet balance of helping ratepayers and defaulters, pressured by tough economic times, whilst at the same time helping his own family and ambitions.

With his new awareness of business practices, he found time to surreptitiously explore the records and systems of revenue collection and recording throughout the shire accounts, and was amazed at the untapped possibilities he discovered. There was one account in particular that caught his eye, an old ledger wedged in behind volumes of actuarial tables. The book was thick with dust, and Jack could see at a glance that the considerable deposit it recorded had not been touched for several years. He slipped it into his briefcase, and stopped by the river on the way home, to read it more carefully. The deposit entries all referred to fines and overdue charges levied and received, and the names of the various payees were written alongside each. Against each entry was a second, later, entry, detailing the actual amounts withdrawn to balance the fees and charges imposed. To Jack’s astonishment, the figures did not match; the deposits were always higher than the fines. Each entry was neatly balanced and ruled off, with a final figure and an annotation of TBR. Each final figure amounted to a pound or less, but the total accumulated was over three hundred pounds. Jack puzzled over the ledger until hunger roused him, and he headed home, his mind teasing apart the possibilities. Had this been a pet project of one of his predecessors, who had died before he closed the ledger? Or had he simply forgotten it, in the face of some emergency? Had his own father left unfinished business records? And what was the meaning of the annotation TBR?

Charlie was sobbing in the corner when Jack entered, and he bent to scoop the boy up in his arms. ‘What’s up, son? Are you a tired little boy?’

‘He’s a wilful little boy.’ Mrs Harrison was standing stoutly in the doorway, her arms folded, her face unsmiling.

Jack swallowed his angry reply. Mary’s health had deteriorated during the last weeks of her pregnancy, and her mother had moved in to assist with Charlie and to support
Mary. Jack enjoyed Mrs Harrison’s company generally, but found he was frequently biting his tongue, refraining from arguing with her as she took over more and more of the domestic decisions that Jack and Mary had shared. Above all, he resented her frequent harping that ‘…the boy needs more discipline.’

Carefully keeping his voice soft, he held the boy to his chest, and spoke over his shoulder. ‘He’s still just a baby, he doesn’t always understand …’

‘He’ll never understand unless you take a firm stand with him now.’

*Not worth an argument. Mary needs peace.* ‘I’ll bathe him and get him ready for bed.’ He dropped his briefcase, slipped off his coat, and carried Charlie into the bathroom. ‘Come on now, Charlie lad. Show me what a good boy you can be.’

*TBR. To Be Refunded.* It was his first thought when he awoke the following morning. Of course. It made sense; the overpayments were to be repaid to the payees. But why had it not been done? The last entry was over five years earlier, and the ledger went back more than twenty years. Or was TBR simply a cover, to satisfy a nosy auditor, should that ever become necessary. Either way, perhaps it gave him a way to access that windfall. His first priority would be to track down the payees, only then would he have a chance of understanding the transactions.

Mary was sleeping still, so he eased quietly out of bed, careful not to disturb her. Grabbing his clothes, he washed and dressed in the laundry, listening with a heavy heart to Mrs Harrison scolding Charlie into eating his breakfast, sitting up straight, keeping quiet so as to let his mother sleep a little. Poor little Charlie. Jack sighed, but conceded that Charlie probably needed a little more discipline than he had faced in his first three years. ‘It’s tough, son’, he muttered under his breath, ‘but life is tough. You need to learn so much …’

He stopped at the little riverside park again on his way to work, and swiftly inspected the entries again, confirming his belief that TBR could only mean *To Be Refunded.* An idea was beginning to form in his mind, and he resolved to say nothing about the matter until he had a fully formed plan. And this time, his plan would be all his own, nothing to do with Evan Whitford. Since he had started work as Rate Collector, he had certainly enjoyed the extra income, and the gifts made life sweeter. But more than that, he revelled in the excitement, the thrill of the secret power he wielded. For his whole
working life, more than twenty years he realised with surprise, he had worked hard for relatively little; now it seemed right that he should find ways to enjoy an easier life, a more rewarding life. It was such a small step to take, and it would surely be cheating his own wife and son to turn away from this opportunity to improve their lives? They deserved the best he could give them, and he deserved the opportunity to better his life. It was not as if anybody would be hurt, or even know.

He closed the ledger and rode in to work, his heart racing with excitement as his plans fizzed and formed.

Evan Whitford was waiting for him. ‘Ah, there you are. Just wanted to check that your new duties are going smoothly? No problems?’

‘No problems at all.’ Jack’s pulse quickened as he reached for his notebook of daily entries. Did Evan know he had discovered the old ledger?

But Evan simply glanced through the notebook and nodded. ‘Good man. Well then, make the usual adjustments as you enter these into the ledger, and keep up the good work.’

Jack’s hand trembled as he dropped the notebook back onto his desk, conscious that he had moved into new territory. It was one thing to work in conjunction with his boss, quite another to strike out alone. But that was exactly what he planned to do.

Excitement surged through his body, and he kept his face down as he gathered his books for the day. Would Evan notice a change? As if reading his thoughts, Evan turned back. ‘You upset about something? You seem jumpy. Mary’s well?’

Jack seized the cue. ‘She’s not well, and I have to admit, Charlie and I are a little crowded having Mrs Harrison staying. Glad of the help, but …’

Both men laughed, and the moment passed. I must be careful. Never relax. He finished gathering his books for the day, shouted a cheery goodbye and rode away, barely able to suppress his exhilaration. All that day, his mind swirled with possible ways to access that three hundred pounds. It was enough to mean the difference between doing nicely, and being well off, having enough put away to deal with any contingency. The trick was in knowing how to release the funds undetected. He was so deeply absorbed in his thoughts he didn’t notice the midwife’s buggy at his gate until he was almost home.

His heart leaped into his throat. Mary had not anticipated a visit from the midwife today. Let her be safe. Please, please. He flung the reins over the verandah rail, and
raced inside. Silence. The bedroom door was closed, and Charlie stared, pale and wide-eyed, from his highchair.

‘Charlie …’ He bent to slip the boy free, and Charlie grabbed him around his neck, his sobs beginning in earnest. ‘Hush, little man. Dad’s here now. Where’s Mummy?’ He swung around at a thin cry from the bedroom, fear gripping him.

‘Mummy’s got a baby.’ Charlie sounded stunned, and Jack briefly glimpsed the boy’s bewilderment and distress.

Holding Charlie close, Jack tapped softly on the bedroom door. ‘It’s me, Mary. Can I come in?’

The door swung open, and Mrs Harrison emerged, closing the door behind her, and smiling up at him. ‘Two fine little girls, Jack. Congratulations.’

Jack’s knees suddenly buckled, and he grabbed the chairback for support. ‘And Mary?’ He couldn’t say more, but Mrs Harrison was already answering.

‘She’s a little weak, she’s had a bit of an ordeal. Nothing a bit of rest can’t fix. Now, you take this noisy boy for a walk, and we’ll have your new family ready to meet you when you get back. Off you go.’

Jack hesitated, but she repeated ‘Off you go now’ and disappeared back into the bedroom. Jack bowed his head briefly, *Thank you, thank you*, then swung Charlie up onto his shoulders.

‘You were right, Charlie boy. Mummy’s got a baby. Mummy’s got two new babies. And you’ve got two little sisters. Let’s go and tell the chooks, shall we?’
Jack fell in love with his daughters as soon as he saw them. His logic told him they were just two red, scrawny new babies. But his heart spoke differently, and he gazed long minutes at them, delighting in recognising Mary’s dark eyes, Charlie’s soft fair hair, his own long fingers. When they were a week old, he confessed to Mary that he had feared he would not have any love left over for them, and she chuckled as she admitted that she too had been afraid that her heart would not be big enough for two more babies. But love was not enough; the babies were hard work, and Mary, always tiny, seemed to shrink with exhaustion. The midwife, and later the doctor, advised Jack against any more babies, fearing that Mary’s health would not stand another pregnancy. Jack did not have to be told twice; since Betty’s death he had been acutely aware of the dangers of childbirth, and he was grateful to have his little family.

‘Besides,’ he reassured Mary, ‘I can give us a better life if we have just these three. Our perfect family.’

They hired a girl to help daily, and Jack promised her regular ongoing work and a generous bonus if she worked hard. Mrs Harrison retreated to her own home when the babies reached three weeks, but she called in every few days, and while she irritated Jack, often making him feel like an intruder in his own home, he knew that her help was invaluable. For himself, he did what he could, but work kept him away long hours, and he soon discovered that the only way he could truly help Mary, and gain her attention even briefly, was to bring home extra little treats and luxuries for her and for the children. Mrs Harrison snorted her derision, but Mary’s grateful smiles soothed Jack.

Amy was delighted to have two new nieces, and came to meet them as soon as Mary was ready for visitors. She brought a set of blocks for Charlie, and Jack watched gratefully as she made a fuss of his new status as big brother. ‘Would you like a little holiday with me and Granny? If Mummy can spare you for a few days? I thought so. Come on, let’s pack some toys.’

William was another early visitor, and he arrived laden with flowers and a silk shawl for Mary, tiny knitted garments for the girls, books and toffees for Charlie, and a pouch
of fine pipe tobacco for Jack. He cooed over the babies, but backed away when Mary handed him one to hold. ‘No, they’re so tiny. I might break them. I’ll wait until they’re Charlie’s size.’ Everyone laughed, but Jack was acutely aware that William had never had the chance to hold his own son. *Poor Will. I can’t imagine how it must have hurt to lose his wife and child. No wonder he ran away.*

Later, while Mary was busy with the children, Jack and William settled on the verandah, stretching their long legs into the sunshine, smoking and chatting in the quiet afternoon.

‘There’s something that I’ve been meaning to ask you, Will.’ Jack tapped his pipe out, and laid it aside. ‘About old bank accounts. What happens to them?’

‘Depends how old, I suppose. Have you found an account of your father’s? You can easily access that, as one of his heirs.’

‘No, not exactly. Just old accounts generally.’

Will pursed his lips thoughtfully. ‘Difficult to say unless I know a bit more.’ He waited, then added, ‘In confidence, of course.’

‘Well, just a theoretical question then. What if there was an old business account, untouched for, say, ten years or so, maybe forgotten. What happens to such an account? Can anyone gain access to it?’

‘Ah. So that’s the question, how to gain access. Anything’s possible, of course. But much depends on the details. Like, the identity of the account owner. And, who else knows about it.’

In the quiet, Jack could hear Mary singing a soft lullaby to the babies. Life was good. But it could so easily be better, much better. Should he tell William about the ledger? Could he trust him? *Ridiculous question.*

‘I need your help, Will.’ Over the next several minutes Jack explained how he had found and puzzled over the old ledger. ‘I’ve been tracing those entries, as best I can. It seems that many of them are dead, a few were killed in the Boer War, four left for the goldfields and never returned. And a few are still living in the district.’

Will ran his fingers through his dark curly hair, and Jack noticed, for the first time, grey hairs at Will’s temples. ‘And you want to know how to get your hands on some of this money? Is that it?’
Something in his voice made Jack turn in surprise. William was laughing at him!

Embarrassed, he seized his pipe and started packing fresh tobacco. ‘Well, yes. I thought …’

William laughed aloud. ‘Good for you, Jack. I didn’t know you had it in you. I was wondering what you’re up to. These past six months your bank accounts have been very active – money in, mortgage payments out. I’ve been wondering how to broach the subject.’

‘Is it so obvious?’ Jack frowned, and put his pipe aside again.

‘Some caution may be wise. We need to talk about it. Maybe not here?’ William nodded toward the open window. ‘But first, have you spoken to anyone else about this?’

Now Jack laughed. Will was echoing Evan Whitfield’s exact words. ‘No. Well, not exactly. It’s quite complicated.’

‘All the more reason to have my help, Jack. You need to be careful.’

‘You both need to be careful.’ Mary appeared in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. ‘If you wake those two, you’ll have the task of getting them back to sleep! And what is it Jack must be careful about?’

‘About his investments, of course.’ Will smiled at Mary. ‘Every investor needs a knowledgeable banker to guide him. Between us, we’ll make you a wealthy woman, Mary!’

‘I’d certainly like that, but I’m not counting on it. You men and your dreams. I’m putting the kettle on. Anyone interested in a cup of tea?’

As Mary disappeared back into the house, Will turned to Jack. ‘Not another word. Meet me after work tomorrow, and bring the ledger if you can.’

They pored over the ledger together, sitting on the riverbank in the late afternoon sun. William checked and rechecked the figures, holding the pages down in the breeze off the water.

‘Yes, I can see why this caught your eye. Lots of potential here. But you haven’t tried anything yet? No withdrawals?’
‘I didn’t know where to start …’

‘So …’ William hesitated, ‘I’ve noticed lots of activity on your account, and when you mentioned this, I naturally assumed you’d made a start. But no. So … so, what is it that you’ve been up to?’ He waited while Jack fidgeted with the lock of the briefcase. ‘I can only help if I know what’s going on. Otherwise I could cause problems.’

Jack stared, incredulous. ‘Are you threatening me?’

‘Of course not. Don’t be stupid. No, I meant, if I set up a plan that cuts across some other, shall we say, ‘activity’ of yours, it could set off a chain of consequences. Just tell me what’s going on, and we can work out your best approach here.’

‘Sorry, sorry, I’m a little jumpy.’ He rubbed his hands over his face. ‘I’m not sure I’m cut out for this.’ I thought I was so damn clever. Seems even a bank teller knew I was up to something. I’m a bloody fool.

‘A worry shared …?’

Jack shook his head. ‘It started after Dad died, when they promoted me.’ He told William all he could remember, feeling a burden lift as his story unrolled. It was so good to tell somebody, and he was almost giddy with relief by the time he finished speaking. William had not interrupted, and now he sat back, drumming his fingers on the ledger absently.

‘Right. Well, caution is our watchword. You have a couple of options, but our first priority had best be to make you less visible. Because if I detected a change in your banking habits, anyone could.’ He nodded at Jack’s unhappy expression. ‘Relax, relax, we can do this. Just a matter of moving things around a bit, and using a few false names. But we need to start soon, before any questions are asked. Here’s my advice.’

Over the next hour, as the day cooled and the sun sank to a golden glow, Jack listened carefully to plans to remove his fingerprints from most of his banking transactions. The danger suddenly seemed so obvious, he was embarrassed he had not foreseen the need for caution. William’s first move would be to open new accounts for Jack, using various aliases.

‘For instance, we can use the names of those men killed in the Boer War. They’d be the earliest entries in the ledger, I think?’ William glanced at the entries. ‘We’ll start there, just dip our toes in very carefully for a start, right?’
‘I was planning to refund the overpayments to those payees still in the district, to make it look legitimate.’

‘What for? Just so you can look like a good fellow? No, you’d just stir up interest in some pretty dodgy accounting practices. Questions will be asked, claimants will appear from nowhere. And the truth is, none of these people have any idea they were overcharged. Why trouble them with old stories now? There’s no future in that plan, Jack. No, we’ll focus our attention on those early entries, pick one or two, and work on them.’

‘So you can access that money?’

‘That’s where you come into it. I can open accounts for you, and make transfers and withdrawals, but you’ll have to sign the cheques to pay in.’

‘Me? How …’

‘Oh come on, Jack, don’t be naïve. You’ll forge a few signatures, nothing too difficult. Unless you reckon old Evan will sign them for you?’

Jack shivered in the cooling breeze, his stomach churning. What have I been thinking? That I was some sort of Robin Hood character?

‘Come on, Jack. Such a little thing to do, for such rewards. You’ll be rich! I told Mary you’d make her a wealthy woman – well, here’s the way to do it!’

Jack shivered again, but feeling the familiar tingle of excitement now. ‘Yes. Yes, of course. God, I’m glad you’re in this with me, Will.’

‘Umm, yes, in it with you …’ William hesitated, pulling his jacket closer against the rising wind.

‘Of course you are. You must take some share of the money we make. I couldn’t do this without your help, I can see that.’

‘No. No, I don’t think that would be wise. Wait,’ he held up his hand as Jack opened his mouth to speak, ‘Hear me out. We need to keep this simple. Just one clear line of operation. It’s the safest, trust me.’

‘That seems hardly fair. You’ll be taking risks too, it’s got to be worth your while …’

‘Let’s get this project launched and successful first. I’ll claim my reward later. That’s honestly the best way. Now here’s what you must do first.’ He glanced at the sky.
‘We’re in for a storm, I reckon. Tell you what, I’ll start on opening a couple of hidden accounts for you, and you start to practice a signature that will withdraw those funds. Evan Whitfield’s probably. Or the Chief Accountant in Melbourne. You’ll know which will attract least attention. And as we complete each transaction, I can destroy all evidence that it ever existed – all except the money, and that will be safely in your accounts. Now come on, we need a beer.’

The pub was warm and noisy, and they were greeted by several men as they entered. The beer and the noisy camaraderie relaxed Jack, and by the time he left to go home, he was buoyant with hope and confidence. *Not yet thirty-five, and on the road to real success. Just stay calm.* He shivered, more from excitement than from the cool wind. *This is for you, Mary. For you and the kiddies. No more will your mother be able to look down on me. We’re on our way!*
CHAPTER 10

September 1915. Wallsley, Victoria.

Just once, Jack thought that Mary suspected something was amiss. He had been deep in concentration over his accounts books, working on the dining table while Mary settled the children for the night. He knew he could count on a full hour uninterrupted, by the time she sang the babies to sleep, then read another story to Charlie. So he jumped, startled, when Charlie’s little hand seized his knee.

‘You read me a story tonight, Daddy. Your turn.’

Jack laughed and ruffled Charlie’s fair hair. ‘I already read you a story, right after your bath.’ He saw tears well up in the boy’s blue eyes, and he pushed his chair back. ‘All right, but just this once. Dad’s got work to do.’

Mary smiled at him. ‘Thanks, Jack. He’s overtired, he just needs a bit of time not shared with his sisters.’

When, twenty minutes later, Jack tiptoed out of the bedroom, and pulled the door shut, he was alarmed to see Mary leaning over his books, running her hand across the page. She turned to him.

‘What is all this, it doesn’t make any sense to me?’

He could feel his cheeks warm, but he pretended nonchalance, and walked past her, putting the kettle back on the stove. ‘Don’t worry your head about it, dear. It is complicated, that’s why I need to concentrate in peace. Can’t often get uninterrupted time at work. You don’t mind me bringing it home, do you?’ He turned to the kettle which was starting to sing. ‘You ready for a pot of tea?’

Mary still stared down at the books. Now she lifted her face to him, serious. ‘Promise me that you aren’t doing anything …, well, wrong. Nothing dishonest.’

A silence fell between them, as all the possibilities flashed through Jack’s mind. Tell her, confess, get her support. No, bluff your way out of it. No, blame William. No … ‘What are you talking about?’ Hot anger surged unexpectedly into his voice, quelling his fright. ‘Who puts such mad ideas into your head? Your bloody mother, I’ll bet! Honestly, Mary, you disappoint me. I work myself to a standstill to give you and the
kids a good secure life, and you accuse me of what?’ He could hear how self-righteous he sounded, and he cringed inwardly.

‘But these entries … these names … I’m not a fool, Jack, I can see when things are not as they should be.’ But her voice trembled, and Jack seized on her doubt.

‘I don’t explain all my work to you, just as you don’t bother telling me every little detail of your home management. I don’t ask you to account for budgeting decisions, do I? I don’t ask you to explain your actions, do I? No. Of course not. Because I trust you. And apparently that trust isn’t mutual.’ For a moment, he felt as if he was standing to one side, admiring an excellent dramatic actor. He continued, ‘Fine, then, show me exactly which piece you want explained.’ He grabbed the book and thrust it close to her face. ‘Go on, show me!’ *Lord, what’ll I do if she takes me on?*

But Mary dropped her gaze, her tears spilling.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry.’ She was openly sobbing now, but he did not move to comfort her, for fear she recognise his shivers as fright. ‘It’s just that we seem so well-off, and I can’t help wondering where it all comes from. I mean, I know what your salary is, and it doesn’t seem enough to explain …’ she gestured around the room, ‘… all this.’

Now he moved to hold and comfort her, soothing her with murmurs as he would one of the babies. Stroking her dark hair, aware of her birdlike fragility in his arms, he calmed and reassured her.

‘These archaic systems are so complex … wish they’d bring in the new systems I learned at night school … anyway, you’d expect me to be doing well by my age, after all, I’ve been working and earning for all these years … there’s the rents coming in, don’t forget … Everything’s fine, I promise.’

He mentioned Mary’s fears to William the next day, as he handed over cheques and deposit slips. ‘Maybe I should tell her? There’s an outside chance she’ll say something out of place …’

William shook his head, his attention on his bookwork. ‘No need to tell her more than she needs to know. Anyway, I reckon women always know more than they let on. Oh, she’ll ask you what’s up, just to show that she’s not unaware. But she won’t spill the beans. For a start, I doubt she really has any idea, except that she is unexpectedly comfortably off. She won’t kill the golden goose, she just wants a look at it, that’s all.’
Jack shook his head, laughing. ‘You are so cynical.’

‘Not about Mary, I’m not. I’ve the highest regard for her perception.’ He stamped the cheques, slipped them into a folder, and passed the bank books back.

Jack frowned. ‘No, I’m sure she doesn’t know. She was just puzzled about the ledger, that’s all.’ He slipped the bankbooks into his jacket pocket. ‘Wonder if Mum knew about Dad’s extra activities? These days she only says she doesn’t want to know about money matters, and I never found any bank books or anything to alert her.’

‘Your father banked with the bookies. Hardly a good investment.’ He closed his ledger. ‘We’re done here. Time for a beer after work?’

‘Evan’s asked me to meet him after work tonight. Said something has come up. Maybe tomorrow?’

‘Fine, see you tomorrow.’

Evan was gathering papers into neat stacks on his desk. ‘Ah, there you are. I’m almost done here, give me a second, and we’ll head for the pub.’

Jack raised his eyebrows, and glanced at the clock.

Evan snorted impatiently. ‘Hardly matters now. Put those books down, you can sort them tomorrow. Come on, I need a beer.’ He pulled on his jacket, slid a pile of paperwork into his briefcase, glanced around the office, and strode out. As he reached the open door, he glanced back. ‘Come on, we may not have much time.’

Puzzled, Jack dropped his books onto his desk and turned to follow Evan. A shiver of premonition made him turn back, scoop the books into his briefcase and tuck it firmly under his arm, before he stepped outside and pulled the door closed.

In the noisy pub, Jack collected their drinks at the bar and turned to see where Evan had chosen to sit. There he was, hunched over a table in the corner. He looks like a crow in a rainstorm, hunched and miserable. Wonder what’s up? Again he felt the tiny shiver of dread, and he could hear fear in his voice as he spoke. ‘What’s wrong, Evan? I’ve never seen you like this.’

Evan seized his frosted glass and took a long drink. ‘Everything’s wrong. Or nothing. I just don’t know.’ He stared into his glass, frowning.
‘You’re talking in riddles. Is there something I can do to help you?’

‘To help us both, you should be saying. I think we’re in trouble.’

Cold panic slid icily down Jack’s spine. He squeezed his eyes shut, and rubbed his forehead. But he said nothing, waiting until Evan broke the silence.

‘I’ve been given a promotion. And a transfer. I’m to move to the Melbourne office as Head of Division.’

In astonished relief, Jack laughed. ‘Good lord, you gave me a fright there! Congratulations, Evan, that is great news.’

Evan stared at him, his eyes red in his pale face. ‘I don’t believe it is a promotion, Jack.’ His voice was soft, barely more than a whisper. ‘I believe they’re calling me in to keep an eye on me, I’m almost sure of it. And they’re sending a new man in here. No local promotion, they’re sending what they called ‘a new broom’, a fellow from Melbourne. He’ll be a new broom all right, he’ll rake over all the accounts and records. We could be in trouble, Jack. Serious trouble.’

Jack blew out a long slow breath. ‘God help us. What can we do? How long have we got?’

‘The telegram came today, the new man arrives tomorrow.’ Evan pulled the telegram from his pocket and slapped it on the table. His voice was bitter as he continued. ‘The man must have already left when they sent word. That’s what alarms me most. They must know something. Or at least suspect.’

Jack read the telegram thoughtfully. ‘Maybe there is nothing to this. Maybe it is as simple as it looks – you have been given a well-deserved promotion. And some city fellow has requested a transfer to the country. It’s not so outlandish, is it?’

‘Perhaps not. Let’s hope you’re right. But for me, I’m burning papers tonight, and I’d suggest you find an excuse for a bonfire too. Lost paperwork is far less trouble than incriminating evidence.’

‘Yes. Right, I’ll do that.’ Jack patted the briefcase at his side. ‘I’ve kept it tidy, and have the latest work here.’ But his mind was racing ahead. I need to warn William, need to protect that work too. ‘Bloody hell, Evan. Let me shout you another beer, before …’
‘Let me shout you both.’

Jack looked up to see William with a tin tray carrying three tall glasses of beer. *Where did he spring from? How much did he over hear? Was he eavesdropping?* He stood, taking the glasses and setting them down on the table before shaking William’s hand.

‘Good to see you, Will.’

‘Thought you two looked thirsty.’ William laughed. ‘So, how’s life treating you, Evan? What’s news?’

*He was listening! I knew it.*

Jack watched admiringly as Evan calmly announced his promotion. ‘A bit of a coup for me. I’ve been angling for a city posting. A last hurrah before I retire. And my wife has always fancied living in the city; now she’ll have her chance.’

‘Congratulations! Great news. I confess I sometimes miss the city life myself. Always something going on. Always something new to master.’

‘Not for me.’ Evan smiled, and Jack admired again his aplomb. ‘A couple of easy years winding down, then I’ll be back to settle into retirement here at home. The novelty of the city will wear thin by then.’ He gulped the last of his drink. ‘Thanks for that, William. I owe you one. Time for this old man to be getting home. Think about that plan, Jack. I’ll see you in the morning.’ He gathered his bag and coat, and hurried away, giving a small salute from the door before he left.

‘Off to burn bridges, is he?’ William leaned back and crossed his legs.

‘You were eavesdropping then. I thought you must have been. Where were you?’

‘Not important. We need to focus on our own plans. Am I right in assuming he knows nothing of our … business arrangements?’

‘Of course he doesn’t. Don’t you trust me?’

‘Don’t be so touchy, I’m just checking your situation. Now, if as you suggest, it is all an innocent promotion and transfer, there’s no problem. Just carry on, with caution.’

‘And if Evan is right?’

‘If Evan is right, you should be pretty safe. The new man will need to be shown the local systems, but that’s Evan’s job, surely, not yours. You might need to have a few glib answers ready, that should cover it.’
‘And we’ll stop our business, as you put it, right now!’

‘Well, yes and no. Maybe best to make as few changes as possible. Slow down, perhaps, but no sudden changes. That would attract attention.’

‘Yes,’ Jack ran his fingers through his hair. ‘Yes, I see what you mean. Right, well, like Evan, I’m off to burn the odd bridge. Only a few papers, I have kept it all pretty tidy.’

‘Give them to me, I’ll take care of them. Saves any awkward questions at home, perhaps?’

‘Thanks, Will, that’s a good idea, if it’s no trouble to you?’

‘None at all. Forget they ever existed.’ He folded the papers Jack took from his briefcase, and slid them into his pocket. ‘What papers?’

They laughed as they strolled outside.

‘A beautiful night, Jack. Go home and enjoy your family. And it’ll all be all right tomorrow, you’ll see.’

‘I hope you’re right.’ But Jack realised he did feel calmer now. William may have his faults but he was a good businessman, and if anyone could make it safe, he would. Jack rode home, focusing on the pleasure of tucking his two daughters into their beds, reading one more story to Charlie, and then relaxing with Mary. Yes, William was right, it would all turn out well.
CHAPTER 11

September 1915. Wallsley, Victoria.

‘Jack, come and meet your new colleague, Tom Walsh.’ If Evan was nervous, he covered it well, looking relaxed and genial as he made the introductions.

A short, chubby smiling man with thinning ginger hair stepped forward and held out his hand. Jack gripped Tom’s firm handshake with caution. He seems friendly enough.

‘Welcome, Tom, hope you’ll be happy here.’

Tom chuckled. ‘I’m sure I will, though I’m told it’s even colder than Melbourne in winter. Tell me that’s not true, please!’

Jack laughed. ‘Not sure about that. You’ll both know the answer soon enough. When do you leave for the city, Evan?’

‘Maybe next Friday. Depends on the trains, so many changes with the recruiting trains running.’

‘Damn the European war; it’s on the other side of the world, yet it affects our train schedules!’ Tom laughed. ‘They’re looking forward to your arrival at City Office, Evan, I can tell you. What with all the younger fellows rushing off to enlist, there’s been a great thinning of the ranks. Your experience and expertise are sorely needed.’

Jack’s heart lifted. They have summoned him because of the war, not because of any suspicion. We’re safe!

‘And you, Jack? You’ve no plans to rush off to war, I hope? I’m going to need the support of someone who knows the ropes here.’

‘It’s not our war, no matter what the politicians say. They said it’d be over by Christmas, and here we are, a year in and getting in deeper, it seems. No, I’ve no wish to get involved. And anyway, I’ve a wife and three kiddies to look out for. I’m not going anywhere.’ Jack responded warmly, but he could have laughed aloud in his relief. Tom Walsh was a pleasant fellow. There’d be no problem.
The party was Mary’s idea, a relaxed spring picnic affair to welcome Tom and to wish Evan and his wife a pleasant time in the city. The weather was perfect, warm and sunny enough for the men to play a rowdy game of cricket in the paddock, and for the children to scamper about playing their own ball games. The twins were delighted with all the attention, and they ran from visitor to visitor, giggling with excitement, revelling in the confusion of identities.

‘Now which of you is which? Honestly, Mary, I don’t know how you tell them apart.’

The twins, now almost eighteen months old, found this hilarious, and needed little else to keep them occupied.

Jack had organised a keg of beer from the hotel, and the women set up a lavish afternoon tea on the verandah. William produced a spinning top and a tin whistle for Charlie, and several boys crowded around him, eager for a turn.

‘You’ve done well for yourself, Jack. Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.’ Tom laughed as Jack jumped.

‘No harm done.’ Jack dabbed at the spilt beer on his shirt. ‘I was watching the kiddies, didn’t hear you come up. Yes, it’s a nice place out here. Mary likes it. Good for the youngsters and close to her family.’

‘And I hear you’ve other investments too.’ He smiled as Jack swung to face him. ‘I’ve been talking to your friend William. Both he and Evan sing your praises, they tell me how you’ve made a real place for yourself in the community – on all the committees, working your way up the ladder at the office, even bought a home for your old mum. Men like you are the backbone of the community. I admire you. Wish I had your tenacity, or whatever it takes to own a few properties at your age.’

*Strewth, how much does he know of my affairs? What has Will told him? And Evan?* Jack forced a laugh, turning back to watch the playing children, keeping his face averted from Tom. ‘I’ve been lucky, I guess. My father backed me at the bank for my first property, when I first started work, and I’ve managed to keep it up.’ He glanced around. Nothing had changed, the cricket game limped on, children shrieked and squabbled, women murmured on the verandah. *I’m being foolish. He means nothing. just social chit chat.* ‘And you’ll soon discover there’s not much to spend your money on around here, it’s a quiet life.’
‘Men will always find a way to spend their money, if they’ve a mind to. Some gamble …’

A trickle of fear ran down Jack’s spine. *Tom knows something! But what was he after? Was this a warning? Or did he want a cut of the rewards?* ‘I’ve never been a gambler. Can’t see the point of keeping the bookies fat.’ Jack spoke slowly, though his mind was racing. *Keep it general, keep it light. Distract him.* ‘What about you, Tom? Fancy a flutter at the races?’

‘No fear. Not my idea of an investment. Seems to me that fools lose their money on gambling, and criminals use it to hide ill-gotten gains. No place for me.’

At that moment, angry shouts erupted among the children. In the melee of red-faced boys and flying fists, they saw Charlie hit another boy over the head with the top. The lad screamed as blood spurted from the cut.

‘Excuse me …’ Jack leapt over the fence into the paddock, and gathered up the hurt boy, scolding Charlie as he hurried toward the verandah and the women. By the time the fuss died down, people were beginning to gather their children. The party was over.

Tom thanked Mary warmly, shook Charlie’s hand, then Jack’s. ‘I meant it, Jack, I admire you. There’s much you can teach me, I’m sure. See you on Monday!’

He strode away, waving farewell to the others as he left.

‘Well, you made a friend there, apparently.’ Mary tucked her arm into Jack’s elbow.

He patted her arm, and gently lifted it away. ‘I hope you’re right. Sorry, love, I need to speak to Will, before he leaves.’

‘He’s not going. I’ve already asked him to stay to dinner with us.’

‘Oh?’ In his mind he heard the echo of his own indignation *I don’t ask you to explain.*

‘Right then, he can help me clear away the chairs.’ He pulled her into a swift hug.

‘Great party, love. Thanks.’

William was unconcerned about Tom. ‘He seems like a nice fellow, maybe not too bright, but harmless enough. Hopeless cricketer.’ He swung another chair onto the verandah. ‘Just hold your nerve. Everything’s going to be fine.’

But everything wasn’t fine. Or Jack thought not anyway. Tom asked endless questions, infuriated the typist with constant enquiries about filing matters, wanted entries from
twenty years earlier deciphered and untangled, and eventually insisted on accompanying Jack every day for two weeks. ‘It’s the only way I’m going to be able to understand your systems. You sure do things differently in the country!’ He was laughing as he spoke, but Jack was beginning to sense an undercurrent of steely purpose in Tom, and he was afraid.

The two weeks passed without incident. Tom greeted all the ratepayers cordially, stood respectfully back as Jack conducted the council business, and listened without interruption as Jack fumbled through explanations. He never challenged Jack, never disagreed, never even raised an eyebrow. Late on the second Friday, Tom declined Jack’s invitation to go for a beer, pleading exhaustion. ‘You set a cracking pace, Jack. I’ll be glad of a rest!’

Tom asked no more questions, and seemed no longer interested in Jack’s work, apparently turning his attention to the pressing demands of the new austerity provisions imposed by the government. Even so, Jack’s fear barely diminished.

‘He’s satisfied now he understands the way things are run, and he trusts you. He’s probably busy figuring out his own systems,’ William assured him. Jack was not convinced, and although he resumed his gradual excavation of the old accounts, he was more cautious than ever.

Beyond the office, as the months passed, the world was changing. The news from Europe was appalling, and wounded men were starting to return. In late January 1916, Mary’s youngest brother came home from the Great War, missing his right leg, bitter, surly and uncommunicative. Mary returned from a family visit, pale and shaken, hushing Charlie as he breathlessly recounted, again and again, that the bloody Jerries had blown Uncle Ron’s leg off, and it never would have happened if the bloody shirkers had been there. ‘What’s a Jerry, Dad? What’s a shirker?’

A new income tax was levied by the federal government, which meant changes to accounting practices, changes that echoed through almost all official bookwork. At the same time, the austerity measures meant either increased workloads or reduced pay. Jack opted for the increased workload, and while he and others silently cursed the changes forced on the community by the war, few voiced their complaint. Too many
maimed men returning to the district, too many families suffering as telegrams reported deaths or the dreaded ‘missing in action’.

‘There’s a silver lining, Jack.’ William tucked the latest cheque away and stamped Jack’s bankbook. ‘With so much attention on this war, there’s less scrutiny of local affairs. Perhaps we should seek out new avenues?’

But the generalised dread that had seized the community had seeped into Jack’s heart, and he shuddered at the thought of any new risk. ‘I’ve too much at stake already. No more. If anything, I’d like to lie low for a bit.’ Without warning, he was close to tears, seized with a deep yearning for a lost, almost-forgotten sense of calm safety.

Exhaustion swept over him, a powerful urge to sleep, to forget all this complexity and deceit. Keeping his head down, he scooped up the bankbook and slipped it into his jacket pocket, aware of Will’s scrutiny.

‘You’ve no need to worry. I was talking to Tom just yesterday, and he … Are you all right?’

Jack shook his head. ‘Not feeling too bright. I’ll see you later. We’ll talk …’ He hurried out into the bright heat of the afternoon. Nothing moved in the dusty street, and he crossed to the deep shade of the trees opposite. Here he leaned against a tree, eyes closed, fighting tears. What on earth is the matter with me? Have I lost my nerve? Heaven help me. He was unsure how much time had passed when he heard voices, and he opened his eyes. Outside the bank, Tom was chatting to Mary. Surprised, he watched, grateful that he was invisible in among the trees. Mary shook her head, smiling, then waved a farewell as Tom entered the bank and Mary walked on toward the post office.

‘Mary! Mary, wait for me.’

She spun around, smiling in surprise. ‘Thought you’d be out on the road at this hour. Is everything all right?’

‘What did Tom want?’ The sense of dread had returned, and he ignored Mary’s question.

‘Apparently he’s trying to track down an old friend of his father, he thought I might have heard the name. A Robert Drummond, I think he said. Anyway, it meant nothing to me.’ She stared at him. ‘Are you well? You look dreadful.’
Robert Drummond. The first alias I used, the first account I cleared from the ledger. He’s onto us.

He turned to peer through the open door of the bank. Tom was leaning on the counter, talking with William.

‘Jack …?’ Mary tugged his arm.

‘Uh, no, I’m not well. Bit of heatstroke, I think. I need to lie down …’

Mary took his hand, gazing up at him with concern. ‘Come on, we’ll go home. Mum’s there with the children, she’ll keep them quiet. You look all in.’

I can’t do this any more. Numb with anxiety, Jack fended off the children, and lay down on his bed. He must have fallen asleep immediately, because he was astounded to realise it was dark when voices awoke him. Will’s here. Something’s up. He splashed cold water over his face to dispel his grogginess, and stepped into the kitchen. Mary was busy at the stove, and the children were seated at the table. They set up a clamour of questions as soon as they saw him. ‘We were quiet, weren’t we, Daddy?’ ‘Do I have to eat the peas?’ ‘Can you hear my reading?’ Charlie had started school at the beginning of the year, and while he loved learning, he was an anxious boy, always worried that he might displease the teacher.

William was sitting near the door, and he stood as Jack entered the room. ‘There you are. We’ve been worried about you.’

Mary wiped her hands on her apron. ‘I’ll put the kettle on, Jack. You’re still very pale. Perhaps you should see the doctor tomorrow? You may need a tonic …’

He was overwhelmed immediately, and the thought returned I can’t do this any more. None of it. I just want it to end.

‘A cuppa would be great, thanks dear. You’ll have one, Will?’

Mary lifted the kettle from the stove. ‘If you two want to talk in peace, I’ll bring your tea out onto the verandah.’

‘Thanks, love.’ Jack held the door open for Will, and followed him out. The air was fragrant with jasmine blossom, and out in the paddocks curlews called sadly across the dusk. Jack sank heavily into a chair, and motioned Will to take a seat.
‘There’s a problem, isn’t there. I knew it,’ he continued as William nodded. ‘That bloody nosy Tom. Evan was right, Tom was sent to spy.’ He waited but William was silent. ‘Well, how bad is it?’ Even to his own ears, his voice sounded dull and flat, without hope.

‘As bad as it can be, I’m afraid. He knows pretty much all about the systems you and Evan devised, and he knows about the various accounts you’ve been operating.’

Jack gasped. ‘How? For god’s sake, how’d he discover that? You destroyed all the evidence. Didn’t you?’ Silence. ‘Didn’t you, Will? You said you had.’

‘I kept them sealed, Jack. Nobody should have ever known they were there.’ He dropped his gaze. ‘I’m sorry … I kept them in case they could get you out of trouble some day.’

Jack rubbed his hand over the stubble of his face, his chest tight with rage. ‘You bastard. You bastard. Why?’

But he knew why. *Mary. Amy warned me, and I ignored her. He has set me up, and he plans to steal Mary from me.*

In the tense silence, Mary swung the door open, and placed a tray of tea things on the low table. She hesitated, glancing from one to the other. ‘What’s up? What’s wrong?’ Jack could hear a note of panic in her voice, and he reached for her hand. ‘Nothing we can’t handle together, you and I.’

‘Will mentioned some irregularities in the accounts. Is it the stuff we talked about once before?’ She was looking directly into his eyes, defying him to fob her off.

He hesitated. ‘Will’s already explained it all to you, has he?’ He hated the sarcasm in his own voice, and clamped his mouth shut as tears sprang into his eyes.

‘Give us a minute here, Mary.’ William’s voice was soft, almost intimate. ‘We’ll make a plan, then …’

A shriek and the crash of a plate from the dining room. ‘Bloody stupid men!’ Mary slammed the screen door as she went inside.

William started talking immediately. ‘You need to disappear for a while, Jack. Just ’til this dies down. Tom was going to the police when he left me, there’ll be more trouble yet.’
‘No trouble for you, then? You’re in the clear?’ Jack could taste bile as he spoke.

‘Jack, we need to move quickly. You can curse me later, but right now, we need to get you to a safe place. Not here, and not your mother’s place either. Your in-laws? No, a bit obvious. Come on, get moving.’ He moved to grip Jack’s shoulder, but a glare warned him off. ‘Look, I can borrow a motorcar, get you away quickly. Pack an overnight bag, I’ll be back in half an hour.’ He leapt down to the grass and was swallowed up in the night.

Jack was pushing shirts into a carryall when Mary came into the bedroom.

‘Will said there’s trouble coming. What’s happening, Jack? This is about those accounts, isn’t it?’

Jack’s shoulders slumped, and he stared down at the half-filled bag. Where can I start? What could I possibly say? ‘I’ve got to go away for a bit. I’ve … There’s some trouble about money …’ Fear choked him, and his voice cracked. ‘They’ll arrest me, Mary. They’ll put me in jail!’

Mary stared, her eyes wide in her ashen face. Jack felt his heart contract. He wanted nothing so much as to be holding her close, feeling her reassuring warmth, loving her. ‘I was right, wasn’t I? The money wasn’t ours. I knew it!’

Jack had never seen her so angry. He took a step toward her, but she backed away. ‘Don’t try to sweet talk now. Just tell me what I am supposed to do. You run away, but what about me and the kids? What happens to us? What are we supposed to do?’ She waited a heartbeat, then continued, her voice slow and harsh. ‘If you walk out and leave me to face this alone, I’ll never forgive you. If you go now, never come back, you hear me. Never come back.’

‘Mary, don’t.’ His voice was a sob.

She stared at him, her dark eyes wide with disbelief. ‘You’re not the man I married, Jack. You’re a stranger.’

Jack’s shoulders sagged. ‘I’m a stranger to myself.’ He turned away, blindly pushing clothes into the bag.

Will was waiting in the motorcar as Jack staggered to the gate. Mary stood rigid in the doorway behind him, not moving, not waving even as the car sped away. Jack’s last
glimpse was of her pale shocked face, and Charlie running past her, trying to reach
Jack.

‘Steady, Jack, steady.’ Will kept his eyes on the dark road as he spoke. ‘I’ve got a plan,
this will work out.’

For you! What choice have I got!

Jack said nothing, and Will continued, ‘Two things. I’ve heard that if the stolen money
is repaid, sometimes charges can be dropped. And the other is that if you enlist, that
wipes the slate clean.’

‘Enlist?’ Jack was horrified. ‘I’m totally against Australia’s involvement, and you want
me to enlist?’

William ignored that. ‘The first step is to repay the money. I’ve brought withdrawal
slips, so’s you can sign them. Then I’ll empty the accounts, and repay the money in
your name. You need to write a letter, confessing or apologising. Or both. I’ll give that
to Tom with the money. That could see you clear.’

‘Clear, but destitute.’ An image of a cruel dingo trap flashed into Jack’s mind, the
dingo faced with the choice of ripping off its own paw or waiting for the hunter’s gun.
He fell silent again.

‘Jack, concentrate. This is important. I’m taking you to catch the overnight train to
Sydney. You’ll get off in Sydney, and go to the Post Office. I’ll send a telegram there,
telling you if it’s safe to come back.’

‘I don’t know … I can’t believe this is happening …’

‘Listen to me. You can’t use your name. If there’s an arrest warrant they’ll pick you
up. You need an alias. What about the first alias, the one Tom mentioned. Robert
Drummond. Right? As of now, you are Robert Jack Drummond.’

William stopped the car on the outskirts of the town. ‘We won’t be seen here. We’ll
race into the station at the last minute, just in case …’

He produced the blank withdrawal forms and a writing pad, and dictated a letter of
confession and apology. Jack, too shocked and miserable to even question why, simply
wrote and signed as directed. Will folded the papers into his pocket.
‘These may do the trick. And even if you have to enlist, you may be rejected as unfit. Not as if you’re a young bloke. You’ll be a hero, not a criminal. It’ll work out, you’ll see.’

At the station, William walked around the car and opened Jack’s door. Jack didn’t move. ‘There must be another way, Will. I should end it all …’

William put his hand on Jack’s shoulder. ‘Perhaps you’ve forgotten, but years ago, the night before my wedding, you talked me out of several mad plans. You told me to do the honourable thing and face the consequences, to make a success out of disaster. Not your fault it didn’t work out. But later I was glad I had done the right thing.’ He waited, but Jack still sat unmoving. ‘Come on, Jack.’ Even as William spoke, Jack leapt from the car, and seized his bag.

‘Right. Here goes.’ He started toward the station, then turned back. Say it, just say it.

‘Will, look out for Mary for me, won’t you. Keep her safe ’til I’m back.’

‘I will, you can count on that. Just go!’

Jack was on the train, huddled down in a corner, his hat pulled low on his face before he remembered Will’s words when he first discovered the ledger. I’ll claim my reward later. But the train was rattling though the black countryside, and Jack knew his choices now were reduced to staying where he was, or jumping from the train. He stayed.
CHAPTER 12
March 1916. Brisbane, Queensland.

The train rattled steadily through the night, and Jack peered out into the black landscape, his mind a turmoil of shame, fear and grief. At the few stops, as some passengers alighted and more clambered aboard and settled into seats, Jack cringed into his corner, hat pulled low, his face tucked into his upturned collar. Once, staring out at the swirl of passengers on a dark station, he thought he saw William’s father-in-law, Glasson, pointing directly at him, mouthing curses. But the man moved and became just another passenger struggling with a heavy suitcase.

Jack slept fitfully, shocked anew each time he woke and remembered his situation. Daylight roused him finally, as the train shuddered to a halt again. The conductor was peering down at him.

‘What … where are we?’ Jack stared around. He rubbed his hand over his face. I must look a fright.

‘Breakfast stop. You’ve got fifteen minutes.’

‘Right. Thanks.’ He stood, wincing as he stretched his cramped limbs. The conductor moved along the carriage, and passengers stood, stretched, moved out of their seats in his wake.

By the time the train resumed the journey north, Jack had a mug of strong tea, a thick egg sandwich, and a burgeoning sense of relief, bordering on euphoria. Whatever lay ahead, at least he was free of the daily tension, the constant fear of discovery, the strain of deceiving Mary and everyone, of being someone else. A thief. A man who steals money. He shook his head. No, that’s not who he truly was. Or was it? Mary said she no longer knew him; had he changed so much? Did secrecy engender lasting change? Could he go back to being the man he had once been?

No. No, he couldn’t. He knew that. That man was as good as dead. There was no going back. Not in any sense. In that instant, he made up his mind. He would enlist. Not in Sydney. Too predictable, the police may be watching for him. No, if he was careful, he could catch the train on to Brisbane, and enlist there. In the army, he would be just a number, a tiny cog in a huge machine. No need to even think. Just obey. Relief surged through him. Yes, enlist, that was the best, the safest …
Safe? I could die. I probably will!

After the steady rattle and clank of the journey, the cacophony of Sydney Central terminus caught him by surprise. The calls of newsboys, shrieks of whistles, hisses of steam, yells of rushing passengers, and shouted announcements were magnified and echoed from the vaulted ceiling. He hesitated, but was pushed forward by the press of passengers eager to reach restrooms, loved ones, connecting trains, or the tea rooms.

‘All the news, read the news’.

Jack gave the lad a coin and seized the paper, tucking it under his arm. First things first – what time did the next train for Brisbane leave? He had already decided against waiting for a telegram from William, there seemed no point, given his new determination to enlist. *A hero, not a criminal*. Well, maybe. Or maybe dead. Action, any action, was preferable to skulking in hiding.

As if conjured by his thought, a troop of khaki-clad soldiers clattered into the terminus, stamped to a halt, and dropped their packs. The newsboys swarmed around them, shouting their papers and headlines. Jack watched them for a moment, then hurried over to the huge information board where station attendants were sliding tin plate destination signs into slots. There it was, *Express to Brisbane via Tenterfield and Armidale*. Two hours to wait. He headed for the ticket office, but swung away as he saw two constables standing there, gazing over the queue. Without breaking stride, he averted his face and, forcing his steps to slow, ambled to the restrooms. Here he unpacked his leather pouch containing a bar of soap, shaving brush and razor. He rubbed a thick lather across his face and started to scrape. A glance at his reflection, then he shaved off the moustache too. A stranger stared back from the mirror. Feeling fresher, he wet and combed his hair. Men came and went, but nobody paid him any attention, and he began to relax. An hour and a half to wait. Time for a cup of tea. He strolled out, glancing around cautiously. The constables had disappeared, so he hurried over and bought his ticket.

‘Platform 7. Leaving at 2 o’clock. Board at least ten minutes before departure please.’ The man turned to the next customer, as Jack stepped aside.

He was sipping his tea, idly reading the news when the small paragraph caught his eye.
MISAPPROPRIATED. A warrant has been issued for the arrest of Jack David Conway on a charge of having misappropriated funds totalling several hundreds of pounds from the Wallsley Shire Council, for which body he was rate collector, among other duties. Conway was last seen at Albury Railway Station where he purchased a ticket for Sydney. He is described as of medium height, with greying brown hair, and blue eyes, wearing a dark suit and a straw hat.

Jack’s heart froze. Everyone must be staring at him. He didn’t dare look up, but he felt as if a huge spotlight was beamed on him. As slowly as he dared, he slipped his hat off and placed it on the next seat, under the tabletop. Still not looking up, he stood, folded the paper, picked up his bag and slowly walked to the entrance.

Away to the right, he spotted a sign Menswear. Forcing himself to relax, to walk easily, Jack entered the store.

‘A cloth cap, please. Something casual.’ Was his voice trembling? He hoped not. ‘And maybe one of these jackets? I’m heading to Broken Hill, I’ll need something lighter.’

‘Certainly, sir. Off to do a spot of prospecting out west? Plenty heading out there now, since the new finds. Here, try this for size. Perfect. How’s it feel?’

Jack had no idea what the man was alluding to, but was happy to let him prattle. He paid for the cap and jacket, had the tags clipped, slipped on the new clothes, bundled his suit jacket into his bag, and left the shop feeling confidently anonymous.

Back at the railway station, the constables had disappeared. Jack found Platform 7, and was walking through the carriages searching for his seat number when the army group clattered aboard, spreading themselves noisily over several carriages. He settled himself, and opened his newspaper, surreptitiously tearing out the damning page and pushing it, tightly folded, to the bottom of his bag. Around him, the soldiers shouted, played card games, pulled out ration packs, and generally ignored him. Suddenly exhausted, he slid lower in his seat, tucked his bag behind his feet, and was asleep before the train pulled out.

He awoke as the sun was setting. Mary, my love, what are you doing now? What has William told you? What are you thinking? His throat tightened with tears, and he stood up. ‘Need to stretch my legs. Excuse me.’ He stepped over the legs of soldiers.
sprawled in noisy groups, arguing and gambling. Locked in the tiny washroom, he
stared at his mirrored reflection. *Am I the same man who held his wife close just a day
or two ago? Am I the father of three tiny children? How could I run away from them
like that? What have I done?* He splashed cold water over his eyes, again and again,
ignoring urgent thumps on the door until he felt calmer.

Later, refreshed and seated again, he pretended to read his newspaper, as he listened to
the laughter and good humour around him. His heart warmed to them. *This will work,
I’ll disappear into a world of men and uniforms. I’ll be safe, and I’ll find a way to
make it right with Mary. And Will has returned the money by now anyway … Perhaps I
should have waited for the telegram …*

More relaxed and reassured than he had felt in weeks, Jack slept almost all the way
into Brisbane, unconcerned by refreshment stops and delays, and alighting into a
bright, already hot Brisbane morning. Home, his family, and his fears, seemed very far
away. He hurried from the station into a broad busy street, and stood in the shade of a
wide tree until the contingent of soldiers marched out, swung north, and marched
away. Strolling at a distance, he followed as they crossed a bridge over a river bustling
with barges, trawlers and ferries. Once over the bridge, the soldiers turned west, and
marched along the riverside, until they turned again, marching through a steeply
sloping park, and disappearing into the trees. Jack hurried to catch up, and emerged
from the trees at the gates of Victoria Barracks. The soldiers had gone from sight, but a
sentry stepped out in front of Jack, clicking his heels.

‘Uh, I’m looking for the recruiting office … can you direct me please.’

‘Just along there, to the end of that building, sir. You’ll see the sign.’ He glanced at his
watch. ‘Not sure anyone’ll be there, sir. A bit early yet.’

‘I’ll wait.’ Jack hurried toward the door, eager to make a start. *Wipe the slate clean. A
hero, not a criminal.*

Two younger men joined him, and they stood in awkward silence until an unseen clock
 chimed and the door was flung open. A thin uniformed man snapped to attention,
barked something incomprehensible, turned away and marched into the room. Jack
glimanced uncertainly at the others, then followed the soldier into a wide hall with
benches along each side and high windows above. The soldier barked again, and Jack
simply stood staring at him. A door opened and an older soldier entered the hall.
‘That’ll do, Corporal. See if you can round up a few more now.’ He turned to the small group. ‘We can get started, no doubt a few more will join us.’ He pointed to the benches. ‘Put your gear there, strip to your underwear, and present yourselves over there.’ He indicated a wide desk at the end of the hall, and turned to greet a new group wandering uncertainly into the room.

By the time Jack presented himself at the desk, several uniformed men were waiting there.

‘Smartly now.’

As Jack hurried forward, the barrage of questions began. ‘Name? Is that your full name? Address? Occupation? Age? Are you a British citizen? Stand up straight, soldier. Next of kin? Spell that.’ On and on it went, then ‘Sign that.’ And the paper was thrust at him. Jack clenched his jaw and carefully signed Robert Jack Drummond. For a moment he thought the name was too long for the space and he let the words swing up at a crazy angle. What a giveaway! They’ll know it’s an alias. He held his breath. Nobody paid any attention. The man seized the paper, glanced at it, added a stamp and pointed to a doorway in the corner.

‘Medical next. Wait there.’

‘Drummond’.

Jack followed the orderly, who snapped questions and orders, filling in the details of the new identity. Robert Jack Drummond. Age 36 years and 3 months. Height 5 feet 6 inches. Weight 165 pounds. Complexion dark; eyes blue; hair brown. Chest 36-39 inches. A description that would comfortably fit a third of the male population, Jack thought with relief. The doctor tapped his chest, prodded his kidneys, grabbed his testicles, and the medical was over.

‘You’ll do.’ He stamped the paper, and the orderly sent Jack back to the wide desks in the main hall, clutching his papers, feeling ridiculous in his underwear. An officer seized Jack’s papers and after glancing through, he read it aloud, asking ‘Do you understand? Is this correct?’ after each entry.

A typist clattered beside him, and handed Jack a sheet of paper. ‘Read it aloud.’ It was headed OATH TO BE TAKEN BY PERSON BEING ENLISTED*. The asterisk was repeated at the bottom of the page, listing the consequences of lying. Too late. No
going back now. He read the formal words aloud, accepted the offered pen and signed, with more confidence this time. The officer added his signature and stamp, shook Jack’s hand and announced he was now Private Drummond, Number 3529.

He was in! No identification papers, no awkward questions. With the other recruits, he clambered onto an army truck for the transfer to Enoggera Barracks where they shuffled through a warehouse, grabbing standard issue gear. ‘Height? Size? Shoes? Stand up straight. Move along. Report to the barber at once.’

Dressed in ill-fitting uniforms, the recruits stared at each other to gauge their own appearances. A soldier barked more orders, then counted them off in groups of eight, tapping shoulders with his swagger stick, herding them into clusters. Straining to comprehend, they followed as he led them at a trot to a group of huts.

‘Home sweet home’, he announced. ‘Inspection in one hour. Get to it. Make it spick and span, men, or you’ll be doing it all night, mark my words.’

The following days and weeks were a blur of exhaustion, humiliation, failure and more exhaustion. Taunted as ‘deep thinkers’, the men worked hard to overcome the slur. But Jack soon realised that many fellow recruits had enlisted for reasons other than pure patriotism. One youngster, who confessed to being a few months underage, was hoping to find his brother who was missing in action. Another hoped to win a girl’s heart with his uniform. But the older men, the ones around Jack’s age, were more reticent, muttering about employment problems, or the drought. Jack sensed he was not alone, but he said nothing.

He started urgent letters to Mary, but could not get past the first lines of greeting. Shame, fear of discovery, and above all the memory of Mary’s furious command Never come back silenced him. As the days and weeks flew by, his past life seemed more like a distant dream. Sometimes, late at night, listening to faraway curlews calling, he could not even recall Mary’s face, nor her voice. In those moments, despair enveloped him, but he had little time to himself, and little privacy, and the moments passed.

Eventually he wrote to Amy. He spoke little of himself, except to say that he was safe and well. He told her that he was in Brisbane, and asked her to post a reply care of the GPO, using his alias. And he filled the page with questions – How was Mary managing? Had Amy spoken to her? What story was she telling? How was Charlie taking his father’s absence? Were the twins well? Had there been much gossip? Now
that the money had been repaid, had the charges against him been dropped? Just articulating the questions lifted his grim despair; perhaps there would be a happy ending to this nightmare, perhaps …

His spirits lifted once he had sent the letter, and he started to pay more attention to the physical changes within himself. He was gradually filling out with new muscle, and his stiff uniform was softening and taking on the contours of his body. He had told Mary that he was a stranger to himself, and he wondered at the differences he now perceived in himself. How many personas inhabited this body? Which was the ‘real’ Jack?

Army life astonished him. Quickly he understood there was no place for loners here; they were being trained as a single fighting machine, a series of cogs working together in a coordinated effort. For the first time in his life, he was valued simply because his effort was necessary, rather than for a personal skill or contribution. A soldier who stood out from his fellows was seen as a liability; no place here for the chiacking and horseplay that typified workers back home. To do less than blindly obey was to put one’s mates at risk, they were constantly reminded. Teamwork. Pull together. Watch out for your mate. Obey orders instantly. Attention. About face. Fix bayonets. Charge. Fire. Fire. Fire.

Two weeks passed since he wrote the letter, two chances to race into the city to check for a letter from Amy, but no reply came. In camp, the rumours flew; they were to be shipped to Egypt tomorrow; they were going to Europe, to France; they were going nowhere, the war was all but over; they were mere cannon fodder and would all be dead before year’s end. A photographer appeared, and took formally posed photographs of each man.

‘So they can identify the bodies,’ shouted the rumour mill. ‘Mementos for bereaved families.’

Frantic now, Jack wrote again to Amy, this time telling her of his enlistment, and giving his army address, reminding her to use his alias, begging for news. He was sickeningly aware that since his marriage, his life and Mary’s had been tightly intertwined, he had known where she was, what she was doing; he had sensed an unbreakable bond between them. Now, sick with shame and grief, he had to acknowledge that any such bond, had it ever existed, had melted away. Could such a
bond be rebuilt? Even if he had the chance? Shaking with distress, he sealed the letter to Amy. All he could do, with safety, was wait and hope.

On 19th June, notices were posted in the mess – no new leave passes to be issued. Then it was official; his unit was to present ready to ship out to Europe at 0700 hours on Saturday 24th June. Last drills and inspections were completed, final preparations made, and all through the urgent activity, a growing sense of excitement spread among Jack’s unit. For Jack, as for many others, this would the first chance to travel beyond Australia, the first chance to experience the far-off places his parents called Home.

On Saturday, trucks were lined up waiting as the men marched from the barracks, ready to transfer them to the dock. Jack lingered as long as he dared, hoping for a mail run, but none came. By late morning, he was on the dock with his unit, waiting to be called to clamber up the gangplanks that angled steeply up the ship’s sides. The men smoked, played cards, or simply gazed around at the ungainly cargo nets swinging over their heads to be dropped into the holds. Crowds of well-wishers, mostly women, waved and shouted ‘Good luck, boys’ and ‘God bless’.

Their call came, and they marched aboard, dropping their kitbags to cluster at the rails, marvelling at the pulsing thrum of engines far below their feet. On the dock, men unhurriedly lifted hawsers from huge bollards, and steadied them as they were hauled aboard. The engine pitch lifted, and small tugboats appeared fore and aft, nudging the ship away from the dock. The crowds on the dock went wild, waving and shrilly calling final messages. Jack glanced to either side. Some men were waving back, but many were solemn as they watched the distance between the ship and the dock steadily widen. For a moment, euphoria surged through his body. A new start. But at that moment a voice at his side muttered, ‘Wonder if any of us will be back?’

The man behind him laughed. ‘Course we will. Come on, let’s find the bar’, and the two of them hurried away. But Jack stared at the still-waving crowds. Would he ever be back to Australia, to his home and family? Even if he survived the war, was it possible to take up where he left off? He pushed the grievous thought away, and turned to stride the length of the deck, already hating the unsteady motion of the sea.

Sea sickness affected most of them as they sailed south, collecting more troops in Sydney and Melbourne, then across the bight for a final stop in Fremantle, before sailing out of Australian waters and into the Indian Ocean, bound for Europe and the
Two days out of Fremantle, the sickness disappeared as if by magic, and everyone’s spirits lifted. The Indian Ocean was a declared danger zone, and although daily drills and deck sports filled the days, Jack enjoyed the distraction of scanning the horizon for any sign of the feared SMS *Emden*. The bright clear days passed untroubled, and it was easy to forget there was a war raging. Australia seemed a distant dream, and the fighting ahead remote and improbable. They steamed past the Cocos Islands, crossed the equator, and stopped briefly in Colombo, Jack’s first experience of a foreign country. He hung over the rails, eagerly absorbing the strange sights, sounds and smells. Watching impossibly thin, dark-skinned men hauling huge carts laden with fruit, piling great bundles of it into cargo nets which swung and hovered overhead before being lowered into the holds behind him, he decided to start a journal, something to show Charlie one day… The thought caused his throat to tighten.

*Charlie, I miss you. Look after your mother, son …*

Within a few days, they entered the Arabian Sea, learning a very different sea motion. Hot dry winds carried strange land scents, but no shore was visible as they steamed north. Then late on a blindingly hot day, they docked at Port Suez, and disembarked, riotous with excitement at stepping onto foreign soil. The land rocked alarmingly under Jack’s feet, and the men laughed to see each other stagger drunkenly, adjusting to dry land after five weeks at sea. Under tolerant smiles of the officers, they marched to a city of tents in the desert beyond the city.

‘You’re here for just two days. Don’t get too comfortable.’

But the following morning three men reported sick, and by lunchtime the new arrivals were quarantined with an outbreak of measles. Two days became two weeks, then four. Guards were posted to ensure the men stayed in isolation, and the men who were well spent their days in endless drills, card-playing and cleaning the fine desert sand from their equipment and clothes. Food and tobacco were plentiful, the weather was hot and dry, and Jack’s life took on a surreal quality. No longer in Australia, nor yet at the front, Jack could almost believe he had been transferred to another world, one with almost no connection with his old life. But the mail finally caught up with them. Some men received twelve letters or more. And at last, his name was called. ‘Drummond? Mail for you.’ He seized the bulky envelope, glanced at Amy’s familiar hand, and with tears blurring his sight, hurried away to read it in private.
Jack found a quiet place to read Amy’s letter, beyond the rows of army tents, on a low rocky outcrop overlooking the road where he could watch the daily scramble of locals selling cigarettes, souvenir postcards and camel rides to the pyramids which shimmered in the heat haze. A few soldiers greeted him as they passed, and Jack waited until they had gone before he slid his finger under the flap of the envelope and ripped it open. Immediately several loose newspaper clippings spilled to the sandy ground and he crouched to gather them. COUNCIL COLLECTOR’S LAPSE. ARREST WARRANT ISSUED FOR MISSING RATES COLLECTOR. POLICE SEARCH ...

Mortified, he scrabbled the papers together and pushed them into his tunic pocket, scanning the sandy ground in case he had missed any. Had anyone else seen? There was nobody nearby, but he folded the envelope and pushed it into his pocket on top of the clippings. Trembling, he carefully unfolded Amy’s letter.

Dear Jack

I am wondering if you ever received my first letter, the one I sent c/- the Brisbane Post Office. In your second letter, you said you had not heard, but maybe it turned up later. Anyway, I shall tell you again the most important news, just in case. What I shan’t repeat is my anger with you. Enough said on that issue in my last (perhaps it will be better between us if you did not receive that one).

Firstly, Mother continues unwell. I think it was the shock that caused her stroke, and since then she has improved only slightly. She speaks little, and is difficult to understand when she does. Walking is painful and awkward for her. However, we are getting by.

Your next question was about Mary, but first I must address your query regarding the arrest warrant. You hoped it may have been cancelled because the money had been repaid. I can tell you, for certain, no such thing has happened. I have a dreadful feeling that you entrusted money to William, to return to the coffers somehow. More fool you, if you did. You certainly should have known, by now, what sort of a man he is. I have enclosed the newspaper clippings, so you can confirm the developments for yourself.
As for Mary, she and the children have returned to her parents’ home to live. The bailiff came and gave her six hours to vacate the house. She was able to pack only their clothes and a few toys onto the buggy. William was in Melbourne buying a fine new motorcar, so was unable to help her then. You have been declared insolvent, though I suppose you knew this already. Certainly everyone in the district does, thanks to large advertisements in the newspapers. Your properties, and what remains of your household goods are to be sold at auction next Wednesday, so it will all be history by the time you read this. Presumably enough will be raised to clear the mortgages and your debts. As to the missing money, one can only hope there will be enough to cover that too.

Mary has visited me twice. What can I say about her? Perhaps only that, in her distress, she has been kind and thoughtful to me. I offered her the money I held here, though I did not tell her its origin. She looked directly at me, and advised me as you had done once, to pay out my mortgage as soon as possible, to ensure my own safety. I then offered to give her the house, or at least share it with her, but she refused. She believes that anything of hers will be seized and sold against your debts, so will not hear of my proposal. I respect her commonsense, and to be honest, I fear William’s devious plans, so I have paid out the mortgage, and the house is now freehold.

Mary seems quietly settled with her parents. Her mother is grateful to have her there, I believe, as her poor old father is now quite absent-minded, and seems not to know who or where he is, apparently. Charlie is less settled, especially since the fire, and he has stayed here with me several times. He is a lovely boy, and I love having him here. He can more easily attend school from my place, so Mary is happy for him to be here. Of course, he is confused about events, and asks when his daddy is coming home. He did tell me the bigger boys were mocking him, on your account, which made me boil with rage. Rage at you, as much as at the boys. He’s a dear little fellow, he is doing so well at school, and I hate seeing him distressed. I must add that this is perhaps the deepest source of Mary's distress. She tells me how she loved and trusted you, and says that she now accepts she made a poor choice in you. Indeed, she has told me that she suspected some time ago that the source of your income was somehow tainted, but didn't know where to turn after you promised her that all was well. She carries deep guilt because of
this. But she cannot bear the hurt and pain to the children, who are being cruelly punished for your wrongdoing. Her anger has clearly burned away her love for you, and has harmed her health; she is gaunt, pale, unsmiling. I hardly know this sad woman these days, she is no longer the joyous young woman, nor the contented matron. And for this, I too blame you.

There is one more thing about money, though I feel awkward telling you this. When I offered Mary money, and she refused, she said I was not to worry about her as William was being very kind, on account of his friendship with you, and he was ensuring that her financial needs were met. Jack, I was so shocked, I did not even ask her what that meant. But I am not comfortable with this arrangement, even though it is none of my business.

Jack gave in to the tears streaming down his face. He crouched low on the ground, his face buried in his left hand, while he crushed the letter to his chest in his right hand, his nails digging into his palm. *Mary. Mary, what have I done? What have I lost? Will you ever forgive me?*

A hand on his shoulder shocked him, and he sniffled, rubbing his face with his hand.

‘Bad news from home?’ The officer peered at him with concern.

Jack straightened up, saluted, tried to compose himself. But he couldn’t speak.

‘See the Chaplain, arrange compassionate leave if you need to.’

‘Thank you, sir.’ Jack’s voice was a croak.

He didn’t visit the chaplain. But that night his tent-mates woke him from a nightmare in which he was running, screaming in terror as hands clutched and clawed at him.

‘Sorry, mate. You were making a racket.’

Jack apologised, humiliated. Silently he vowed that he would never be a trouble to anyone again, not to his fellow soldiers, not to William, or Amy, and above all, not to Mary. He would keep his grief and fear secret, he would tell nobody, not now, not ever. He had cut himself adrift from all he loved, and although he had not anticipated such a disastrous result, he should perhaps, as Amy suggested, have seen it coming.
This was all his own doing, and now this was his own hell to endure. *Just until I get to the front. Then the Jerries will finish it for me.*

At first light, he read the letter again. Horror for Mary’s situation swept over him again, but he clenched his teeth on his pipe stem. *Endure this. She had to.* He had been so naïve. The image of the bailiff serving notice to Mary appalled him, and he shook his head in shame. How had he not anticipated that? How had he not realised what was happening in his absence? Had William really not returned the money? Amy had never liked William, so maybe her judgement was wrong? Though what other explanation could there be? Had William betrayed him? Had William been setting him up right from the beginning? It was possible…And Amy thought he would know of an Insolvency Declaration? How would he have known? Did she think he was in touch with friends, and yet not with her? Or did she think he had been receiving the newspapers from Victoria? And what fire? How had Charlie been involved in a fire?

The newspaper clippings! They were crushed in his pocket, perhaps they would tell him more. He smoothed them carefully, and arranged them in date order, trying to ignore the headings on each article. Smoothing the papers, he took a deep breath, then lifted the first clipping.

*Wangaratta Chronicle March 18th 1916*

**COUNCIL COLLECTOR’S LAPSE**

*At the monthly meeting of the Wallsley Shire Council on Tuesday, Mr J.G.Black, the Secretary, said that information had come to hand that Jack Conway, rate collector and inspector, had absconded and that he had sent a letter admitting that he had misappropriated several hundred pounds. A warrant has been issued for his arrest. The Secretary further stated that Mr Conway’s friend, Mr William Dempsey, had been with Mr Conway at Albury Railway Station, and that Mr Conway had confessed to him, whereupon Mr Dempsey had requested a letter of confession and apology. After supplying the letter, and full details of the misappropriations, Mr Conway had caught the train to Sydney, intending to enlist under an alias. Mr Dempsey was commended for his prompt reporting of the crime.*

Will had certainly changed their story somewhat, he was presenting himself as irreproachable, or was that just a journalist’s angle? Anything for a good story? Jack reached for the next piece of newspaper.
Country News Ballarat and District March 21st 1916

ARREST WARRANT ISSUED FOR MISSING RATES COLLECTOR.

A warrant has been issued for the apprehension of Jack Conway on a charge of having misappropriated funds of the Wallsley Shire Council, for which body he was rate collector and inspector. Conway was last seen at Albury Railway Station where he purchased a ticket for Sydney. The amount of £575 has been named in the warrant.

Yes, he had known of the arrest warrant, had read the newspaper article all those months ago in Sydney. But even so it was hard to see it in print again, to read the humiliating words Mary would have read, to hear the harsh facts that would have been taunts against his children.

Outside the tent, people were beginning to stir. His tent mates snored softly, and Jack quickly folded the first clippings away before he seized the next one. Ah, mention of a fire. Amy had said Charlie was involved in a fire…

Wangaratta Chronicle April 22nd 1916

BLAZE DAMAGES HOUSE AND PROPERTY

A domestic accident led to the blaze which partially destroyed a house and most of the contents in Pine St, Wallsley yesterday afternoon. Hot dry winds caused the fire to spread rapidly, and despite many willing hands, and the prompt attendance of the fire service, the damage was severe. The house was the property of Jack Conway, who has not been seen since a warrant for his arrest was issued four weeks ago. Conway’s wife and son were at the scene, neither were hurt. Mrs Conway says she was grieved to lose so many treasured possessions.

Charlie was unhurt. Nobody was hurt! Jack realised he had been holding his breath. A fire though? How had that happened? Was there more information?

Wangaratta Chronicle May 1st 1916

MISSING RATES COLLECTOR DECLARED INSOLVENT

Missing rates collector Jack Conway was yesterday declared insolvent. His properties (154 freehold acres leased; a tenanted house with ten acres; a fire damaged dwelling on ½ acre; a commercial property leased) and household goods are now seized by the bailiff.
and will be offered for auction in due course, to recover Conway’s debts. Details of the offerings and the date of sale will be announced shortly.

Jack sank to his haunches. Everything was lost, everything. There was no reason to go on now, his life was over. And Mary? How had she endured this humiliation? What had she thought when the bailiff ordered her out of their own home? How had she endured his supervision as she tried to calm the children, and gather a few treasures? Oh God, what had he done?

One last clipping. This could get no worse, surely. He blinked away tears, and read …

*Country News Ballarat and District May 10th 1916*

**POLICE SEARCH ABANDONED**

The police are no longer searching for missing rates collector, Jack Conway. No word has been heard from him, and it is believed that he has either enlisted under an alias and left the country, or has taken his own life. Anyone with any information should contact Wallsley Police Station immediately.

A bugle sounded, rousing his tent mates. They rolled from their stretchers, rubbing their eyes and grunting, as Jack swiftly folded the clippings away, noisily blowing his nose.

Jack forced himself to read and re-read the letter and clippings at every spare moment. But the same baffling questions spun endlessly through his mind. *William hadn’t returned any money. He’d bought a motor car, and was being the big man, supporting Mary! Bastard! And the fire? What happened? And suicide? Surely nobody thinks that? No wonder Mother is ill.* Always reserved, he became reclusive, speaking little, acting correctly and obeying orders, but numb inside. At night, as the men around him snored, he dug his fingernails into his palms, deeper until he drew blood, revelling in the sharp pain as he re-opened the cuts of the previous nights. Only in the bright clarity of pain could he forget his grief, even briefly. But one day, lying full length on the sand at target practice, he winced as he tried to slide the bolt, and instantly the duty officer was beside him.
‘Show me your hands, Private. I see. What happened here?’ It was the same officer who had ordered him to see the chaplain.

Jack was silent.

‘Self-inflicted wounds are a pretty shameful affair, Private. I’d like to see this healed pretty damn quickly. Report to sick bay. Now! And report back to me in five days, unless you want an incident report lodged. Understand? Now move.’

The wounds were almost closed over when he reported back to the officer. With his head bowed, he listened to a lecture about being part of a team, asking for help when it is needed, understanding that his body belonged to the army now, and he had a duty to keep it in good working order. He suspected the officer was smiling at this last, but did not raise his gaze to check. Another letter from Amy had arrived earlier that day, and he was keeping it until after this appointment, delaying exposing any further weakness.

‘Chin up, soldier. Lots of the men have tough news from home, but there’s a war on, and your contribution is needed. I’ll be watching you. Dismiss.’

A warning, or support? Jack could not tell, but it mattered not. He hurried away, eager to read Amy’s letter.

Dear Jack

I’ve had no word from you and am becoming concerned. Neither have I heard that you have written to Mary, though I have not asked her directly. To be honest, we have not spoken of you at all. I think neither of us know what to say. We focus on the things we can do, how I can have Charlie stay here during the school week, how she can bring us extra firewood from her parent’s farm, and whose chooks are laying best. Women’s talk, you would call it. Anyway, I do hope you are all right. The man in the post office believes I have ‘a fellow at the front’, as he puts it. He assures me that the simple army address will always reach ‘my fellow’.

Jack, it occurs to me to ask, what will happen if you are injured, or worse? If you are only known by this name, how will we ever know what has become of you, or how we could help you? I suppose you have a plan. I do hope so.

The auction has been and gone, and a sad affair it was. People can be spiteful, but I had not expected to hear such comments from people I had considered friends. There was an unseemly rush to purchase Mary’s treasures, those that escaped the fire. An
unpleasant afternoon, but that is all behind us now. Everything sold, and I understand all outstanding mortgages and debts were paid out. As for the missing money, I was told, and I think I can believe it, that some was covered by a council insurance and the remainder has been covered by the sale. But whether this means that the arrest warrant is still in force, I cannot say. To ask, or to show much curiosity, may lead them to know I am in contact with you, which would be unwise, I imagine.

William drives around town in his new motor, and Charlie tells me that he loves to go for rides in it. I do not know whether to hate William for being here when you are not, or to be grateful that he is showing Charlie such pleasure. The boy loves the car, can talk of little else. The reason I am telling you this is not to cause you pain, but to explain the drawing I have enclosed. Charlie drew it for me, and I thought you might like to have it.

Please write, just to reassure me. Mother is not well, though no worse really. I think her heart is broken, she seems uninterested in life. Having Charlie by her side is the only thing that lifts her spirits. And he reads her stories, and shows her how he makes his drawings. He is a wonderful little fellow, we love him dearly.

Your loving sister

Amy

Jack took a careful, deep breath and lifted the last page of writing away to reveal Charlie’s drawing. Blinking hard, forcing himself to be calm, he steadied his trembling hands and simply lost himself in the pleasure of examining the picture. Amy was right, the boy was drawing beautifully. Well, beautifully for a six-year-old. He smiled, conscious of the unaccustomed tug of tiny muscles around his mouth. Charlie had drawn the car filling the entire page. A stick figure man sat at the steering wheel, and a smaller figure sat beside him, waving, with a wide toothy smile on his round face. The car was detailed, with door handles carefully placed, wheel spokes radiating precisely, even a flying decoration on the centre of the bonnet, although Jack could not make out exactly what it was. He had carefully written CHARLIE IN UNCLE WILLIAM’S CAR below the drawing, followed by three kisses.

Jack stood gazing at the picture for several minutes, feeling his heart lift and swell with almost forgotten pleasure. He ran his fingers lightly over the drawing, imagining
Charlie’s slender fingers shaping each line, his head tipped to one side, his tongue poking from the corner of his mouth, in deep concentration. The picture felt like a lifeline thrown to a drowning man, and Jack held it with relief and even with a tiny glimmer of hope. Maybe something good could come from all this. Just maybe. It was as close as he had come to a prayer, and it would serve.
CHAPTER 14

November 1916. Egypt.

Jack’s calm remained intact as the quarantine was lifted, and the men prepared to leave Egypt. They were kept in a frenzy of activity as the orders came through to complete medical inspections, decamp, board ship, and sail to Europe. He wrote to Amy, reassuring her of his own situation, and asking more questions, hungry for more news of his family. What fire? What happened? Then, two nights before the planned departure, as he wrote in his journal, a single gunshot startled him. An attack? He dived for the floor, lay still for a moment, alert in the sudden silence. Then came shouts, voices of men hurrying, thumps of heavy footsteps running past. His tent flap was pushed open, just as he reached for it. It was Fred, one of his tentmates.

‘Everything all right here? Young fellow along the row just shot himself. Silly bastard.’ Fred dropped the flap, and Jack heard his footsteps pounding on along the row, checking at each tent, passing the news.

Shot himself! A thrill of fearful excitement ran through him. Watching the daily camaraderie of army life, keeping himself distant, Jack had never considered the possibility that others were in their own private hell of fear, grief, or regret. Now he sat in the dark, his face in his hands, and faced his own choices. A single gunshot. Not so difficult, surely. Clean and quick. But …

Fred was back, just as a sharp whistle sounded calling them all to assemble.

‘Come on, Jack, hurry man, the Captain’s in a right lather.’

Men hurried to the parade ground dishevelled, unshaven, some shirtless. Jack stood toward the back, next to Fred, listening to the Captain’s fury and distress.

‘Damned shame … pointless waste … your country expects better of you … Who was aware this young fellow was in trouble? Somebody must have known something …’ Nobody moved. Then the order. ‘No soldier is to be alone for the remainder of this voyage. A soldier found alone will be considered a traitor, and will be punished accordingly. Is that clear!’

A brief sombre military funeral was held the following afternoon, and the youngster was laid to rest in a lonely desert grave. On guard duty that night, Jack listened to the wild desert dogs barking and fighting, and wondered about the rumours racing through
the camp. The soldier’s sweetheart had married someone else; she had been killed in an accident; his mother had died; he was too terrified to go any further. Whatever the truth, the fact was the boy was dead. No more pain. No more … anything.

‘Those bloody dogs!’ Jack’s fellow guard ground out his cigarette. ‘I’d shoot the bastards if it wouldn’t bring the Captain down on us.’

They spent the rest of their watch devising increasingly mad inventions for destroying desert dogs, so by the time they were relieved, Jack was in a lighter mood. It was a relief to march away from the camp later that day, onto the troop ship.

Late that night, the ship sailed into the Suez Canal. Jack joined the men thronging on deck, unable to bear the noisy stuffy wardrooms below deck, and eager to see this marvel of engineering. Dredges scurried by, steadily lifting sand even at night, in a constant struggle to keep the waterway navigable. High stone walls on either side blocked the desert, but in places Jack could see the drifts of sand built up to the height of the embankments, and slowly inexorably spilling over. Beyond the walls, the dark land appeared empty and desolate, and Jack thought again about the young Australian soldier lying out there alone.

The ship arrived in Port Said in the early afternoon, and docked in the spacious basin of the port, among many other vessels. Seaplanes landed and taxied between the ships, and although no shore leave was granted, Jack was fascinated by the bustle of activity in the port. Blackouts were more strictly policed here, and many of the men slept on deck, yearning for cigarettes, and restless in the growing tension and constant rumble of noisy activity.

They were wakened at dawn by the increased rumbling of engines through the deck; they were on the move again. The ship was nudged out of the harbour by tugs. Excited to be away, the men clustered at the rails, but almost as soon as the tugs puttered away, the anchor was dropped and the ship swung lazily around, bows to the port.

‘Hope they manage the bloody war better than they manage this shambles.’ Fred stuffed fresh tobacco into his pipe and lit it. ‘Have we broken down already?’

Jack smiled, and they leaned on the rails in comfortable silence, watching as another ship, and then several more were bustled out into the open sea by the little tugs. They each dropped anchor, and the ships swung in wide arcs. Clearly a flotilla was assembling, and murmurs of excitement ran through the watching soldiers. Jack
counted twenty-seven vessels, listening to the men as they identified merchant vessels, troop ships, and finally six destroyers. Flags fluttered signals between ships, and the men who could read them sang out the messages to the troops. A drill was called, and every man was issued with a lifebelt, an awkward bulky device covered with a rough sticky grey canvas.

‘Keep this with you at all times. It may be the difference between life and death, for you and for your mate. Check your allotted emergency position on deck, be sure to memorise it. And note which men stand on either side of you.’

‘Still making sure we look out for each other,’ Fred muttered mutinously. ‘Not as if we’re bloody schoolkids.’

Jack chuckled. But in his heart he acknowledged the rightness of the notion. In a sense, they were each responsible for each other. This whole madness of war could only work if every man agreed to be a part of the whole, giving over his reason, his intelligence, his personal choices to the unseen, all powerful puppet-master who jerked them all into motion, then let them flop lifeless.

‘Maybe we are schoolkids, Fred. Just a bunch of silly kids. Heaven help us.’

‘Amen to that!’

Excitement rippled along the crowded deck, and as if in response, the engines stirred back to life as the winches shrieked and strained at the heavy anchors. They were on their way again.

The excitement fizzled into boredom as the quiet hours passed, and the ships moved steadily into the grey Mediterranean. The land behind them dropped from view, and Jack watched the scudding clouds, the sloppy formless waves, and the great flocks of seabirds, marvelling at how mariners had ever found information in such blind portents. Then, on the third day, the men were startled when a sleek cruiser slid swiftly alongside them, lowered the elevation of the long gun barrels, and fired into the sea.

‘Submarines! There’s a sub! Report to deck stations immediately.’ Voices called orders as the men scrambled to obey.

Immediately the lookouts blew fiercely on their whistles, and the sound was picked up and passed from ship to ship, until the air was filled with the cries of whistles and the boom of the guns. White foam surged up as Jack and the others stared in shock, and the
cruiser fired again and again. A huge cloud of black smoke erupted up from the water, acrid smoke that stung the eyes and noses of the watchers.

‘Got the bastards. They’re goners.’

Nothing more was seen. Jack stared at the waves, horrified that men had died there with nothing to mark their going. Even the black smoke swiftly evaporated away. Nothing remained of those lives. The enemy. Men like myself. Dead. God, I hope it was quick for them. The cruiser slid away, prowling the perimeter of the fleet, herding stragglers closer together as if they were sheep.

The tension hung in the air, and it was less of a shock, even almost a relief, Jack thought, when a massive blast shook the ship.

The alarm sounded, and over the curses and yells of the men, the loudspeaker barked instructions. Move to deck positions. Life jackets. Fred appeared at Jack’s side. ‘Come on, Jack, move!’ They scrambled into their life vests, running to their deck positions. But it quickly became clear that it was the neighbouring ship, not their own, that had struck the mine. Stand easy. Remain on deck. Prepare to take cover... Jack watched as the ship slewed sideways, and shuddered to a creeping pace. A destroyer sped in and slid alongside, and as the rest of the fleet steamed away, the two boats fell away astern, the longer one shepherding the other north toward the Italian coast.

Now the fleet started to separate, with a number of ships peeling away to head south for Gibraltar, while the rest, including Jack’s ship, swung north, moving ever closer to the war. The men lined the rails as the ship swung around Cap Croisette and into the sheltered harbour of Marseille, finally docking nine days after leaving Egypt. Europe, at last! Officers barked orders to the men, reminding them of the necessity to move swiftly as they disembarked, of the vulnerability of troops during transfer operations, Speak to no civilians, make no purchases, maintain order!

The ship bumped against the dock, gangplanks were lowered, and the men flowed onto the docks, streaming away in orderly lines to waiting trains. With no time to gaze around, Jack’s group was quick marched onto a train, loaded with rations, and warned to make them last for a journey of over 1000 miles through the heart of France to Le Havre. So close to the fighting! Why aren’t we going directly to the front? Speculation and rumour flourished, as more and more troops marched across the docks, and boarded. The train shunted forward in short bursts as fresh carriages were added.
Finally a second locomotive engine joined at the rear, and with a scream of whistles, the train pulled out.

For three days, the men marvelled at the beauty of the countryside, so different from their homeland. They recognised few of the crops, even the cattle looked smaller, more compact. The frequent castles, or ruins of castles, atop so many hills reinforced the fairytale unreality for Jack. The train stopped at a number of towns, and the locals rushed forward offering hot coffee, buns, even wine. Everyone seemed so old, or else very young. All the men are away fighting, I should have realised. And everyone wanted to shake their hands, to reach out and touch them, to whisper and to shout ‘Merci, merci.’ Suddenly the proximity of the war, and the responsibility of their task, seemed overwhelming, and the men were quieter between stops, lost in their own thoughts.

Their train journey through France ended in the northwest at Le Havre Railway Station. From here, they marched to the American rest camp where they listened, subdued, to stories told by men returning from the front, being sent back for a spell. So it was a sombre lot who trooped aboard the cross channel boat for the dark uncomfortable crossing to Southampton. With little time to register that they had arrived in England, the men were transferred by train to Fovant camp on the Salisbury Plains, where they were immediately ordered into isolation tents; measles had broken out again.

This time, Jack was ill, really ill. Initially, he developed sore eyes and a fever, and his chest and back were soon covered with painful red spots. But in the days that followed, as his fellow-sufferers recovered and recuperated, Jack weakened into apathy. He lay, eyes closed against the painful light, lost in confused dreams muddled with reality. He awoke from a dream of Mary to find a young, dark-haired nurse gently swabbing infected spots on his chest. Oh, the sweet touch of a woman’s soft fingers. He burst into tears, twisting his face away from her startled gaze, pushing his hands over his mouth to stifle the animal sounds he was making.

‘Sorry, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you …’ The nurse backed away.

When the doctor saw him next, he was prescribed a tonic, plenty of fresh air, and a return to activity immediately, on half-duties for a week. Jack thought this would kill him, but to his surprise, the return to duties lifted his spirits and restored his energy. He
re-joined his unit as they completed the training begun in Australia, and soon regained the weight he had lost. The bracing cold weather, the long hikes with heavy packs, and the plentiful food made the news from the front incredible, unreal. Only the daily arrival of wounded men from the battle zones in France, barely a couple of hundred miles away, less distance than my train trip from Albury to Sydney, reminded Jack of what lay ahead. Drafts left camp for the front every Sunday, though the names of the destinations were never given. The names of the battle zones were now familiar though, Poziers, Fromelles, Polygon Wood, Bullecourt, Ypres, Passchendale ...

Men queued to scan the lists, cheering as each read his own name, unwilling to show trepidation. In early March, Jack’s name appeared, 150 men from his unit were to report ready for travel on Sunday. Reading the list, Jack finally acknowledged that he must now declare his true identity. He had never answered Amy’s fearful question How will we ever know if you are hurt, or worse? The illness had been frightening enough, but being sent to the front meant, it seemed now, almost certain death. This time he went to the chaplain first, to bolster his courage, and to garner support. He spoke only of ‘troubles at home’ and ‘a need to disappear for a bit’. The chaplain nodded, and produced a statuary declaration form for Jack to complete. To Jack’s astonished look, he simply remarked drily, ‘You’re not the first, nor likely to be the last.’

Jack endured a brief, humiliating interview with the commanding officer, in which he was invited to explain himself. He remained silent. The officer glared at him, declared him an arrogant fool, signed the amendment to Jack’s identity paper, and it was done. His next interview was with the paymaster, who smirked at the paperwork, and directed Jack’s pay to Mary, rather than to a bank account of Robert Jack Drummond. Finally, he wrote a new Will, in his own name, naming Mary as his next of kin and beneficiary. Then he wrote a letter to her, the first since he had left home all those months ago.

March 17th 1917

My dearest Mary

How can I begin to tell you how very sorry I am for all the pain and grief you have endured because of me. I am so sorry. I think you have heard by now
that I am in the army, and am presently well and safe. Amy writes to me, as you may know, and keeps me up with the news of home. I miss you all so much, her letters bring me comfort.

I hope you and the children are well. I am told that you are staying with your parents for the time being. Bless them for their kindness, I am truly grateful to them. Mary, I tried to ensure your financial support before I left, but I am told this did not work out as I planned. I shall not speak of that now, except to assure you that I have now directed the paymaster to forward the bulk of my pay to you. I am sorry this has taken so long.

My unit is moving into a different position now, and there will be greater danger. If I am never to see you again, I want you to know how much I regret the pain I have caused, and how much I love you and our children.

Goodbye, my dear.

Your loving husband, Jack

Now the war could do what it would, he was ready. Or so he thought.
CHAPTER 15
March 1917. France.

He was wrong; nothing could have prepared Jack for the reality of war. Not the stories he had heard in England told by men recuperating, not the newspaper reports, not even the graphic drills instructing them how to staunch bleeding from amputation injuries, how to alert stretcher bearers to one’s position, and how to retrieve the paybook and identity disc of a dead mate.

With efficient speed, Jack’s draft was transferred from camp in southern England, to the cross-channel ship which took them to Boulogne in France, to the train, then trucks, before marching the final four miles to their tent camp behind the lines at Hamel. At each stop, the men were increasingly laden with rations and equipment. Jack examined the hideous gas mask, memorising the drill as instructed. ‘You’ll likely as not be blinded by the gas, so you need to know it by touch.’ He shuddered at the thought of being blinded, even temporarily. There was a terrible irony, he thought, at being loaded up with both death-dealing and life-saving equipment. If we could all just pack up and go home, there would be no need for either guns or gasmasks. But as soon as that thought formed, he remembered he couldn’t go home. No home to go to, everything he had once owned was gone. A gun and a gasmask would have to do.

For three days they remained in camp, repeatedly carrying out drills and gas mask practice, as they listened to the roar of big guns, and the shuddering thump of bombs. Convoys of wounded men poured back through their position, and a column of weary prisoners shuffled through, being escorted back behind the lines. They looked so grey and defeated that Jack almost felt sorry for them. He thought of Mary’s brother, missing a leg, a lifetime of bitter rage ahead, and wondered if one of these men had pulled that trigger, thrown that grenade. Still, he could not hate, and he felt a sharp sense of failure. Surely family loyalty demanded at least that of him?

On the fourth day, Jack’s unit was moved to the Somme. First by narrow-gauge railway, and then on foot, they gradually moved south, closer to the constant boom of battle. And finally they moved into line near Mont St Quentin. The trenches were worse, far worse, than Jack had expected. The stench came out to meet them as they marched forward, and engulfed them as they stepped down into the labyrinth of narrow filthy-sided alleys. Jack gagged, and the man in front stopped, retching.
‘Keep on, keep on.’ The men behind pushed steadily, and there was no choice but to move on, no room to step aside, nothing to do but hurry forward, bending low to keep below the parapet and the zinging bullets, feeling for the duckboards blurred by mud. From time to time, a side passage opened, or a wider area appeared where men lounged, watching with open scorn as the new troops rushed through, shivering with shock.

The first night in the trenches appalled Jack. The noise of shells screaming overhead hurt his ears, and he cringed low at each new burst of gunfire. Mud crept up around his boots, making an obscene sucking noise each time he hauled first one foot then the other into a new position. In a lull, pannikins of hot tea were passed along the line, and Jack was embarrassed that his teeth clattered against the tin mug. He glanced around, but the older hands were seemingly unaware, and played cards with rough laughter, cigarettes dangling from their lips. Several times during that long night, an orderly ran by chanting something Jack could not catch, and each time the card game and cigarettes disappeared as if by magic, seconds before an officer strode through.

Their days slid into a routine of cleaning the mud from their rifles, repairing duckboards, filling sandbags and restoring shattered trench walls. Every few days, pumps were carried in, and the sickening smell of the trench would mingle with fumes from the motor as water was pumped away. The horror of the trenches soon became routine. 

A man can get used to anything, I reckon. Even so, Jack was relieved when his unit was moved back to the support line. With the others, he watched with cynical amusement as fresh new recruits marched past, glancing at the dishevelled men leaving the trenches. You’ll know, soon enough.

In days, they were back in the trenches, feeling like old hands now, muffling their noses with eucalyptus-oil-filled handkerchiefs, almost able to nonchalantly ignore the scream of shells, the chatter and ping of bullets, and the sick thump of grenades.

On the second round of support line duties, mail arrived. A letter from Amy, and a second letter, folded small and tight, tucked inside it.

My dear Jack

There is no way to break this gently. Mary has asked me to write to you, to pass on her wish that you do not write to her or contact her again. She felt this needs no
further explanation. However, I have persuaded her to write, to speak for herself, and I enclose her letter here.

I am so very sorry to bring you such news. Mary is a dear girl, I am and will always be very fond of her. But right now, I find her cruelty unbearable. I begged her, but she is determined that this is what she wants. Jack, I will try to soften her, I promise you. Maybe time will resolve this.

In the meantime, I can tell you that the children are well, and growing fast. Charlie is a little man almost, and the girls are such chatterboxes, and a delight to everyone. I am sure the children are happy enough for now, and want for nothing.

Do write when you can. Whatever comes of all this, I remain your loving sister,

Amy

Jack's fingers trembled as he unfolded the tight folds of the note, smoothing the paper on his knee.

Jack

I write this to make my situation clear to you, and in doing so, I ask that you accept this as my final communication with you. After what the children and I have been through, as a result of your actions, I can no longer imagine ever sharing our lives with you again.

I think Amy has kept you informed about the fire in our home. Charlie was so brave, trying so hard to protect his father's reputation, which was more, much more, than you deserve. If only you had shown such courage in protecting him from this present trouble. He was wonderful too, when the bailiff came, helped me to load the little ones onto the buggy, and kept them singing and laughing, made it an adventure for them, while I struggled to gather what was left of our clothes and treasures. All the while, the bailiff's men watched, and never raised a finger to help me.

My parents have taken us in, and are generous in their support. Without their help, I do not know what I would do. I have heard that deserted wives without family or community support have their children placed in State care, so the wives can join the workforce, becoming laundry workers or worse. Jack, how could you have done this to me, and to our children? I cannot begin to understand why you let this happen, why you have allowed the humiliation and shame to engulf us, while you play the soldier-hero. The women in the town gloated over my belongings at the auction, women I had
counted as friends seized my treasures and packed them onto their buggies with never a glance at me. But how could I look them in the eye if they did speak to me? These people have been my lifelong friends, and you stole from them. My shame is overwhelming. Nobody has approached me, nobody has spoken to me, except Amy, and William, who is being very kind on account of his friendship with you. He is a true friend.

I can make no plans for the future. But of two things, I am sure. I am determined to keep my children with me at any cost, and I am equally determined that you will never be part of our lives again. Once you made a vow to love and protect me, but you have broken that promise. For this treachery, I consider our marriage ended. I remember telling you to never come back, and I repeat it here. Never come back, we don't want you in our lives.

Mary

Back in trench duties, Jack threw himself into work. He volunteered for sorties into no man’s land – dead man’s land, the men called it on the worst days. He hauled back wounded men, raced across broken ground with relay wires, grabbed identification from dead soldiers. He quickly gained a reputation for being bulletproof, and heads turned his way at each call for volunteers. ‘You’re mad, Jack. You’ve got a death wish!’

They were joking, but it was true; Jack now yearned for death, an honourable death, a death that would allow his family, or at least his son, to remember him with pride. For himself, he simply no longer cared. He redoubled his journal writing; this would be all Charlie had of his father, and Jack was determined to give an honest account of himself. Or perhaps not completely honest, he conceded, struggling over entries. He desperately wanted Charlie to hear him through the stories in the journal, but he could never dispel the phantom of his school teacher, standing behind his shoulder, snapping ‘You can’t write that! Use proper English, boy.’

The school teacher won. Jack knew that the formal language of his journal was stilted, almost technical. But it was a link, and he pushed aside his disappointment with himself, and used every spare moment to write a little more. He wrote of the rats in the trenches, and of the endless hours of boredom interspersed with frantic firing across no man’s land. He told Charlie how he felt as he raced across the mud, unspooling wire
for the radio operators, and how he enjoyed the familiar crunch of thick frost underfoot. He wrote of the casual courage of the men, the grey defeat of the prisoners, and the ruined land in which they fought.

Amy wrote again, with more sad news; their mother had died. No pain, no real illness, Amy had assured him, just a gradual decline until one morning she did not awaken. Jack considered the carnage he witnessed daily, and marvelled at the clean sweet simplicity of such a death. At what age, he wondered, does one stop being an orphan? Both his parents were now gone, and he felt an odd sense of vulnerability, of unprotected exposure to a suddenly chill wind. *Ridiculous. A man of almost forty is no orphan. Stop feeling sorry for yourself."

He wrote to Amy, awkwardly trying to offer comfort, hoping that their brother was there to help her. Her letter was dated six weeks earlier, the funeral would be long past, Amy would be getting on with life by now. How strange that all that had been happening, and yet he knew nothing of it. What had he been doing at the moment his mother died? How had he not even known of her passing? He remembered a story from his childhood, of a woman who knew the moment of her soldier son’s death, far away in the Boer War. Was it possible to reach out at such moments? Had his mother tried to reach out to him? He doubted it. He imagined she had turned her face from him long ago, in shame and disgust. And, he wondered, would he, in his turn, reach out to Mary at the moment of his death?

The answer came within the week. He and two others had been scouting in no man’s land, freezing in a predawn shower, when a flare went up and shells started dropping around them. They tumbled into a shellhole for protection, crouching low in slimy cold mud, as clods of earth pinged off their helmets. At a break in the shelling, they scrambled up to the lip of the hole. The first man glanced around, signalled to the others to follow, and leapt up, running, bent double. Jack followed but had only taken two paces when a heavy blow in the middle of his back sent him flying, head first, into an even deeper shell hole. In the brief moment before he landed, he was sharply conscious. *Thank God, at last. Then it was over.*

He awoke to silence. No gunfire, no shells. He lay unmoving, remembering, trying to gauge his injuries, knowing that the silence may signify an enemy advance. For all he knew, he could be behind enemy lines already, the front may have passed over him,
sweeping forward over his last position. His head was turned sideways in the mud, filthy water filled his mouth, and he slowly, silently, spat it out, gulping air. Directly in front of his face lay a bloodied leg, blocking any further view. *Light enough to see, must be dawn already. The most dangerous time.* Far above a bird called, then another. Was it truly a bird? Or a signal? He lay absolutely still a minute longer, then gingerly moved, slowly pulling himself up out of the mud, resting on his elbows, checking his limbs one by one. He was soaking wet, and he could feel an unnatural warmth and pressure on his back. *That’s where I was hit.* But no pain. Not yet.

A crackle of gunfire erupted away to his right, and was immediately answered by gunfire from his left. *So I’m still between the lines. Here until nightfall now! No chance of getting out, no chance of stretcher bearers coming.* He dared to lift his head further now, to look around the shellhole. Three bodies lay crumpled, the nearest one dismembered. His own gun lay half-buried in mud just beyond his reach, and he pulled himself forward to retrieve it. Whatever his injury, he could move his arms strongly. Holding the gun, he felt less vulnerable, and he rolled to his left side, lifting the gun clear, sliding his fingers into firing position. As he moved, he was astounded to feel the sensation in his back slither away, leaving him unbearably light, and suddenly cold. *What ...?* The torso of his mate slid into the mud with a sickening thump, the lifeless head buckled back, blood still oozing from his mouth and the hole where his arm had been. His stomach lurching, Jack scrambled crablike to the side, realising as he did so that his legs, his back, every part of his body was undamaged. The thump had been the man being blown into him, taking a direct hit from the shell.

Jack lay still, gasping in horror, staring at the mutilated bodies around him. How was he still alive, still unwounded, when these vital young men were blasted to death? He wondered if he should pray for them, but the thought was ludicrous. The comfortable, familiar God of his earlier life held no sway here. Sobs choked him as he rummaged for his entrenching tool, and started hacking clods of mud from the sides of the shell hole. *If there is little chance of retrieval, and it is possible, bury the fallen where they lie.* He squeezed his eyes shut as he groped for identification discs and paybooks, shoving them into his own tunic pockets. *And if I am killed now, they’ll never know which of these IDs was me.* The effort of digging out shallow graves, keeping as quiet as possible, calmed him. *At least I can do them this kindness.* He gathered two spare ration packets, the guns and ammunition, and an oilskin cape from the bodies before
burying them. The light was fading from the sky when fresh gunfire erupted above him, some fired close by. He slid down, pulled the oilskin over himself, and fixed his bayonet. But even so, the sudden appearance of a soldier slipping into the shell hole startled him. **One of us!** He pulled the oilskin aside, and immediately the soldier swung around, bayonet ready.

‘Bloody hell, Jack, I could have killed you!’

They spoke in whispers, exchanging what information they had, then Jack joined him as they crept across the mud, estimating enemy positions by the bursts of gunfire and the hiss of shells. They dropped as flares went up, crept on when each faded. It was with exhausted relief that Jack fell back into their own trenches hours later, and handed in the identifications he carried. **Just numbers on a report now.** The sergeant peered closely at him, and sent him back to support duties, with orders to report to the company doctor for a check. ‘You’re no good to anyone if you’re running a fever.’

He recovered, and rested behind the lines with his unit until they were sent to Ypres, then Messines where they fought fiercely, rested briefly then fought again. On fatigues, Jack’s unit was paraded before a Colonel, and received praise and commendations. They had brought honour upon themselves and their nation, they were told. But Jack looked around and thought how few were left of the men who had shipped through Egypt with him. Reinforcements arrived, units waxed and waned as the battles raged, and through it all Jack fought on, alive and unhurt, against all odds. Over the following months, Jack’s unit was moved many times, and Jack recorded in his journal the unfamiliar names, names whose spelling he guessed at, but names he would never forget – Bullecourt, Vimy Ridge, back to Messines. Christmas came and went, and Jack remembered how, in the first rush of recruitment four years earlier, the word had been that it would all be over by Christmas. In freezing conditions, Jack suffered frostbite, then trench fever, and was hospitalised for several days. A letter arrived from Amy while he was recuperating, lying in a sheltered corner behind the hospital tent. He held it, unopened, for some time, wondering if he really wanted to know any more from the distant, increasingly unbelievable place called home. The news Amy had sent to date had been sad, so what was the point of even opening her letter. Tears filled his eyes, **self-pitying fool,** and he shook his head, tore open the envelope and read.

Dear Jack
I think of you often, it is so strange that I have no idea where you are or what you are doing. The news we read of the war is sad and disturbing. I can only pray that you are safe and well.

The children are growing fast, and bring joy to all. They are delightful kiddies. Charlie stays with me each week during school times, but returns home on the weekends. I love his company, and find it quiet and lonely when he is not here. He is a clever boy, you may be very proud of him.

Will this war ever end? Will I ever see you again?

Your loving sister

Amy

Jack read it through twice, then with trembling fingers, he folded it away in the back of his journal with her other letters. Why write if she has nothing to say? No word of Mary? I wish I had thrown it away unread! His loneliness was like a physical pain, a deep ache through his whole body. Without warning, sobs bubbled up from his chest, and he buried his face in his hands, tears streaming through his fingers. I’ll never see any of them again. I’ve thrown away everything. I want it all back. I want my life back. Nobody disturbed him, and if he was quieter than usual that night, nobody mentioned it. They’ve all got their own grief.

His unit moved back into the trenches for several days, only pulled back into support when casualties outnumbered men standing. Summer brought flies and fever, and the men were exhausted. Reinforcements arrived, barely trained. And still the war dragged on. Jack continued to volunteer for suicidal missions, and came through each unscathed. His journal writing became desultory; he could barely remember the hope with which he had begun it. And he abandoned it entirely after an incident in early autumn. With another man, he had taken a wagonload of telephone wire to a dressing station near the front. The doctor there requested them to transport four serious casualties back behind the lines, and the unconscious bandaged men were bundled aboard. Jack sat on the wagon to steady the patients, as they started back. But almost at once, shells came whistling over, at first falling ahead, but then closer, all around them. The horses, and then the driver, panicked, and the wagon flew, jolting and bucking, across the shell-pocked mud. Jack flung himself across the injured men, frantically
clutching at arms, legs, anything, as one, then another slid helplessly from the wagon to the churned mud below. His frantic cries went unheard, and it was minutes before the horses calmed and slowed to a stop, their eyes still rolling in their foam-flecked faces. The two men stared back across the mud, watching shellbursts kick up the earth. Wordlessly, they led the horses on, walking slowly beside the wagon, murmuring soothing words to the horses, not daring to look at the fresh blood staining the wrappings of the two remaining soldiers. That night, Jack pushed his journal to the bottom of his pack; his task now was to forget, not to record or remember.

It was late autumn before the tide of the war turned. News of great victories filtered through, and the spirits of the men lifted. Paradoxically, the intensity of fighting increased too, and casualties rose. Jack’s life became a daze of running through zigzag trenches, emerging to race across open land, then dropping into more trenches, and running, running, always bent double, always running. Germans surged toward them, sometimes with bayonets, sometimes with arms aloft in surrender. Again, Jack made a conscious decision to forget all he witnessed. This was hell. Nobody would ever want or need to hear about it.

In October they were pulled out for a month’s rest. Jack’s unit marched back over the newly won land, back to the railway, where they boarded and were carried far back, almost beyond the sounds of war, to a city of tents. Jack was shaving, enjoying the crisp cool of a late autumn morning when a great shouting erupted from the mess tent. ‘It’s over! Thank God, it’s over!’

Men were running, crying and laughing, hugging each other, openly weeping, then shouting again. But as the immediate euphoria faded, Jack sensed he was not the only one dreading an unknown future. He knew he was utterly changed by the war, a different man altogether. Even the men with loving wives and families waiting, even they openly wondered what lay ahead.

‘Home by Christmas’ became the mantra, and even though that was an unrealistic hope, Jack’s unit was back in Southampton for an unforgettable traditional English Christmas dinner.

The unity of purpose that had bonded the men for so long now shrivelled. Men turned their thoughts to home, and talked openly of new beginnings. ‘What about you, mate,
what’s your plan?’ It was the question of everyone’s lips, and Jack quickly developed a calm reply. ‘Same as you I guess, back into civvies, back into work.’

They stayed in Weymouth for the first three months, then transferred to Sutton Veny, as they waited for their turn to be repatriated. Wounded men, early enlists, nurses and doctors all took priority. Men chafed and fretted, and wrote endless letters home. But Jack spent long afternoons walking, thinking, considering his options. He realised there was no way back, but neither could he see a way forward. He had no idea what to do next, nor where to turn for help. He had never felt lonelier.
CHAPTER 16


Dear Jack

I thank God daily that you have survived this terrible war. I can’t begin to imagine what you have endured. The men who have returned wounded tell some hard and bitter stories, and I have been so afraid for you. My grief is compounded by what I must tell you now. Mary has declared that you are dead. I think she has lost her mind. She says you were killed in the last of the fighting in France. She has told the children, and her parents, and everyone, that she has received word that you were shot, and died instantly. The minister led special prayers for you.

I visited her, and told her that I had received a letter from you, written some weeks after the date she says you were killed. But she insisted that she has received word, as your wife, and therefore she should know. She even claims she has received reparation money from the government. She accused me of making up stories because I cannot accept the truth. As you can imagine, I was bewildered and hurt by her words. But then she told me that she is moving away, she is taking the children to make a new start far away from the distress of these years since you left. She certainly has endured jibes and hostility from many locals, and I know that Charlie has been bullied, so I understand her desire to leave. She has withdrawn Charlie from school, in preparation for her departure, so I have not seen him since this appalling nightmare began.

But here is the worst of my news. Jack dear, how am I to tell you? Earlier today, when I was in the store, I was told that William has taken a transfer and promotion to Queensland, to a country town called Buderim. He’s to be the bank manager there; he’ll even have the manager’s house to live in.

Jack, I can’t help but make the connection, though I hope I am wrong. Since you went away, so suddenly and unexpectedly, I seem to have had nothing but bad news for you. I am so sorry. My heart is broken, I cannot imagine how this news will take you. Please come home to me, somehow, someday.

Amy
Jack felt as if the breath had been sucked from him. He stared at the letter, trying to make sense of the words. *She can’t declare me dead. Nobody will believe her, will they? Why would she do that? This is madness.* But he knew she could. Men were missing, declared dead every day. There were no clear records, no trace of the men blown to pieces on the battlefields. He remembered how many times he had groped for identification, but had found nothing, no mark to say this man had lived, had fought and died here. If Mary declared him dead, she would be believed, and she would be treated with all the sympathy due to the widow of a soldier. And why would she do that? He could think of one compelling reason – to be free of him forever, to ensure she never saw him again. But to join William in Queensland? No, no … As he reread the letter, his rage swelled – William was behind all of this. William had hustled Jack out of the way, had stolen the money Jack tried to repay, had lied and cheated his way into Mary’s trust and, Jack knew it, her affection. What had William said all those years ago? *I’ll claim my reward later.* All these years, William had been planning, working toward this. *How could I have been so blind, so gullible, so damn stupid?* 

Through all Jack had endured in the war, all the deaths, all the brutality of killing, all the loss of young comrades, all through that time William had been charming Mary, building his fortune on stolen money, giving comfort and support to Mary to win her for himself. *And I sanctioned it. My last words to him were ‘Look out for Mary, keep her safe until I’m back.’* Well, I’ll be back, William, no matter what you have persuaded Mary to say, I’ll be back, and while you may know more about money than I do, these years have taught me a thing or two about killing …

He started, then tore up replies to Amy, protesting, demanding she spread the news that he lived. But even as he destroyed each attempted letter, he recognised a burgeoning sense of new life, a tiny bubble of excitement that, despite what was lost, he was free to start a brand new life, a man with no history, with everything ahead and no responsibility to the past at all. What’s more, he reasoned, he was not the only one who chose to be lost. He knew of men who had received news that their sweethearts had become tired of waiting and had married someone else, of men who had enlisted to escape unhappy relationships and who had no intention of returning, and men who, like him, were running from the law and intended to remain free, at whatever cost. He was effectively invisible, and he planned to take advantage of this.
Jack’s days in camp were pleasant and relaxed now. No daily drills, and plenty of opportunity to explore the countryside locally and further afield, attend various training courses, or simply enjoy the hospitality of local families. He kept himself fit with long walks, and at every encounter, at every new place visited, the thought was always in his mind Could this be my new life? Could I see myself staying here forever? Are these the people with whom I can live? Great Barr, in the Midlands, reminded him of his home, and he thought, of all the places he visited, this was the one place he could come to call home. Twice men were reported missing, gone AWOL, but no real effort was made to locate them, and Jack considered this option. To just disappear. A new name, a new start. But he did nothing, and the weeks became months. Amy wrote, but he no longer replied. Maybe I am dead, maybe Mary is right. How would I know if I had died? But around him men were continuing to suffer shellshock, and he was not only alive, but relatively unscathed by the whole horrible experience of the war. His dreams, or nightmares, were still filled with the roar of battle, the blinding flashes of explosives, the hideous slithering crunch of a bayonet sliding into then out of a man’s gut, and the bodies – everywhere the bodies, dismembered, bleeding, shattered beyond recognition. The killing had become routine, almost easy, but the horror of witnessing all those deaths, lingering and agonising or brutally swift, he felt he would never forget.

His repatriation notice came through in early August, ten months after the end of the fighting, and he packed his gear. There’s still time. Or I can jump ship along the way. But he was still aboard when the ship docked in Sydney, and the troops disembarked. Few people turned out to welcome them, the novelty of returning men had long passed, and only a few wives and mothers waited quietly on the dock, shyly waving as they recognised husbands and sons. Were the womenfolk as changed as the men were, Jack wondered? Would these families be able to pick up where they had left off? He truly doubted it possible, and knew he was so utterly changed it was a bitter relief not to have to try to find the younger man he had been.

On the dock in Sydney they queued to receive passes for onward travel. Men lined up in front of signs reading Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra.

Probably be arrested if he went to Victoria, he reasoned, so why not head for a warmer climate, after the European winters. Mary won't see me, I know, but ...? Unfinished
business with William? Or do I just want to find them, to see that the kiddies are all right...? Jack joined the Brisbane line for his rail pass.

‘What name, soldier?’

‘Barr. B-a-double-r.’ The name was on his lips before he even thought about it, the name of the sleepy little village in England that had reminded him of home. Why not? Jack Conway was dead, according to Mary and everyone from his previous life; Jack Drummond had been left behind in the trenches. It was certainly time for a new name.

‘Parr? There you go, Mr Parr. Welcome back to civvy street.’ The man turned to the next soldier before Jack could correct him. The pass in his hand read Parr, well, so be it, Jack Parr he now was.

Buderim. The strange place name he remembered from Amy’s letters. With no clear plan, he bought a Queensland map from the newsagent in the railway station when he alighted in Brisbane, and had the stallholder help him locate the village. It lay to the north, as Amy had said, on a branch off the Main North Line. ‘Trains leaving every morning,’ the man assured him. ‘Take most of the day to get there.’

‘Thanks.’ Jack folded the map and pushed it into his pocket.

Outside, the city was much changed from when he had last been here, on his way to enlist. Few horses were visible, replaced by the cars and trucks that rattled along the city streets. He crossed the bridge and strolled along the riverbank, retracing his steps of three years earlier. Three years? Is that all? It feels like a lifetime ago.

He headed up into the park leading to the barracks, and stopped at a bench, where he spread the map open on his knee. Almost immediately, a man stumbled out of the trees, heading straight for him. ‘Got a coin for an old digger, mate?’

He was shocked at the man’s filthy condition. He looked younger than Jack, but gaunt, limping, unshaven. Jack stood, rummaging in his pocket for coins. ‘Times are hard then, are they?’ A stupid question, he wished he had not spoken.

‘No work at all, mate, no place for us any more. The youngsters took all our jobs, the army don’t want us back, what’s a bloke to do, I ask you?’ He glanced at the coins Jack dropped into his outstretched hand. ‘Thanks, mate. Godbless.’
Jack stared after him as he limped away. *Probably heading straight for the pub. Well, who can blame him?*

Jack spent the rest of the day exploring employment prospects, and quickly discovered that the man was right. There were few jobs available around the city for young men, even fewer for men of Jack’s age. Did he dare to state his previous bookkeeping and accountancy experience? He thought not. Too risky, if they started asking questions, or wanted references.

‘Any suggestions?’ he asked in the canteen of the league recently opened for returned soldiers.

‘A fit bloke might find work out west, in the mines. New pits opening up out there. Or maybe you’d find labouring work on the railways. Lots of new lines being laid. Some blokes are applying for soldier settlement land; have you got any farming skills? No, well, maybe try the mines first.’ And he did. He travelled to Cloncurry where he found work easily; there were positions for men who were not too fussy about conditions, who were prepared to skirt around the labour unions.

Being part of a work gang soothed him; he had missed the anonymous camaraderie and team effort of the war. It wasn’t companionship he craved, but the mutual trust of being part of a whole, working as one.

Out of work hours, he remained a loner, as always. He continued his long walks, amazed at the colours and stark beauty of the western region. And all the time, in the back of his mind, the question niggled – *How can I get to see Mary? And Charlie. Would I recognise them? The girls were so little when I left – they won’t remember me...*

The idea came from an unexpected quarter. A young fellow, newly arrived in the mine, was chattering in the canteen, boasting about his farming skills, and assuring the men that he was only here to save enough money to buy a parcel of land at Buderim.

‘Beautiful land. A man can grow anything there. You name it, it grows! Bloody beautiful soil. And I’ll own a piece of it in a year, you just see if I don’t’.

Jack spoke slowly, keeping his voice casual despite his racing heart. ‘Buderim, you say? I’ve heard of that place. Where is it exactly?’
It was all the encouragement the homesick youngster needed, and he spoke enthusiastically about the crops, the friendly community, and the prosperity of the area. ‘People come up from Brisbane, it’s a proper health resort place. Lots of holidaymakers too, ’cos it’s cooler up there.’

A holiday. Why not? Jack applied for leave, packed his gear and took a train back to Brisbane. Unexpectedly nervous, he stayed two days in the city, riding the trams and the river ferries, trying to anticipate what risks lay ahead. He wanted to see the children, especially Charlie, his heart knew the truth of this. But Mary? Did he really want to see her, to speak to her? Probably not, he had to admit. It was too late, her life had moved far beyond his, and he himself had changed irrevocably too … And William? Did he want to see William? Could he see William, and not take his revenge? What could he ever say that would satisfy his rage and pain? And if he did see either of them, by choice or by chance, would they report him to the police? He did not even know if the arrest warrant was still valid, and there was no way he could find out without drawing attention to himself. When he had first left his home, over three years ago, he had thought that by repaying the money he would be somehow exonerated. But it was obvious that William had withdrawn the money but never repaid it. Had he done so, surely the bailiff would never have taken everything …?

The old grief and rage surged up, and he tensed himself against the trembling that seized him. No point in going over old ground. Too late now. But how could Will have betrayed him like that? How could Mary not have seen through the deception? Or were they lovers even before he left? Had they set him up in order to get rid of him? Tears of fury welled in his eyes, and he covered his distress with a burst of coughing, pressing a handkerchief to his face.

He’d been over those questions so many times, he felt exhausted even allowing them to form in his mind again. Forget it. Just leave it alone. All I want is to glimpse my kids, to be sure they are safe and well. Then I’ll go. But he bought a slender sheathed hunting knife, slipped it into his jacket pocket, fingerling it as he pondered his choices. A man may need protection.

Finally he made up his mind to risk a brief visit to Buderim. He wouldn’t seek William out, but if he chanced upon him … if he had an opportunity … He bought a wide-brimmed hat which he pulled well down onto his forehead, and caught the early train north. Late in the afternoon, he changed trains at Palmwoods for the last section to Buderim. As the little tram chugged slowly up the steep inclines, Jack patted his pocket
again, reassured by the sturdy leather sheath as he gazed out at the wild rainforest, and wondered if he was making yet another mistake. Would this end with his arrest? After all he had sacrificed to stay clear of the police, was he about to lose even his freedom now? Just a few days, he thought, just a couple of days, a chance to see my children, I’ll be so discreet, I’ll be almost invisible. And if I meet William, well, so be it, let the Fates decide…

He swung onto the platform as the train shuddered to a stop, clouds of steam hissing from under the engine. Bright posters advertised guest houses, and Jack examined each, looking for one that didn’t boast ‘Central location’ or ‘Handy to all amenities’. He jotted down an address … ‘a peaceful location, a pleasant walk away from the township’. That would do. Shoving his notebook back into his pocket, his fingers closed around the knife handle, and at the same moment, he saw William. He was walking away from Jack, moving briskly along the platform, now breaking into a run … He’s seen me. Hot rage swelled in Jack, and he strode after him, his carryall bumping awkwardly against his leg.

‘Hey, hey, William …’

Surprised faces turned to him as he pushed past travellers. ‘Careful there, mind where you’re going.’

Jack heard nothing, saw nobody but the back of the running man. He was gaining on him, and inside his pocket, he flicked the knife clear of the sheath, held it ready … The man raised his arms, seized a young woman who laughed as he swung her around. Now the man was facing Jack, only two paces away – it wasn’t William. Not William! Even as his mind recognised that this was a stranger, not William, just a much younger man greeting an even younger woman, the finely-attuned soldier in him leaned forward in attack, already pulling the knife from his pocket. Panicking now, Jack stumbled clumsily aside, dropping his bag, falling heavily on his right side. The knife clattered away across the platform. A moment’s shocked silence, then men were helping him up, peering into his face, passing him his bag. The young man and his friend stared for a moment, their faces concerned, before they strolled away, arm-in-arm. A man offered the knife, handle first, to Jack. ‘You dropped this, mate?’

‘Uh, no, no, not mine … uh, I think that’s what tripped me …’ He could feel his face flushing, and turned, ‘I need to sit down …’. Further down the platform, he could see a
policeman, and he sank onto a bench, his face turned away until the knot of bystanders had drifted away. The platform emptied, the steam engine quietened as the engineers closed it down overnight, gradually the hammering of his heart slowed. He stood slowly, aware of an ache in his hip where he had fallen. Pulled a muscle, lucky it was nothing worse. And it could have been so much worse, I nearly murdered a man there, a stranger. What have I become, a wild animal? I'd have lost everything, and for what?

He found the guest house, further away than he had expected, but certainly a distance from the township, in a quiet bush setting. The proprietor, a middle-aged man, showed him to his room, and wished him a pleasant stay. ‘If there’s anything you need …’. As soon as the door closed, Jack dropped into the generous armchair and groaned aloud. What a fool he’d been. All his training as a soldier, all his fighting experience, had taught him to be cool, remain detached, allow nothing to cloud his judgment. No emotion, just action; plan, act! But in an instant of vengeful fury, he had forgotten all that, forgotten all the men he had killed, forgotten all that had led to this moment. It had almost gone horribly wrong, he had very nearly killed an innocent young man, and what for, what for? Even if it had been William, even if he had killed William, what would that have achieved? No, he had to admit he was relieved the knife was gone. The knife, and that choice – both gone. And so was his urgent need for revenge – gone, melted away. Killing William would be as easy, and as meaningless, as the many killings he had done in the war. For the war killings, he was a hero, a brave soldier. If he killed William now, he would be a criminal, to be punished by a lifetime in prison. He’d never see his children that way, never be able to make another free choice. William was just not worth it. Exhausted by the emotion of the day, he fell asleep where he sat, waking in the dark to tug his boots off and fall onto the bed.

The next morning, he examined himself carefully in the mirror. Clean-shaven, thinner than when he had last seen his family. Gaunt-faced, his hair noticeably grey. And older, seemingly many years older than his forty years. He doubted anyone would recognise him. But worse, he wondered if he would recognise Mary. He had no photograph, and he barely trusted his memory. Some days he could hardly remember her face at all. What about William? He had been so sure the man he saw was William, and he was wrong – his confidence was shaken now. And the children? The girls were so little when he left, he knew he had no chance of recognising them. But surely twins
were not common? That might help? And Charlie? Would he recognise Charlie? Here
his courage almost gave out, as he finally acknowledged to himself how desperately he
wanted to see his son, to hold him, to breathe in the sweet scent of sweaty little boy, to
listen to his earnest stories of his daily adventures.

He sat heavily back on the bed, his throat tight with tears. Better he pack his bag and
leave right now, this mad quest could only lead to grief, or worse. Saddened, but with a
haunted sense of relief, he packed his bag, and left. He checked out, making a lame
excuse about a family emergency, and strode out, back along Gloucester Road, and
past the school. Here he slowed, gazing over the fence into the playground, as children
swirled and shrieked. Were his children there? Dare he stop? A hand-painted sign
catched his eye ‘Janitor wanted. Apply to office.’ Without breaking stride, he swung
through the gate, up the steps and into the office.

‘Good morning. Can I help you?’

His heart thudded as he replied and was ushered into the headmaster’s office. Twenty
minutes later, he was introduced to the office staff. ‘Jack Parr’s joining us as our new
janitor. Please do what you can to make him welcome.’ He was shown around the
grounds, and given a run down on his duties. The headmaster asked if he could start
the next day, suggested a few places he could seek board in the village, shook his hand
and thanked him, and the interview was over. Dazed, Jack walked back into the bright
sunlight. What have I done? But elation overwhelmed his fears, and he strode away to
find a place to live. He vowed to himself that would stay away from the township, he
would not seek out William or Mary, he wouldn’t even speak to his children if he saw
them. He just wanted to see them, just to know they were safe and well, that was all …
He took lodgings on Gloucester Rd, a brisk walk from the school, at the home of Harry Clark, a widower and retired teacher.

‘I’ll be glad of your company, Jack. Being retired’s turning out to be a lonely business.’

The two men got along well, yarning over their pipes on the long twilights of summer.

‘Got any family, have you, Jack?’ The question was casual, and Jack let a silence stretch before he answered.

‘A sister down south. Lost the rest in the war.’

‘Ah, bloody war. A sad business, that. I lost my son. In France. And that was what killed Nellie. Lost my wife and my son within three months of each other. A bloody sad business.’

They sat in silence as the dusk deepened. Harry sighed, his pipe glowing briefly as he spoke. ‘Makes it hard to go on, doesn’t it, Jack.’

Neither mentioned their losses again, and an easy companionship settled between them. Jack avoided the township, and worked each day, preparing the sports grounds for the new school year and repairing gutters and fences. In the evenings, Harry told him stories of the school, and Jack came to understand how deeply Harry had loved teaching, and being around the children. So he was unsurprised when Harry announced that he planned to volunteer three mornings a week to help with the reading groups.

Then the holidays were over; the children would return to school the next week. Jack planned to keep out of sight, as far as possible, not draw any attention. But he could certainly watch them. And then …? He had no idea what might come after that, but that night his dreams were of Charlie, and when he awoke his face was wet with tears.

Please, please, please let me see him. Just to see him.

By the first day of school, Jack had the grounds ready, and he had no trouble finding tasks away from the playgrounds during the breaks. Impatience clawed at him, but his need to see his children was so great, he was fearful to act on it. Slowly, slowly. No rush. Invisibility first. Then, a few weeks into the term, he returned to a garden bed
after the lunch break to find several new plants stamped into the dirt. He crouched to straighten them, loosening the compacted soil and mounding it around the damaged stems. *Just an accident, just kids in a hurry.* The following day, the plants were flattened again. Jack crouched by them awhile, then pulled them all out, and strode away. By the next break, he had placed bricks across the patch of garden, making a little walkway. He doubted the damage was accidental, but he said nothing. He deliberately stayed away from that area for the next week, determined not to be provoked. But when he did return, at the tail end of a lunch break, he was unsurprised to see all the remaining plants flattened and dying. He stood, hands on hips, surveying the damage, aware of a group of senior boys clustered nearby. One boy turned to him, and shouted ‘They’re wrecked.’

Jack turned slowly to face them, as first one, then the group, swaggered out of the shade toward him. ‘They *are* wrecked. It’s a pity.’

‘Just stupid plants. Waste of space, my dad reckons.’

Jack smiled slowly. ‘Your dad may be right. But I get paid to look after them so that’s what I do. That, and looking after the sports ground. Which I can’t do if I’m kept busy repairing damage here.’

‘Why don’t you just let them die then? ’Cos they keep getting damaged.’

Jack chuckled. ‘It’s no skin off my nose what work I do. Whoever does this risks trouble, and I benefit. So why should I worry? Easier work than fixing the sports ground after you boys scuff it up anyway. ’Course, you can’t play so well when the sports ground is damaged, but again, why should I worry?’ He turned away, surprised to see that a group of younger children had gathered, curious, perhaps sniffing out trouble. ‘Nice chatting to you, boys. But I’ve got work to do.’

‘Anyway, only sissies do gardening, my dad says!’

Jack clenched his fist, forcing himself to turn slowly, keep smiling. ‘Your dad sounds quite a character. Perhaps I know him? Perhaps I met him in the fighting in France and Belgium? Perhaps he was there alongside me? Not many sissies out there.’ Unable to keep rage from his voice any longer, he turned and strode through the cluster of children just as the bell rang.
Small irritations followed; a trowel missing, a full wheelbarrow inexplicably overturned, a measuring tape flung into a tree. But they left him alone, and he ignored them. And all the time, he surreptitiously watched the children at play, or marching in their daily drills, or hurling themselves into running races, ball games and other sports activities, watching always for his own son. Would he recognise Charlie? Children change a lot in four years. Charlie would be almost ten years old now, the girls six. And he had all the time in the world.

As it turned out, he recognised his children easily. The twins were easy to spot. Tiny, dark-haired and so like their mother, watching them made Jack’s heart contract in pain. Lively, always together, always running, shrieking, laughing as they chased and were chased in their games. He watched them in awe, remembering their soft skin, and their sweet milky baby perfume. These two little girls were his children, his own flesh and blood. And yet, he was somehow afraid. He simply could not imagine the circumstance in which he would claim them as his own.

Charlie was different. Charlie was so like himself, he thought, that he was astounded that others did not notice, did not make the connection. For this reason, he kept even more distant from him than from other children. Charlie was lean, his long limbs making him already taller than his peers. His hair was sandy and sun-bleached, his eyes blue. As blue as Jack’s own, as blue as Amy’s. Watching the boy race about the schoolyard, or crouch intently over marbles, or avidly reading against a tree, Jack was seized with a longing so great he had to turn away, force himself to breathe, breathe, breathe. It was almost a relief when rain fell during the lunchbreak and the children stayed indoors.

Then, as he strode toward the school one autumn morning, he saw Charlie and three other boys crouched beside the road. As he approached, Charlie stood, holding out his arms to Jack. He was cradling the school cat, which lay limp, its head drooping. Immediately Jack crouched beside the boys, who were all talking at once, their voices shrill with excitement. ‘Reckon it got run over… Maybe a dingo got it… Or a snake. I saw a snake yesterday…’

‘Bring it into the shed. We’ll bandage her up, see how she goes.’
The boys watched quietly as Jack tore strips of rag, and made a splint for the broken leg. He showed them how to gently bathe her cuts, and drip water into her mouth. All the while, Charlie stroked the cat’s head, and murmured to her.

‘Are you a doctor?’ one lad asked. ‘How do you know this stuff?’

‘They teach you first aid in the army,’ Jack replied. ‘Men get hurt, you have to know how to help your mates.’

Charlie looked up, ‘My dad was killed in the war.’

Jack’s throat closed, and he said nothing, just nodded.

The other boys chimed in, adding their own stories. ‘My uncle was hurt really badly … My dad was gassed, and he coughs and coughs… My mum says millions and millions and millions of people were killed …’

The boys came to his shed every morning to tend to the cat, and Jack looked forward to their company and their questions. ‘Tell us about the war, Mr Parr. Tell us about the guns. And the horses. And the ships. And the Jerries.’

He worked steadily as he told them stories, always keeping the narrative pleasant, making it all sound like a clever adventure, though he repeatedly told them that war was no way to sort out problems between nations or people.

‘You know how it is, when you’ve done your homework perfectly, or you’ve drawn a really good picture, or your maths book is neat and all the answers are right, and then somehow, the book gets muddied, or the pages are torn, and ruined. And you try to fix it, but it is never the same again. You know that feeling? Well, that is what the war was like. It was as if something lovely and perfect was ripped to bits, and it can never be put together again. It will never be as it was. That’s what war does.’

Autumn cooled into winter, and the cat recovered and disappeared back into her patch of bush. Still the boys came almost daily, making a visit to Mr Parr a part of their daily routine. Jack enjoyed their company, but was scrupulously careful to pay no extra attention to Charlie, nor remark if Charlie was absent. *This is enough. Don’t tempt the gods.*

Once Charlie said, ‘You look a bit like my dad.’
Jack’s heart soared, but he managed to smile and reply, ‘I reckon all soldiers look the same, especially in uniform.’

Charlie thought about that for a while, then asked, ‘Did you know all the soldiers? Did you know my father?’

‘Aw, don’t be stupid, Charlie.’ It was the youngest boy. ‘There was millions and millions of soldiers, my mum said.’

Jack’s breath snagged in his throat, but he turned to Charlie. ‘Well, anything’s possible. What was your father’s name?’

‘He was Mr Jack Conway.’

‘Jack Conway. Yes, I knew a Jack Conway. A nice fellow. But he wouldn’t be your dad, he came from Victoria.’

‘Yes, yes! That’s him. We used to live in Victoria. We came here after he died and Mum married Uncle Will. Did you really know him?’ The boy’s eyes shone, and Jack felt sick with apprehension. *Why did I say that?*

‘Yes, I reckon I did. But best we keep this to ourselves, eh? We don’t want to cause any sadness for your mum, do we?’

The bell rang, and the boys scattered. Charlie lingered a moment longer, peering back shyly. ‘Will you tell me about my dad sometime?’

‘Sure, Charlie. But let’s keep it quiet for now.’

And the boy was gone.

Then, in early spring, the blow fell. He was called to the headmaster’s office, and his heart sank.

‘Jack, this is very difficult for me. One of the mothers has been in to see me, a Mrs Dempsey, the mother of young Charles Conway. She insists that she knows for certain that you’re wanted by the police. She says that if you remain employed here, she’ll report the matter to the police herself.’

Jack said nothing, he stared at the floor, struggling to hear the words through the pounding of his heart.
‘Jack, I don’t really know what to do. I certainly don’t plan to call the police, but neither do I want any unpleasantness. Mrs Dempsey’s a war widow, remarried now of course, with three kiddies in our school. Her husband’s in the local bank, I believe. Influential fellow, she tells me. And she’s no shrinking violet herself.’ He sighed heavily, and rubbed his forehead, his distress and embarrassment obvious. ‘What am I to do, Jack? How do you want me to handle this?’

The silence stretched uncomfortably as Jack cleared his throat in futile attempts to speak. Finally he managed, his voice unexpectedly steady and firm. ‘Thank you for telling me. I’ll leave immediately, of course.’

‘Jack … This is a bad business. I’m so sorry … If I can help in any way.’ He stood and reached to shake Jack’s hand. ‘Jack, I don’t want to know what’s behind this. Not now, not ever. I’ll stand by you to fight this, if that’s your wish. But if you must go, I’ll give you a good reference.’

‘I’ll pack away the tools.’ Jack could not keep the tremble out of his voice, and he blundered out of the office, his face burning with humiliation. Would the past never leave him? Was he to be haunted forever by his stupidity? He knew the answer to that. All he had to do was live a quiet life, far from his son. That was all.

_That’s all? I may as well be dead. Never to see him again? And why? Why? And how had Mary known? Has she spotted me? Mrs Dempsey, indeed! I could tell you a thing or two about her! Either she’s living in sin, or she’s a bigamist! Won’t help me though. I’ve been so careful, and Charlie never guessed, I’m sure he didn’t._

The headmaster handed him an envelope as Jack slid the wheelbarrow into the shed and closed the door. ‘It’s a good reference, Jack, and I’ll speak well of you to anyone who wants more information. Your pay’s there, with holiday money and a well-deserved bonus. Keep in touch, will you?’ It was almost a plea, but Jack shook his head. ‘Jack, look, I have no idea what’s behind all this, but I have my own opinions, and they don’t match those of Mrs Dempsey.’

Within minutes, he was on his way back home, clutching the envelope.

‘So you’ve had the news, huh?’ Harry plonked a beer bottle and two glasses down on the table. ‘Sit here and drink this. Don’t say anything. Just let me talk.’

Surprised, still numb with shock, Jack sat. ‘Bit early for a beer?’
‘Just listen, Jack. I heard about the complaint this morning, that’s why I expected you home early. Knowing you, I reckon you’ve got a plan to move to Russia or the moon, or somewhere. But I’ve got a better idea. No,’ he held up his hand to silence Jack, ‘… all I ask is that you hear me out, then you can do as you want.’

Jack sighed, and wrapped his hands around the cold glass. ‘I’m listening.’

‘I’ve been thinking for some time I’d like to get a bit of a market garden going here.’ Harry leaned over the verandah, gazing across the yard. ‘Good soil for it, and there’s a few bob to be made. But I knew it was too big a job for me. So now I reckon you and I can go into partnership. Grow veges, make a quid, live a quiet life. Sound all right to you? ’Cos I have to tell you, Jack, I don’t want to think about life without you here. I’ve got used to having you around …’

Jack sat very still for a moment. Then he stood abruptly, choking out ‘Give me a minute’. He almost ran into the bathroom, closed the door, sat on the edge of the bath, and buried his face in a towel. *It’s so unfair. Why would she do this to me? And now this kindness from Harry. What should I do, what on earth must I do?*

He splashed cold water on his face, cleared his throat several times, and returned to the verandah. Again Harry held up his hand. ‘Drink your beer first, think of it as medicine. Then I’ll listen to your plan.’

Jack managed a laugh. ‘You’re a hard man, Harry.’ He swallowed the beer in a long gulp, and softly put the glass down. ‘A hard man, but I like your idea. Just one condition, before we discuss details. You have to be the public face. I stay home and grow veges, you do the selling. Would that work?’

‘Wouldn’t have it any other way.’ Harry refilled their glasses. ‘Lots of details to work out, but I reckon we’ve had enough drama for one day. How about we catch the afternoon bus down to the coast, take a stroll along to the Mooloolaba pub. Need a couple of beers to wash away the stench of the bloody Dempseys.’
CHAPTER 18
March 1921. Buderim, Queensland.

The market garden flourished. Jack revelled in the hard work, discovering a green thumb and a deep enjoyment in working with the land. During the day, he dug and prepared garden beds, and in the evenings, he and Harry sketched out plans for seasonal rotations. Jack’s needs were few, and his savings were sufficient to carry him through. Harry had a list of buyers ready to take whatever they could produce, and by late summer they were already receiving a small return on their efforts.

‘Young Charlie Conway’s back at school, Jack.’ Harry put his pencil aside, and pushed the ledger toward Jack. ‘Here, you’ll have to show me again, I can’t figure out what goes where in this mess.’

Jack pulled the ledger across the table, ‘Charlie’s been away?’

‘Been ill for some time. Thought I’d told you.’ They both knew he hadn’t, but Jack pretended attention to the ledger as his mind raced.

‘Nothing serious then? He’s well now?’

‘Looks a bit peaky. Fallen behind a bit with his work. We had a yarn today, he’s been sent to me to help him catch up.’

‘Uh-huh.’ Jack kept his finger on the list of figures, his face down.

‘Fact of the matter is, Jack, the lad wanted to write you a letter, but he didn’t know where to send it. Relax, I never gave you away.’ Harry waved away Jack’s interruption. ‘Told him I’d find a way to pass on a message if he wanted that.’ Harry stopped speaking.

A long silence, until Jack looked up, pushing the ledger aside.

‘And …’

‘And he wrote you this note.’ Harry groped inside his jacket, pulled out a folded paper. ‘I’ll be down the yard if you need me. Feed the chooks while I’m there.’

Jack slowly unfolded the letter.
Dear Mr Parr

I am writing to tell you that I am sorry. I made a mistake. I told Mum you knew my dad in the war, and she got angry. Then she came to the school with me and made me show her which one was you. I thought she would talk to you about Dad, but she went to see the headmaster. And then you went away. I’m really sorry, because you asked me to keep it secret, and I forgot and I think I got you into trouble.

I hope you are well.

Your friend

Charlie Conway

Jack was still sitting in the same spot when Harry returned. He looked up, surprised that the light had faded. *Must have been here over an hour.*

Harry glanced at him, pulled a bottle of beer from the fridge and sat down. ‘You told me once you lost your family in the war. Want to talk about it?’

Jack stared at him in surprise. How much had he guessed? Suddenly, talking about it, telling somebody the whole story, simply unburdening himself of it all, sounded irresistible. He bent his head, feeling the weight of all the secrets, evasions and deceits. He wanted so much to put it all aside, even if just for a short while. But was it fair to load all that onto another person, especially one who had shown such kindness and generosity? *Tell him. Just tell him. Then... it doesn’t matter. Just tell him.*

Jack reached for his glass. ‘Chances are you’ll chuck me out …’

‘Try me.’

Jack talked for hours, keeping nothing back. From time to time, Harry stood to grab another bottle, or to switch on a light, close a window. But he said nothing, never interrupted, asked no questions, just listened. When Jack finally fell silent, they both sat unmoving. Then Harry moved to the bench, where he cut thick slices of bread, and made cheese sandwiches.

‘This’ll do for dinner, just this once.’

They ate in silence.
‘Thanks, Harry. Thanks for listening. What now? Do you want me to leave?’

‘Peas in a pod.’ Harry reached for a crumb of cheese.

‘What…?’


Jack nodded slowly. ‘I suppose so …’

‘If you’re happy enough to keep out of sight, stay here working the garden, I reckon we might find a way through this.’ Harry was quiet for a minute, then he laughed. ‘You know, young Charlie told me he thought you might be the ghost of his dad. Smart boy, that.’ He laughed again, seeing Jack’s confusion. ‘I told him I don’t believe in ghosts.’ He stood and stretched. ‘Let’s sleep on it, Jack. Enough beer and talk for one night, eh?’

The two men returned to the story repeatedly over the following days and weeks. Jack felt as if he had put aside a heavy suit of armour, and was happy to answer Harry’s questions, even though the answers put him in a bad light. Harry marvelled at the chance results of each decision along the way. ‘If only we were born with a crystal ball. Wonder if it would help?’

‘I look back in despair,’ Jack replied. ‘I made stupid choices, and the worst possible decisions. Starting from the very first one, when I decided to fiddle the books.’ He sighed. ‘Greed. Ambition, greed and a young man’s sense of invincibility. No excuse though. It was wrong. But, strewth, I’ve been punished for it!’

Their one unshakeable point of agreement was that Charlie had the right to know his father. To know he was alive, to learn his story, and, if he chose, get to know him. ‘But not yet,’ Harry was adamant. ‘He’s too young to sort it out. Wait ’til he’s ready to leave school, we’ll talk to him then.’

‘That’s three years away!’

‘It’ll pass, Jack. Think back to yourself at the boy’s age. Could you have handled such a dilemma? You’ll be asking him to understand that all the important adults in his life – his mother, his stepfather and his dad – have all lied to him. How would that feel? No, give him a little more time.’
‘Three years!’ But Jack knew Harry was right. He was saved from despair by Harry’s regular contact with Charlie, and by the stories Harry brought home about Charlie’s ways.

The business grew, and Jack worked longer and longer hours, knowing that no matter how strong the demand, they could not risk exposure by employing help for Jack. But Harry, now in his late sixties, needed assistance with deliveries, and he suggested to Jack that they offer part-time work to Charlie after school hours a couple of days a week. Jack was nervous about the plan, but Harry managed it smoothly, picking the lad up after school, and dropping him to his home out on the far side of the village. ‘He asks about you occasionally, wonders where Mr Parr is now. I tell him I know where to find you, should the need arise, and he seems happy to leave it at that.’

Jack saw Charlie at a distance once, when the boy was thirteen, and he was amazed at how he had grown. Tall, sturdy, with sun-bleached hair flopping over his forehead, even Jack could see that the likeness was stronger than ever.

It was Harry’s idea to give the war journal to Charlie. ‘I can say you asked to pass it on to him as a memento of his dad, on condition he keep it secret. That way he can get to know his dad a little before he meets you. What do you reckon?’

‘I don’t know. I’d rather give it to him myself…’ Jack was uneasy, though he could not say why.

Harry was ready with a second option. ‘Well, we can let him meet Jack Parr, on one of his occasional visits to Buderim. Then you can give it to him yourself.’

Jack was silent, and Harry continued. ‘I think we should break this to him over time, Jack. It’s going to be a lot for the lad to take in.’

‘I’m not sure, Harry. How would you see this working?’

‘Well, on the regular run, I tell him that you’ve turned up for a visit, and ask if he’d like to see you. Then I bring him back here…’

‘That’s assuming he wants to see me.’

‘… then I bring him back here, and you’re waiting here, like a visitor, and you get talking. Then you give him the journal, and tell him you’ll see him again one day soon. Then I take him home.’
‘I guess it might work.’ But Jack was increasingly nervous as the days passed, and almost frantic on the appointed day. He wore his suit, had a packed bag under the table, and sat uncomfortably waiting, giving the appearance of a visitor.

Soon after 4pm, Harry ushered Charlie onto the verandah. Jack stood abruptly, bumping against the table in his discomfort. _He’s almost as tall as me! Still a child, but in a man’s body._ He reached to shake Charlie’s hand. ‘Good to see you again, Charlie. It’s been a while.’ _Can he hear the tremble in my voice?_

‘I’ll get us a cool drink. Lemonade all right for you, Charlie?’

Charlie stared at Jack while Harry bustled into the house. ‘It’s all right, Charlie. I’m not a ghost.’ Jack attempted a laugh.

But Charlie spoke at almost the same moment, his voice still that of a boy. ‘I’m sorry about making trouble for you, Mr Parr. I never meant to.’

Relieved, Jack spoke, his words tumbling out in a rush. ‘It doesn’t matter. Water under the bridge. Not your fault anyway. But I’m mighty pleased to see you again. How’s school going? What plans for the future? Is that old cat still alive?’

Harry set a tray down, poured lemonades and handed them each a glass. ‘Here’s to old friends and new beginnings.’

‘Yes, yes.’ Jack raised his glass, and Charlie, watching both men, did likewise.

Harry cleared his throat in the silence that followed. ‘Charlie, Mr Parr’s got a book he wants to give you, isn’t that right, Jack?’

Charlie still stared at Jack.

‘Uh, well, you remember I told you I knew your dad in the war. Well, the fact is he kept a bit of a journal, and when he… when he died, he asked me to be sure you got it when you were old enough. But he asked that you keep it secret, because he didn’t want to cause your mother any more hurt. Can you give me your word on that?’

Charlie nodded, his eyes wide, and Jack reached into his bag, pulled out his battered old journal and handed it to Charlie.

Charlie took it, and sat very still, holding it on his lap, inspecting the cover and running his fingers over it. ‘My father wrote in this?’
‘Yes. He wrote it because he wanted you to know him.’

Charlie nodded, but still did not open the book. ‘I remember when he went away.’ His voice was soft, and the men leaned closer to hear. ‘Mum told me we would never see him again. Then Uncle Will came and he said it would be all right, and I had to be patient, but Mum was angry with him because she said he was talking nonsense, and that I should get used to it. But after the fire, I knew then he would never come back.’

Harry glanced at Jack, then leaned in to Charlie. ‘Fire? What fire? What happened there?’

Charlie’s face was pale, and he suddenly looked tired. ‘Mum and Uncle Will were talking about some papers they had to find, something they had to get rid of, but they didn’t know where Dad had left them. They were packing stuff to move out to Grandma’s house that day, and they said the bailiff would get the lot if they didn’t hurry. I think they forgot I was there, but Mum had been angry with me for days, so I was trying to be good. And I remembered that Dad had some papers stuffed in an old shoe in the boot box in the laundry, so I wandered around and looked for them. And I found the bundle, and because everyone was so upset, I decided to show how helpful I was. So I struck a match and burned the papers. But they flared right up, really fast, and then the wicker basket was on fire, and the clothes, and the sheets on the clothes horse. I couldn’t get out, and I was too scared to move, and I was stuck in the corner. The fire was hissing and crackling, and the flames were up to the roof. But then I heard Mum screaming for me. That made me brave, and I ran through the flames out into the yard, and the roof fell in. It was a tremendous crash, sparks everywhere. Mum didn’t see me, and I was too scared to stop running. When I reached the fence and turned around, she was trying to get into the laundry, and Uncle Will was holding her back, and they were both screaming for me.’ Charlie shuddered, and took a gulp of his drink. Nobody moved or spoke. He stared at Jack again, then continued. ‘I thought Mum was going to get burned, so I ran back, and I was yelling, then she was yelling and hugging me, and it all got crazy after that. But most of the house burned down.’

Charlie was visibly shaking, and Jack didn’t trust himself to speak for a moment. He cleared his throat, tried to keep his voice steady. ‘You’re a brave young man, Charlie. Not many youngsters would have done that for their father.’
Still Charlie stared unblinkingly at him. Jack tried again. ‘Your dad mentioned something about a fire, but he didn’t know what had happened. He certainly didn’t know you had been a little hero.’

Charlie dropped his gaze. ‘Mum said I was an idiot. She was angrier than ever after that.’

Silence fell again. Jack cleared his throat again, glancing around. This wasn’t going as well as he had hoped. But what did I expect? He’s here, let that be enough. Charlie fingered the journal again, and opened the front cover. He ran his fingers over the page, but his gaze was on Jack.

‘Can I ask you a question?’

Jack frowned and glanced at Harry, who was frowning too. He attempted a laugh. ‘Certainly. Nothing too hard, or I won’t know the answer.’

‘Are you my father?’

High overhead, a currawong called, and its mate answered, a sweet melodic line, the only sound in the long silence. Charlie kept his gaze steadily on Jack, waiting.

Harry stood slowly. ‘Do you want me to leave, Jack?’

‘Please stay.’ Jack could hear the desperation in his own voice. It’s all come to this. So close, and I’m going to lose him again, I just know it. He sighed. Say it. Tell him. You’ve lost him anyway. ‘Yes, Charlie, I am Jack Conway. I am your father.’ His voice was crackly with emotion, but he held Charlie’s gaze.

Charlie nodded, his face a mask. ‘I knew it. I always thought that you were. I remembered you …’ Again the currawongs called, their warbling song filling the silence. ‘Why didn’t you tell me? Why did you pretend to be a stranger? Mum said you were a liar. But I’m your son. Why lie to me? Why didn’t you want to be our father? ‘Course my sisters don’t even remember you, but I always did.’ The boy’s voice was steady, and Jack realised that Charlie had anticipated this moment, had thought what he would say.

Why didn’t I ever think about how he felt? Always caught up in my own problems. But I didn’t think of his hurt. And I should have, I should have.

Jack closed his eyes, covering them with his hand.
‘These are tough things to say, Charlie.’ Harry reached across to put his hand on Charlie’s shoulder. ‘Tough to hear.’

Jack looked up again, and in that second recognised that while Charlie had his own physical appearance, he had his mother’s steely spirit. He took a deep breath. ‘Best get it off your chest, Charlie. I’ll answer as best I can.’

Charlie sat taller.
He’s afraid too.
‘Did you steal some money?’
‘Yes, I took money that was not rightfully mine.’
‘Why?’

_Because I was weak, too weak to say no when I had the chance. Because I wanted so much to be rich … ‘Because I was weak, Charlie. I was weak.’_

‘Mum says you ran away and left us to face the music. She said that if you had returned the money, if you had given it all back before you ran away, the bailiff would never have seized our house and all our things.’

Damn William. Damn him to hell! ‘I left and enlisted to fight in the war in France. Many men did the same, and many of them died.’

‘Were you scared?’

_I was scared the whole time, as I recall – afraid of capture by police, of discovery, of making a fool of myself, and then the pure terror in battle. ‘Yes, I was scared. Often. I’d be a fool to say I was never afraid.’_

‘Dicky’s father says he was never afraid. He was a hero.’

Harry cleared his throat noisily, but Charlie ignored the interruption.

‘Were you shot? Were you injured?’

_That moment when I thought I’d been killed, when I was blown into the shell hole. And that terrible gallop across the fields with dying men. And watching rats nibble ration packs and being too exhausted to do anything about it. Dragging injured men across freezing mud. Pulling identification from body parts. ‘No, I was one of the lucky ones. I wasn’t injured.’_
‘Dicky’s father has two big scars. He says they hurt still. He hates the Jerries. Did you do anything brave? Did you get any medals?’

All he wants is a father to be proud of. He hates me.

‘No, I’m not brave.’ I was insane with fear, and they were right, I had a death wish. But not brave. ‘I’ve got the standard service medals. Would you like to have them?’ He pulled them from his pocket as Charlie nodded. ‘Like the journal, best you keep them from your mother.’

Charlie turned the medals over in his hand, running his finger over the inscriptions, then slipped them into his pocket. ‘Why didn’t you want to be my father?’

In an instant, Jack saw the boy’s bewildered pain and resentment, and he shook his head helplessly. ‘I would’ve gone to jail, Charlie.’

‘But you’d still have been my father. Even in jail.’ He stood abruptly, clutching the journal. ‘My father died in France. Mum was right about that.’ He swung away and clattered down the steps, and after a moment, Harry hurried after him. Jack listened as the car door slammed and the engine started up. Gradually the sounds faded as the car slid away downhill, and silence fell again.
PART III

CHAPTER 19

Kate was baffled by the turn of events. On the tram ride back to her bedsit, walking down the long avenue of bare trees, shivering over her small bar heater that evening, she recalled the conversation again and again. Why was her father so upset about her plan to research his father? It made no sense at all. All her life she had heard that her grandfather had died in France, right at the end of WWI. Now, thinking it over, she realised she had heard precious little else about him. Charlie told stories about his mother, his uncles, his sisters, but never about his father. *How is it I have never noticed that? Why have I never asked?* She knew the answer. ‘He died in the war’ – it was a complete explanation in itself, the bald statement somehow closed off further questions. In all the ANZAC studies at school, that had been enough. *My grandfather died in France in WWI.* She had repeated it, almost a badge of honour, year after year in Australian history classes. Now, it seemed, there was something else, something more to the story, and she had no idea what that something might be. It was outlandish to think there was any alternative to the simple statement of fact.

Somebody knew the answer. Who? Her father? Apparently, but clearly he was not about to tell her, not until she completed her university studies, he had said. Who else could tell her? Gran? What had she said to Charlie? *I’m waiting for you to leave so I can speak privately to her.* Surely that meant she was willing to reveal something?

*Dare I ask her? What was the deal with Dad? Find another project.* Well, she would do that, but asking Gran about it was not exactly breaking her word, was it? She was back at the hospital the following day, with roses this time, and a jar to put them into.

‘Gran, can I ask you about my grandfather? Why was Dad so upset yesterday when I mentioned him? What’s the mystery? All I know is that he died in France. What else …?’

‘Oh, he died in France, all right, make no mistake about that! That Parr fellow turning up, making trouble, that was the proof, if any was needed. Then Parr disappeared. And
good riddance! Just upsetting Charlie, stirring up old troubles for us all. A wicked man, a wicked thing to do.’

Gran’s eyes closed, and her head lolled to one side. Kate stroked her hand, waiting for the old woman to wake again. The bell rang to signal the end of visiting, but still Gran did not move, and Kate bent to kiss her. ‘Thanks, Gran. I’ll visit again soon.’

Hurrying back to afternoon lectures, Kate was more confused than ever. Proof? What was Gran talking about? Surely the official notification of death was proof enough? And how had Mr Parr upset Charlie? Why was Gran calling him wicked?

Kate approached the librarian at university after lectures ended. ‘Is there any way I can access my grandfather’s army records? All I know is that he died in France in 1918, but I’d like to do some further research.’

With the librarian’s help, Kate wrote her request to the Commonwealth Army Records Office in Canberra. The librarian glanced at Kate’s amended research proposal, ‘I’ll add a note to confirm this is part of your research work. That should get a quick response.’

Kate cringed. *Not my current research, but it will be a future project, so it’s not exactly a lie.* She mailed the letter that evening wondering, as she let the envelope drop into the mailbox, just where her curiosity might be leading. What was that remark Gran had made? *No good comes of all this fancy education.*

Guiltily, she called her parents to arrange to visit Gran with them the following Sunday. But Charlie phoned her on Saturday morning; Gran had died in the night, slipping away in her sleep.

‘A peaceful passing,’ Charlie assured her. ‘A blessed relief from all that pain.’

In the quiet, sad days before the funeral, Kate marvelled at how easily she had simply accepted, without question, the gaps in her family story. She had been too young to know Grandpa Will except as a jovial and indulgent grandfather. But never had she asked about her Gran’s background, and she was ashamed to realise how self-absorbed she had been, how unaware of the rich past her grandmother must have lived.

At the funeral Charlie gave a sweet eulogy, but Kate learned nothing new from it, no hints about her grandfather. Gran was the last of her generation, and looking at the small group of mourners, Kate understood that there was nobody left who may be able
to answer her questions. Nobody except her father, and this was not the time to disturb him further. She would have to be patient.

But she didn’t have to wait long. Just a week after the funeral, a letter arrived from CARO with an official request form for her to complete, along with a list of fees. She returned the forms and payments the following day, and two weeks later, she arrived home to find a fat envelope in her mailbox. She glanced at the return address. Yes! Commonwealth Army Records Office, Canberra. At last. She dropped her bag, and even before she slipped off her coat, she ripped the envelope open, and pulled out the wad of papers. Clipped to the front was a covering letter and receipt from Defence Records. She slid that aside. The next sheet was the first page of the official WWI record of her grandfather, Jack Conway. She peered at it, squinting to read blurred stamps and tiny handwriting. This seemed to be a summary of his service, stamped with official notices of his transfers and movements, and boldly across the top, two stamps of medals – a British War Medal, and a Victory Medal. Cryptic notes, illegible signatures, but a record of his service.

Excited, she turned to the second page. In red ink across the top, a firm hand had penned CONWAY Jack. But this was written over a typed name. DRUMMOND Robert Jack had been carefully crossed out, and CONWAY Jack entered above. Puzzled, she ran her gaze down the page. Two further typed entries ROBERT JACK DRUMMOND had been crossed out, and CONWAY firmly overwritten in red ink. But the signature at the bottom of the page was untouched – Robert Jack Drummond, in a clear hand, the name rising from the line as if the writer feared the words may not fit in the space provided. This was followed by the date 21st March 1916.

None of the enlistment details matched anything she knew of Jack Conway. Robert Drummond was British born, Jack was Australian. Maybe Australian soldiers were listed as British, as they fought under British command? Perhaps. But the age was wrong. Robert’s age was given as 31 years, Jack was 36 years old when he enlisted. Kate had a copy of Jack’s birth certificate, folded into the family bible, so she was sure of that. A swift check confirmed that Jack had been born on 21st February 1880. Robert’s birthdate was given as 10th September 1884.

Robert was described as a farmer, a single man, living in Brisbane, his next of kin a brother living in Wangaratta. Here was a slight connection, Kate thought, Jack came
from Wallsley, a small country town close to Wangaratta. Was there a link? But Jack was a public servant in the shire office, married, with three dependent children when he enlisted. There clearly was some mistake.

Mystified, she turned to the next page. This was headed ‘Oath to Be Taken by Person Being Enlisted’ with a footnote detailing the legal consequences of dishonesty. The oath was completed in the name of Robert J Drummond, and signed in that name with the same odd lift at the end of the signature. The following page was a certificate declaring Robert Drummond to be medically and dentally fit for service.

Now Kate was annoyed. This record cost a considerable chunk of her weekly budget, took two weeks to arrive, and CARO had sent the wrong one, or a severely compromised one. This was ridiculous. Planning her outraged letter of complaint, she leafed through the next few papers. A statement of service, an attestation for the soldier to be sent abroad, several active service forms, all with Robert Drummond’s typed name crossed out and Jack Conway added by hand.

The next page chilled her. It was a typed statutory declaration, a prepared sheet with handwritten details clumsily inked. The writing was thick, possibly overwritten for emphasis or clarity.

STATUTORY DECLARATION

I, Jack CONWAY, do solemnly and sincerely declare that I was enlisted on 21st March 1916 under the name of Robert Jack Drummond which name I now declare to be incorrect. The name of Jack CONWAY I now declare to be my true name, and I make this solemn declaration believing that same to be true, and by virtue of the Provisions of an Act made and passed in the Sixth Year of the Reign of King William the Fourth, Chap. 62 entitled “The Statutory Declarations Act, 1835”.

Horrified, she flipped to the next page. Here was a neatly typed copy of the declaration. This was easier to read, and she scanned it swiftly; Jack had declared his wife, Mary Conway, as his next of kin, and had given her address at her parents’ home. Among the illegible scribbles of the handwritten copy Jack’s signature was clear and firm, no uncertain lift of the script. The paper was dated 17th March 1917. A year after he had enlisted.
This was incomprehensible. She flicked through the remaining pages. There were more documents, all in the name of Jack Conway, noting lodgement of his Will, and detailing his return to Australia and discharge from the army.

*His return to Australia? His discharge from the army? But wasn’t he killed in the war? And who was Robert Jack Drummond?*

She went through the papers a second time, searching for some clue to the mystery. Whatever she had expected to find, it was not this tangled web of deceit. And just how far did the deceit extend? *Does Dad know any of this? Did Gran know?*

Suddenly her head was spinning with questions. Had Jack ever returned to his family? *He can’t have. Dad has always said his father was killed in the war. So Jack never came back to his family. Why not?* What date did Gran remarry? Hang on, did she divorce first? Surely not. Divorce was a very difficult affair in those days, took years to go through. How old was Charlie at the end of the war? And if Jack had returned to Australia, where did he go? Was it possible he was still alive? Or was it a stranger who had returned, a Robert Drummond, who had assumed Jack’s identity after his death? And where was Mr Parr in all of this?

Kate shook her head. None of it made any sense. Why an alias, why the deceit, and why all the lies? If lies they were. *How could Dad have thought his father was dead? Did Gran lie to him?*

The sun was down and a chill was settling when she finally folded the records into a file, stood, and stretched. This was not going to be resolved in a hurry. Deep in thought, she stared into the dusk. Why should she care anyway? *So Dad lied, or was mistaken, about his father – so what? It makes no difference now, does it? But an inner voice shrieked in outrage Yes, it does. I’ve been lied to, and in my turn, I’ve been lying, all my life. My grandfather didn’t die in France! He came home. Not a hero, just a returned soldier.*

She spent the evening making lists of questions, and plans to research more. *So much for our deal, Dad. But you’re not being honest with me, so…* Her final thoughts as she fell asleep were, *Is it lying when you are just repeating what you’ve been told? And Jack Conway, my grandfather, might, just might, be alive out there, somewhere.*
CHAPTER 20


The clerk at the Army Records Office in Brisbane was helpful and sympathetic. His eager assistance made Kate smile, wondering if he would be so good to a customer who was not a young woman, with long fair hair, blue eyes, and a bare left hand.

Yes, he assured her, he could confirm that Jack Conway had disembarked in Woolloomooloo NSW on 10th October 1919. And yes, he had been officially discharged from the army on 3rd November, in Brisbane, at the barracks where he had enlisted. But beyond that, the clerk could not help.

‘He would have been given a travel pass to get home after disembarking. No record here of a Jack Conway claiming one, though. I guess he planned to stay on in Sydney. No, he was officially discharged in Brisbane just three weeks later. Maybe he had private transport? Sorry, miss, there’s no further trace after those two entries.’

Kate opened the file to the Statutory Declaration. ‘What about this business of an alias? Is there anything you can tell me about that?’

He shook his head, scrutinising the papers she gave him. ‘Quite a number of men enlisted under an alias, it wasn’t uncommon. Why? Oh, any number of reasons. Underage enlistment was usually it. Didn’t apply to your grandad though. A German sounding name was another, but that’s not the reason here either. Marital problems? That was a common reason. The other obvious one was to avoid the police, for whatever reason. And the truth is, the army was none too fussy about checking. They needed men, no questions asked.’

Marital problems? Avoiding the police? Overwhelmed and confused, Kate simply pushed it out of her mind for several days, and concentrated on her studies.

When her next step occurred to her, it was so obvious she was embarrassed she had not seen it at once. She had two names to track down, Robert Jack Drummond and Mr Parr. Best of all would be to ask Dad, but not yet. It’s possible he doesn’t know anything of the alias ...
She went back to the Army Records Office, where the helpful clerk was clearly pleased to see her again. Patiently he ran his finger over indexed lists, but every listing of Robert Jack Drummond led back to Jack Conway; there was no separate file for a man called Robert Jack Drummond. Nor was there anything on a Parr in the same unit as Jack. Not even in the same battalion. The only Parr listed was a youngster killed in Gallipoli before Jack left Australia.

‘Try the Electoral Rolls, miss. Or maybe land registers. Some returned men applied for soldier settlement land; that could be worth a try too.’

The clerk brushed aside her thanks. ‘We get quite a few enquiries. Not every story is simple and straightforward, believe you me! Good luck with your search. Let me know how you get on.’

Kate smiled and nodded. No need to discourage him, I may need his help again.

She quickly discovered that a search of every electoral roll and every land register was simply not possible. How do the police ever track anybody down? The police! She had forgotten about the suggestion of an alias as a means of evading the police. This was so unlikely as to be outlandish, but maybe there was something useful to be found? Where to start?

The young man in the local police station was more flirtatious than helpful, but Kate enjoyed the banter. Why not? He’s a nice fellow, and I’ll play the game if he’s prepared to help.

There were Application for Information forms to complete, and fees to pay, but Kate left the office confident that if there was anything to be discovered, her new-found friend would track it down. Even so, it came as a shock when he greeted her the following week with a broad smile and announced ‘I bet you didn’t know that you are the granddaughter of a felon.’

‘What!’

‘Found a warrant for his arrest, back in 1916. Bit before your time. You all right? Didn’t mean to give you a shock. Here, sit down …’

Kate sank into the chair he indicated, feeling foolish. I thought this research was a bit of a lark. But my grandfather was a criminal? Does Dad know that?

She gratefully accepted the glass of water, and sipped it slowly.
‘Sorry about that. Just a bit of a surprise. Not a good one!’ She laughed ruefully.

‘Okay, I’m ready now. Tell me the bad news!’

He passed her a sheet of paper. ‘This is it. But he enlisted, you say? Looks as if he evaded us after all.’

VICTORIA POLICE GAZETTE. MARCH 31, 1916

CONWAY, JACK, is charged, on warrant, with embezzling the sum of £575, moneys of the president, councillors, and ratepayers of the shire of Wallsley, at Wallsley, between 1st January 1914 and 7th March 1916.

Description:– Rate collector, about 36 years of age, 5’7” high, medium build, round shoulders, fair complexion and hair turning grey, fair moustache (may be clean shaven), has a peculiar movement of the mouth and chatters his teeth; may wear a dark suit and straw hat. Identifiable by Constable Selwyn, 4164, of Wangaratta. Last seen at Albury Railway Station on 14th inst. Possibly going to Sydney or Queensland.

O.9766. 18th March 1916

Kate read it through twice, shaking her head in disbelief. This was not what she had expected at all. Does Dad know? What does all this mean? Could it possibly be a mistake, a wrongful accusation?

‘Can I keep this?’

‘Sure. Do you want to lodge a further search? Maybe there’s more …’

Kate shuddered. ‘I hope not! This is enough to deal with. For now anyway.’

‘Well, I’ve got your details on file here. I’ll let you know if anything else turns up.’ He hesitated. ‘Maybe I could give you a call, maybe you’d like to go out sometime?’

All Kate wanted at that moment was to be out in the fresh air, far from the police station. She smiled weakly, folding the paper into her pocket. ‘Thank you for all your help. I’ll be in touch if I need anything.’

She found a quiet park bench, and sat back in the spring sunshine, eyes closed as she ran over the startling information she had gathered. Her grandfather had not died in the war, but had returned to Australia. And there had been a warrant out for his arrest when he enlisted, presumably that explained the alias. But … but … Further questions clamoured. Was he ever arrested? Gran had remarried because Jack Conway had been
killed … but that wasn’t true, he hadn’t been killed. So where was he? Was he in jail? And the same question, over and over – *How much of this does Dad know?*

Suicide. The word crept into her mind so quietly, she almost jumped in surprise. *Of course. He hadn’t been killed in the war, he had killed himself after the war. He had returned to Australia, and then … That must be the answer. And suicide carried such a stigma of shame, no wonder Dad preferred to say Jack died in the war. How horrible and sad, for everyone. Poor Dad. Poor Jack.*

Now all she needed was a death certificate to confirm her suspicion. She lodged her application that afternoon, and waited, relieved to have solved at least that part of the mystery.

To her utter astonishment, the reply read simply ‘*No Death Certificate lodged under the name of Jack Conway.*’

Where to turn next? Who, apart from her father, could connect the dots of this puzzle? Was there anybody? Yes! Her mother. Surely she must know.
Chapter 21

Kate was sipping her first coffee of the morning, reading over the brief notes she had made about Jack Conway, when her mother rang.

‘Kate, sorry to disturb you so early but there’s something I need to ask you.’

‘Snap! I was about to phone you, to ask you something.’ She laughed. ‘You first.’

‘Okay. Well, your father and I have decided to take a short break. He’s been peaky since the funeral, and I thought a few days down at the coast, a spot of fishing, some long walks… A bit of a tonic for him. For us both really.’

‘That’s a great idea, Mum. Do you want me to come over and feed the cat? And water the garden?’

‘Oh Kate, you read my mind. That’s exactly what I’m phoning about. Could you do that? Stay over if you like, have the whole house to rattle around in. Bit of a change from the bedsit. And easier than going back and forth each day. Can you come on Thursday? We’ll get away early, and be back the following Wednesday. Okay? Now, what did you want to ask me?’

‘Nothing important. It can wait ’til you’ve had your break.’

Kate arrived on Thursday morning, looking forward to a few days enjoying all the comforts of her childhood home. And a chance to search for the journal Mr Parr gave Dad. Her mother bustled around, reminding her where to find the cat food, showing her the stock of Kate’s favourite cheeses, and trying to explain the vagaries of the new radiogram. ‘Dad’s out in the garage, checking the oil or whatever it is men do. Here, take my bag out to him, would you? I’m just about ready…’

Charlie looked up in surprise. ‘Hullo, Katie love, I didn’t hear you arrive.’ He wiped his hands on a rag, and hugged her. ‘Seems a bit mad for you to be here and us going away. Maybe you could stay on for a day or two when we get back? We don’t see enough of you.’

‘We’ll see when you get back. Catch a few fish, and you won’t be able to get rid of me!’
She waved them off cheerily, but when she went back inside and closed the front door, she felt like a guilty intruder. Help yourself to everything, her father had urged, make yourself at home again. But she planned to search for the journal, and she knew his generosity didn’t extend that far. But I’m going to find it anyway.

She waited, just in case her parents returned for some forgotten essential, but lunchtime came and went before she felt calm enough to start to look around. What’s my problem? This is my home too, this is where I grew up, of course I’m entitled to glance through the bookshelves. But that was all she did. She skimmed titles, fingered volumes, pulled a few out for a closer look. But she doubted that her father would keep the journal on the bookshelves anyway. Far too public, since it was clear he didn’t want her to see it. Not yet. So where would he keep it? In his bedroom? No, she wasn’t going searching there. A step too far, she decided. Maybe in his study?

She stopped in the doorway of the study and looked around the little room. Dark, cluttered with so many familiar reminders of her own past. The faded globe Charlie had used to show her a world view that her school atlas had concealed, a heavy green glass paperweight she had been allowed to hold while he read stories to her, an old clock set into an ornate carved wooden frame which he said was saved from a house fire when he was a boy. House fire? Why didn’t I ever ask him more about that? Was being allowed to wind up the clock such a distraction? How is it that my own family story has been invisible, yet right there under my nose? Am I so selfish, or is everyone like this?

She jumped guiltily when the phone rang, a sharp jangle of noise. It was her father. ‘Hi, Katie love, just letting you know we are safely settled in here. Got a pencil? I’ll give you the phone number in our room, in case you need us.’

She scribbled the number, and took a deep breath. What have I got to lose? He can only say no. ‘Dad, while I’m here, please, please may I read your father’s journal. Please, Dad.’

There was a short silence. ‘Have you been searching for it, Kate? Is that why you agreed to stay in the house? Because I’ll be straight home if I think that’s true.’

Don’t react. Don’t ... ‘Dad, have more faith in me. If that was my plan, I wouldn’t be asking, would I? Yes, I should have asked before you left, but somehow, I didn’t. Sorry about that. But I’m asking now. Please.’
Another silence. ‘I said I would show you after you graduate. Is it too much to ask you to wait?’

Kate hesitated a heartbeat. ‘Yes, it is, Dad. I promised to go back to my original research paper, and that’s what I am doing, truly. But this man is my grandfather. And I know practically nothing about him. Why the mystery? Why the secrecy? Was he a mass murderer, or what? Why can’t I know about my own grandfather?’

Charles’ voice was soft. ‘Gently, Kate, that’s my father you’re talking about.’

‘And my grandfather. I have a right to know about him, surely!’ Kate winced to hear the anger in her own voice. ‘Sorry, Dad. But I so want to know.’

A long sigh. ‘I had hoped to put this off a while, Katie. But if it means so much to you, then I suppose you must see it. Can you wait until I am there to be with you while you read it?’ His voice was flat, without expression.

‘Was anyone with you when you read it? How old were you?’ She felt as if she was pulling wings off butterflies, but she was so close, so close …

Charlie sounded surprised. ‘I hadn’t thought of it like that. I was alone, certainly. And I was about twelve or so, I guess.’ Again he sighed. ‘You win, Katie. The journal is in the second drawer of the filing cabinet, in the file marked Personal Archive. Inside there’s a large envelope marked Pa’s Journal. Phone me back if you need to …’

Was he coughing? Or crying? Oh God, I’ve gone too far this time.

‘Dad? Dad?’

The line was dead, he had hung up.

Slowly she replaced the receiver, and stood staring into the lengthening shadows. The cat called softly, then appeared, and wound itself sensuously around her ankles. She bent to scoop him up.

‘Dinnertime, is it, Julius? Okay, we can do that.’
CHAPTER 22


It was harder than she had anticipated to actually walk into the study, slide open the steel drawer, flick through the files to *Personal Archive*, lift the fat file onto the desk. Even then, with the prize so close, she hesitated. *I feel like a thief. Or like a sneaky child behaving badly. Sorry, Dad, sorry. But I need to know...*

Still unwilling to cross that final line, she retreated to the kitchen where she poured a glass of wine and sipped it thoughtfully. *Can I come so close and not open that envelope? No, I can’t. I hate that this is causing Dad pain, but I don’t understand. I guess that is part of what is driving me. Wonder how he is feeling, knowing I am reading the journal? But there’s no going back now.*

Back in the study, with the cat back winding itself around her ankles and purring, she turned over the contents of the file. A few slender envelopes, each clearly labelled – Our Wills; Birth and other certificates; Kate’s school reports. This made her smile. *I’ll look at that one later.* And there it was. A chunky envelope labelled *Pa’s journal.* Her heart thumped as she turned it over in her hands, and she could feel the tension in her arms and shoulders. *Am I expecting my grandfather to tap me on the shoulder? To snatch it from me and say, ‘How dare you?’*

‘Come on, Julius, let’s sit out in the living room for this.’ Kate clutched the package tightly against her chest. The cat padded beside her as she retrieved her wine glass, topping it up generously. On an impulse, she grabbed her briefcase, pulled out the envelope containing Jack’s army record and the arrest warrant. *Maybe I can find references to these?*

Settled in the easy chair, comfortable against soft cushions, and warmed by the wine, Kate took a deep breath and focussed her attention on the label. *Pa’s Journal.* *Something odd about that? What is it? Pa? Mr Parr? What? Are they one and the same? No, that’s not possible. Is it? God!*

She slid the journal from its envelope and sat with it on her lap, not moving, simply running her fingers over the cover. *My grandfather wrote in this notebook. Jack Conway. This is as close as I am ever going to get to him.*
The thought was overwhelming. She shook her head, and turned her attention to the journal. The book was roughly the size of a postcard, and about a centimetre thick. The covers were faded black cardboard, scuffed at the corners, bound down the spine with blue buckram, and secured shut with a band of greyed elastic tied in a knot. As she eased the band off, she could feel the brittle rubber of the elastic snapping. *How long since this band was last removed? Many years, by the feel of this.*

With a tiny shiver of excitement, she slowly opened the front cover. Inside was written, in a fine hand, *Jack Conway.* The first page was dated *March 17th 1916,* and the fine, close writing flowed down the page. Kate flicked through the book. Every page was covered in the same tight, tiny handwriting, and in places, extra notes had been added vertically in the margin. The impression was dense, daunting. The last several pages were blank, and she flicked through to find the final entry. *October 1918.* Nothing more was written after that, but inside the back cover, straining the spine hinge, was a bundle of letters and newspaper clippings, tied together with a length of sewing thread. *Where to start?*

The cat curled onto her lap, and she leaned back against the cushions, turned to the first page and started reading.

The first entry was written as Jack travelled by train from Albury to Sydney, and described how William – *was this Grandpa Will?* – advised and helped him to escape. *Why? Escape what? Is this about the arrest warrant the young policeman found?* She put the journal aside, and unfolded her copy of the arrest warrant. The dates matched – the warrant was dated 18th March 1916. *So had William known about the warrant, and warned Jack?*

Sighing, she put the paper aside and turned back to the journal. The next entries, dated over the following days, detailed Jack’s experience of the tensions of the train journey to Sydney then to Brisbane, and his enlistment and early training. Kate checked the entries against the dates on the army records. Yes, it all matched. But the lists of dates and facts gave no clue about the man writing the account. Puzzled, she read on. The next entry was dated 17th May 1916.

‘Dear Charlie, I shall write this like a long letter to you, in the hope that one day, somehow, you can read it and think well of your father.’
The tone of the writing changed after this, and it was clear that Jack was addressing his son, sometimes simply telling his story, at other points confessional, or even sentimental. Kate read, engrossed, gradually coming to understand Jack’s life, as he wrote of his early stupidity and dishonesty, and how swiftly and easily it escalated to embezzlement.

‘Like running down a slippery hill, Charlie. Exhilarating at first, then terrifying. And almost impossible to stop once you get up speed.’

Jack described his fears over the months and weeks leading up to William’s warning and his subsequent flight.

‘You ran after the car as William drove me away, do you remember that? I’ll never forget the look on your face. That was the last time I saw you.’

The alias, his enlistment and training in the AIF, his grief at leaving Australia, convinced he would never return: Kate admired his willingness to tell such a damning story about himself. She wondered about his health, physical and mental, as she read of his periods in quarantine and the lengthy illness in camp in Britain. Did he have some sort of a breakdown? And why did he revert to his own name? Again she turned to the army record, and read the Statutory Declaration. How hard would it have been to own up to that lie? What were the consequences? Was he punished? Or did the army just want men, as the policeman had said?

Jack’s story engrossed Kate. Her wine, the cat, even the comfortable chair all faded from her awareness as she read the entries her grandfather had written half a century earlier. Some entries perplexed her, but she simply read on, too caught up to stop, or to try to untangle threads. His descriptions of the fighting in France appalled her; she had never heard such barbarity, none of her school studies or ANZAC Day services had ever hinted at such horrors. How did anyone survive? How could he have endured that? Why haven’t I heard these stories? Didn’t any of them tell anyone once they came home?

Then the entries ceased. The final one was dated 23rd October 1918, and described a scene from hell, a nightmarish ride transporting injured men. After that, nothing. It would be easy to believe he had died at that point. Maybe that is what Dad believes. But the army papers have him returning to Australia ... Maybe the idea of suicide after he returned is true, it makes the most sense so far.
Perplexed, Kate untied the bundle of letters and newspaper clippings, and settled back to read them. The letters were all from ‘Your loving sister, Amy’. Jack’s sister. Dad’s never mentioned that Jack had a sister. That would mean she’s my Great-Aunt Amy. How is it I’ve never heard of her? From within one letter, a smaller folded sheet of paper slid. Kate unfolded it slowly, glancing first at the signature; from Mary. And the line above that signature read ‘Never come back’.

By the time she had read and made sense of the letters and newspaper clippings, Kate was in tears. The last letter from Amy was dated January 1919, and contained the devastating news that Mary (Gran, my Gran) had declared Jack dead, and seemed to be planning a new life with William. Enough to make any man contemplate suicide. What lay behind this sorry situation, Kate wondered. Had Mary really thought Jack dead? Or was she in love with William? Was she having an affair? Was she – heaven forbid! – having an affair even before Jack left? Jack’s journal had revealed betrayal by William, but how far back did that betrayal extend? Kate stood and stretched, startling the cat as it slid from her lap. Past midnight! I’ve been reading for hours! She wandered into the kitchen and made a cup of hot milk, her mind swirling with confusion. Dad has seen all this. He knows this much at least. And that last letter was dated long after the end of the fighting, surely that tells him that his father wasn’t killed in the war? So it must be suicide. But there is no death certificate.

She sipped the hot drink, trying to quiet her mind. I’ll read it all again tomorrow. Maybe I’ve missed some crucial snippet...

She slept badly, dreaming she was searching for her grandfather in the trenches, engulfed by noise and danger and misery. As she ran through mud and ruins, she could hear him calling in pain… It was the cat, yowling for breakfast. Nine o’clock! Goodness, time to get moving. No wonder the cat’s upset.

After breakfast she phoned her parents. Her mother answered the phone and at once Kate could hear the tension in her mother’s voice.

‘Dad’s gone for a walk, love. He’s pretty upset, you know. You’ve stirred up a lot of old sadness for him.’

Kate’s throat tightened with tears. ‘I know, Mum. I read the journal last night. It’s awful. But there’s so much I don’t understand still. Do you know the whole story?’
There was silence for a moment. ‘Kate, you agreed to wait until graduation, then you broke that agreement, and pressured him to let you read it now. He’s given in, but please, for pity’s sake, don’t push him any further. And I’m not going to discuss it with you, because it’s not my story. None of this is about you, Kate, it’s all about him, can’t you see that? Please, just leave it until after graduation. He agreed to talk to you then, and he won’t break his word, you know that.’

Kate couldn’t disguise her tears any longer. ‘I’m sorry, Mum, I hate to hurt him. But…’

‘I know, love, I know. Every family has secrets, some bigger than others. But just be patient, that’s all I’m asking, just wait a while. Nothing will change, it will still be the same sad story after graduation. Concentrate on your studies for now. Okay?’

‘Okay, I won’t ask anymore, I won’t talk about it unless he raises the subject.’

_But I will pursue it, I will keep searching. I just won’t tell you about it._

After she rang off, she sat staring at the envelope, wondering again about the label. _Pa’s Journal._ Mr Parr. Who was this man?

She reached for her notebook and pen, and started to list what she knew of Mr Parr.

1. He claimed to have fought alongside Jack Conway in France ( _but there was no army record of that name in Jack’s unit_ ).
2. He claimed to have been there when Jack died ( _but Jack hadn’t died_ ).
3. He had given the journal, and Jack’s medals, to Charlie ( _When? How had he known where to find him, if Mary had moved away_ ?).

If Jack Conway was a mystery, it seemed Mr Parr was even more so. Nothing made any sense. She tried again.

1. Jack returned alive to Australia, and disembarked in Sydney.
2. He demobilised in Brisbane, so he made it that far, somehow. But she found no further trace.
3. Had Jack suicided at that point? If so, was Mr Parr there? Otherwise, how had he come by the journal and medals, and how had he got them to Charlie?
4. Gran said ‘That Parr fellow turned up, making trouble, upsetting Charlie.’ Was that when he had given the journal to Charlie? Turned up where? If it was after the war, then he must have ‘turned up’ in Buderim, where Gran lived then.
There was something wrong, something illogical, with all of this. Clearly, Mr Parr was the key to unlocking the mystery. But how was she to find him? Even if he was still alive. Say he was the same age as her grandfather, then he would be 87 years old now. Probably dead years ago. But maybe he left a wife? Family? Somebody who could throw some light on this. She needed a detective. Or my friendly policeman! Maybe he can help.

On Monday, she called into the Army Records office again, this time with a fresh idea. Was there a travel pass for a Mr Parr in the same group that disembarked with Jack Conway? To her astonishment there was.

‘Here’s your man. Jack Parr, issued with a travel pass to Brisbane. Is that the one you’re looking for?’

Kate could have hugged him. Her vague suspicion was beginning to crystallise; Jack Conway had become Jack Parr when he arrived back in Australia. Why? To avoid arrest?

She put this question to the flirtatious policeman.

‘Perfectly possible, I’d say. The arrest warrant could have been cancelled if the complaint was withdrawn. But if he broke the law, then it was probably a police matter. Mind you, many a blind eye was turned for men who fought overseas. I think they were deemed to have paid the price. But he wouldn’t have known that unless he asked. And if he asked, there was the risk of arrest. No way he could win that one. So it’d make sense to take on a new identity. But now you want to track him down, is that right? I can’t help much, if he stayed on the right side of the law. But I can suggest a few leads you could follow.’

Kate left an hour later with a list of suggestions, and a date for dinner and a movie the following week. At the top of the list was a search of the Electoral Rolls, but this time she knew what area to search. Brisbane or Buderim. That wicked Parr fellow turned up... She would start with Buderim.

No Jack Parr was listed at Buderim for any year, nor was there any Jack Conway. As a last desperate attempt, she tried Robert Jack Drummond. Nothing. William Dempsey was listed though, Grandpa Will, at the address Kate had visited frequently through her childhood.
The next suggestion on her list was the Births, Death and Marriages register again. Another blank – no death certificate lodged for a Jack Parr in the years from 1920 to the present. ‘I guess he’s still out there somewhere.’ The desk clerk sounded far more optimistic than Kate felt. She had to concede Jack Parr did not want to be found, he had been careful to leave no footprints. So what right had she to search him out? She sighed. She couldn’t answer that in simple terms. Was it just stubborn insistence on getting her own way? She had hurt her father, and she was betraying his trust even now, by continuing to search. So why was she doing it? Because I must! Because I want to know my grandfather. And my own heritage. None of it made sense – not the mystery of Jack Conway or Jack Parr, nor her own driving compulsion to unravel it all. In a way, she almost wished she had never started any of this. All because I wanted to honour my grandfather who died in France. That innocent ambition seemed a long time ago. Since then she had discovered that her father lied to her, that his father lied to him, and now she in turn was lying to her father. Secrets! If there were no secrets, we wouldn’t need these horrible lies. Why can’t we just be open and honest? But it was far too late for open honesty now, she knew that. Probably far too late for any sort of truth at all, if truth was what she sought. If this Jack Parr is, by some remote miracle, my grandfather, he’s probably gaga by now, a dribbling old man with no memory of anything.

One last try. The final name on her list was the Land Titles Office. She waited in line, trying to guess which clerk would call her. To her relief, it was an older woman, friendly and motherly.

‘I believe Parr was in Buderim sometime after 1920, but then he left, so probably not much point searching there. Is there any way to do a broad survey search, maybe of the Brisbane region?’

‘I can run a Queensland wide survey, but that would take months, and would be very expensive. Can you narrow it down to a couple of likely areas? For example, I can search the Buderim region. Not a big area; that will be a quick one. Then where?’ Kate shook her head in misery. ‘I’ve no idea. I don’t even know what work he did.’

‘Tell you what. Leave it with me. I’ll check the Buderim area. We could get a lead from there. Worth a try? Good, fill in this form …’
Kate paid the fee, and arranged to be back a few days later. As she travelled back to her parents’ home on the tram, she was almost relieved to have made no progress. *One lie less to have to tell.*

There was a letter addressed to her waiting in the letterbox. *Dad’s writing, surely?* She ripped it open as she walked inside.

Dear Katie

This business with your grandfather’s journal is very difficult for me, as you will have realised. However I have come to the conclusion that it is time for you to have it, and keep it. I haven’t read it for many years, and I have no wish to do so now. It holds nothing but pain for me. So please take it home with you, on one condition – don’t ask me any more questions. If you have read it, you know as much as I do. Let that be an end of it. In the same file you will find another small packet with my father’s two war medals. Take them too.

    With all the love in my heart

    Dad xx

Kate opened the front door, dropping the other mail on the hall table. In the kitchen, she poured a generous glass of red wine, scooped up the complaining cat, dropped into the lounge chair, and wept.
CHAPTER 23

Her parents returned two days later. Kate winced when she saw how exhausted her father looked, but nothing was said about the journal, and they didn’t press her to stay on longer. Kate was back in her own bedsit by evening, with the journal and the medals packed in the bottom of her bag.

She still had a few weeks before the university year began again, and she was determined to make progress in her search before the pressure of her studies took over. Back in the Lands Office, she was greeted warmly.

‘Good news, perhaps. A Jack Parr briefly owned a block of land in Buderim. Here, I’ll show you the details.’ The clerk swung the paper around to face Kate, and pointed out details as she explained. ‘See, Parr took over the title here, in 1924. The title transfer was not a sale though, it seems he inherited it from the previous owner. And he sold it almost immediately. But here’s the interesting bit – it was a market garden with a house. Maybe your man was a market gardener?’ She smiled at Kate. ‘I found this as soon as I started the search, so I reckoned you had a little credit due. So I looked for his name again in market garden areas around Brisbane. And found him. He bought another market garden block with a house attached, at Rocklea, south of Brisbane, and kept that until about eight years ago. Then a developer bought up the area, and Parr purchased a unit in a nearby old people’s development. One of those hostel and nursing homes, you know the sort of thing? In Yeronga. And he still holds that, it seems.’ She pushed the paper toward Kate. ‘This copy is for you.’

Kate’s mind was racing. Almost certainly not the Jack Parr I’m looking for. Not a chance. It’s probably a common enough name. Her hand trembled as she reached for the paper, and the woman gently placed her fingers on Kate’s hand.

‘I’ve got a feeling this is a sad story, isn’t it?’

‘No! Yes … no, it probably isn’t even the right man.’

‘Well, I hope it turns out well. Let me know if I can help further.’

Kate fled, close to tears, suddenly overwhelmed by the thought that it was just possible that her grandfather, Charlie’s father, had been living in the same city all these years.

Don’t be silly, it won’t be true. Just a coincidence.
Now what? She sipped a chocolate milkshake in a nearby café, yearning for her father’s gentle counsel. He would know what she should do next. But asking him was out of the question, he had closed that door firmly. No, if I’m going to do this, then I do it alone. But what am I hoping for? What if I find a man called Jack Parr? Then what?

She had no answer for that. What was that phrase in the journal? Like running downhill. Exhilarating, then terrifying. And impossible to stop. Yes, that was exactly how she felt right now. It was impossible to stop.

She caught the train out to Yeronga the following morning. The village was further away from the station than she had thought, and she was hot and tired when she found it, at the end of a road that led into bushland. Behind the large sign, ‘Welcome to Yeronga Sunset Home’, lay a cluster of small homes, surrounding two long low buildings. The impression was of a holiday village, with bright garden beds and shady trees. The only sign of life was a cat, sprawled in the shade of the letterboxes. She moved closer. Maybe there are names?

‘At last! We thought you’d never get here.’

Kate jumped, her heart thudding. ‘Sorry! I didn’t see you there.’

An old woman was sitting on the ground against a tall palm, holding a book. ‘Only place I could find a breeze. You are the pianist, aren’t you? They’re expecting you in the hall. Want me to show you the way?’

‘No, I’m …’

But the woman was already on her feet, stepping lightly across the grass. ‘You’re very late, you know. They’re going to be cross.’ She had Kate’s arm, and was insistently pulling her toward the buildings, when Kate stopped.

‘No, you’ve got it wrong. I’m not anyone. I was just curious. I was …’

‘But you do play the piano, don’t you? Come on then.’

Kate glanced around. This is like a scene from Alice in Wonderland. To her relief, a woman emerged from the main door, and hurried toward them.
Thank you, Vera, I’ll look after our visitor now. I think you’ve left your book over there…’ She pointed back to the palm tree, and Vera drifted away. ‘Sorry about that, she means no harm. Now, my name’s Joan, I’m the manager here. How can I help?’

Kate giggled in foolish relief. ‘That was surreal. She thought I was a pianist.’

‘Be good if you were, we’ve a concert planned for the residents, and the pianist has cancelled. Sorry, that’s not your problem.’

I’ll never get a better chance. ‘Uh, I can play the piano. I could help out, if you like …’

‘That would be fantastic. I hate disappointing the residents.’

Kate was already regretting her impulsive offer. ‘I’m pretty bad, don’t practise as much as I should.’

‘It’s not a real concert, just a sing along. If you could play a few popular numbers, they’ll be as happy as larks.’ She led Kate toward the larger of the two buildings. ‘And you’ll never get a more forgiving audience, I promise you. They’re a bunch of sweeties. And there’s morning tea afterwards. Okay?’

Kate was warming up her rusty keyboard skills, practising a few scales, when the residents started to arrive. A few sat quietly waiting, but several women clustered around her, humming, then singing a few bars. Joan reappeared, settled everyone and introduced, ‘Our special guest artist, Kate’. The warmth of the applause moved Kate, and she relaxed into simply enjoying herself. She played a few popular numbers, and everyone sang. Then she asked for requests, and struggled through, while they sang again. She was surprised when Joan signalled her to finish up. Nearly an hour! That went by so fast! During the morning tea, she felt like a star, as she was offered tea and cake and more cake.

Joan laughed as they finally left the hall. ‘You’ve won a few hearts there, Kate. They’d love to see you back again, if you ever felt like it. Hmmm?’

‘Um, possibly …’ She hesitated. ‘Actually, what I came about …

‘Oh, my goodness!’ Joan slapped her hand against her forehead. ‘I am so sorry, Kate. I completely forgot. I was thinking you were an angel, heaven-sent! And now you’ve spent your morning … Right, let’s start again. How can I help you?’
Kate smiled, already liking this warm maternal woman. ‘No, it’s fine, I enjoyed myself. But I’m trying to track down an elderly man, a Jack Parr. I think we may be related.’

Joan’s smile disappeared. ‘I see. Come into the office, would you? We can talk in there.’ She turned away, and led the way to her office. Kate followed, suddenly apprehensive. What did I say?

‘Take a seat, Kate. You didn’t tell me your full name?’

‘Conway. Kate Conway.’

‘I see. And you are hoping to find a Jack Parr?’

Kate frowned. ‘Look, I am not here to cause any trouble for anyone. It’s just that …’

She hesitated, confused by the abrupt change in Joan’s demeanour. ‘I have been working on my family tree, and I think there is a link. I think …’ Don’t say too much.

They both let the silence stretch uncomfortably. Kate kept her gaze on Joan, refusing to be intimidated.

Joan sighed, her face serious. ‘Look, the truth is, we get some, how shall I put it? Some gold-diggers, people who have ignored family for years, and who get a sudden interest toward the end of a life.’

‘Oh God, is he dying? No, no.’

‘I didn’t even say such a man is here, did I? It’s just that I am fond of … of all our residents, and I get a bit mother-hennish about them.’

Rattled now, Kate groped for a handkerchief. ‘Look, maybe you could tell him – if there is such a man – that a Kate Conway wants to visit him. Let him decide.’ Another silence. ‘If he exists, that is.’

Joan’s face softened. ‘Wait here, I won’t be long. But I want your word that you’ll respect his decision. If he exists.’

Now Kate managed a smile. She nodded. ‘Fair enough.’ Would he see her? Would she come this close and have to leave, not knowing? The wait stretched on, and she was sure the ticking of the wall clock grew louder as the minutes passed. Then Joan’s head bobbed past the window and a moment later she entered, smiling broadly.
‘Well, perhaps you are an angel, as I first thought. Yes, we do have a Jack Parr resident here, and I can tell you now, in all these years I have never seen him smile as he did when I said your name. And yes, he’d like you to visit.’

‘Now?’ Suddenly Kate felt afraid. It had all been so theoretical until now. He’s real. He’s waiting for me. I wish Dad were with me. But even as she stood, and followed Joan, she knew this was between herself and Jack, and nothing to do with her father. Joan stopped at the end of the garden bed and pointed to an open door a little further along. ‘That’s Jack’s place. Be gentle with him, he’s rather special.’

Kate turned, panic fluttering in her voice. ‘Aren’t you coming?’

Joan shook her head, smiling. ‘You don’t need me. Off you go.’ She gave Kate a gentle push, and turned back.

Kate walked slowly toward the door. As she drew close, a gaunt man with fluffy white hair and bright blue eyes stepped out and smiled at her. He looks so like Dad!

‘Hello, Kate, I’ve been waiting for you a long time.’

Without knowing how it happened, she was suddenly wrapped in his hug, and she knew by his ragged breath that he was sobbing too.
CHAPTER 24


It was Jack who stepped back first. He held Kate at arm’s length, and smiled though tears still ran down his cheeks.

‘You are so like Charlie. So like him …’ He shook his head. ‘Come inside, I don’t know about you but I need to sit down.’

Kate followed him inside, glancing quickly around the bright little room. Sunlight streamed in through an open door leading onto a paved courtyard, and beyond that lay a narrow strip of grass and a long garden bed, crowded with greenery.

Despite his words, Jack went straight to the tiny kitchen. ‘First, a drink. Too early for a beer? Or would you rather a cup of tea?’ He peered into the fridge. ‘Can’t even offer a soft drink, I’m afraid.’

Kate smiled. ‘A cup of tea for me. I need to keep my wits about me. Shall I fix it? You wanted to sit down.’

‘Thanks. It’s all there.’ He waved toward the cluttered bench, and turned to pour himself a glass of beer. He sank into an easy chair as Kate filled the kettle, grateful for a few moments to compose herself, aware that Jack was watching her closely.

‘Can I ask you …’

‘There’s so much …’

They both stopped, shaking their heads and smiling.

‘You first.’

‘No, you …’

‘Hang on, wait ’til this kettle boils …’

She carried her tea into the living room, and glanced around.

‘Here, close to me.’ Jack patted the arm of the next chair, and Kate sat down. ‘Now, you first. We’ve both got lots of questions, I think.’

Jack nodded, his face solemn. ‘All me. It’s a long story … How much of it do you know?’

Kate scurried in her handbag. ‘Well, this much, anyway.’ She pulled out the journal and medals, and a bundle of papers. ‘These are records from the army, and from the Land Office.’

‘May I?’ Jack held out his hand, and Kate passed it to him. He fingered the journal, turning it over in his hands. ‘I wondered if I’d ever see this again. I gave it to your father, let’s see, about forty years ago.’ He let his breath out in a soft whistle. ‘And here it is again.’ They sat in silence as Jack stroked the cover of the journal.

‘Hang on.’ Kate put her cup down. ‘You said you’d been waiting for me. Were you at the sing-along?’

‘What sing-along?’

‘Never mind. That’s another long story! Why did you say you were waiting for me? What did you mean?’

Jack smiled. ‘Maybe hoped is a better word. I always hoped you’d come. You, or Charlie.’ He held her gaze, the next question unspoken.

‘Dad is … Dad is unwilling to even discuss his father. He … he doesn’t know I am here.’ She felt her throat tightening again. ‘I’m not proud of that.’ She glanced up at Jack’s puzzled face. ‘When I first wanted to find out about you, he asked me not to pursue it. And I promised. But I’ve broken that promise so many times…’

Jack reached for her hand. ‘Maybe that’s the logical place to start. What started you looking for me? Is that something you are willing to tell me about?’

‘Okay, well … it was when Gran was dying … oh, God, I’m sorry. Maybe you didn’t know…’

Jack nodded. ‘Yes, I saw it in the paper. I went to her funeral.’ He shook his head at Kate’s astonished expression. ‘You’d never have seen me. I’ve learned to be invisible, and I’ve had lots of practice. I was on the steps to the organ loft. I just wanted to be there…’

‘You never remarried?’
‘I never divorced, Kate. But we were speaking about your decision to search for your grandfather. For me. What happened next?’

*He was still in love with Gran?* She sighed, and thought for a moment, ordering her thoughts. Then she started. She spoke of her planned research project, of her father’s dismayed reaction, and Gran’s fury. She told him about her bewilderment when she received records from the army, her shock at the arrest warrant, and how she had bullied her father into giving her the journal. ‘Once I read that, I could start to make some sense of the fragments of information I had. That was when I began to think you might be alive still.’ She spoke of the sympathetic help from the woman at the Lands Office, and finally, she told how she had been swept into giving a piano performance when she arrived at the village.

A knock at the door startled them both. A woman pushed the door open with her shoulder, glanced in, then placed a wide tray on the dining table. ‘Joan suggested I deliver two lunches today, Jack. She thought your visitor might still be here.’ The woman turned to Kate. ‘Lovely music this morning, dear, we could hear it in the kitchen. Sounded like everyone was having a fine time!’ She turned away. ‘I’ll collect the plates later, Jack.’

‘Look at the time! I should go.’

‘You can’t go now, Joan’s sent lunch for you.’ He smiled broadly. ‘I’ve never had a lunch guest before. Scandalous! Questions will be asked.’ He was amused, but Kate suddenly realised how deeply she had invaded his privacy.

‘I hope I haven’t made a problem for you…’

Jack seized her hand as he stood up. ‘My granddaughter has come to visit me. How could that ever be a problem?’

Suddenly they were both blinking back tears again. Jack blew his nose noisily and cleared his throat. ‘Now look, come out to the garden with me. I usually pick a few tomatoes and whatever’s ready to go with my meal.’

She followed him outside, marvelling at the rich array of vegetables in the small yard. ‘Wow, you’ve certainly got a green thumb. This is amazing.’

Jack stooped over each row, selecting tomatoes, a few beans, a tiny cucumber and a handful of parsley. He handed these to Kate, and scrabbled in a thick vine along the
fence, pulling out three large passionfruit. ‘Think I’ve still got a bit of ice cream in the freezer. Come on, our feast awaits.’

Smiling at his obvious excitement, Kate followed him inside. She rinsed the vegetables, and placed them onto a small dish while Jack set the table and laid out their plates. He reached deep into a cupboard and found two crystal glasses which he filled at the tap. ‘Better than wine, any day. Cheaper too.’

At the table, he lifted his glass in salute. ‘Here’s to my granddaughter.’

Kate laughed, and clinked her glass softly against his. ‘Here’s to my grandfather. Which reminds me, what am I to call you?’

‘What feels comfortable to you? You already got a full complement of grandfathers, or used to have.’

‘Mum’s father died before I was born. And Grandpa Will died years ago.’

They were both quiet for a moment, the spectre of William hanging between them. Then Jack laughed. ‘Well, I’ve taken a few names in my time, but throughout them all, I’ve always been Jack. Would you feel comfortable just calling me Jack.’

Kate smiled, relieved, and lifted her glass again. ‘Here’s to my grandfather Jack.’

They spoke little during their meal. Kate glanced almost shyly at Jack from time to time, astounded that she should be here, sharing a meal with her grandfather.

After they had finished, Jack stacked the dishes on the bench and put the kettle on for a cup of tea.

‘Must you rush off? We’ve so much more to talk about. And the truth is, I don’t want you to go. Maybe I’m afraid this is all a dream.’

Kate glanced at her watch. ‘I’d love to stay a bit. I really would like to talk more. And I promise, if you want to see me again, I’ll be back.’

‘Oh my! I can already hear the scandalmongers –Jack’s young woman stayed all day! And he reckons she’s his granddaughter. Wonder why we’ve never heard of a granddaughter before, I ask you!’

They both laughed. But as they sipped their tea, Jack grew serious again. ‘Tell me about your father, tell me about Charlie.’
Kate could hear the pain in his voice and her heart ached for him. ‘I truly wish he had come with me. But … Anyway, he’s well. He’s not long back from a bit of a holiday down the coast. How long since you saw him?’

‘To speak to? I last spoke to him when he was fourteen. Harry brought him to see me in Buderim, that’s when he decided that he didn’t want me as his father. But I’ve kept tabs on him over the years, and actually seen him from time to time. Not that he’s seen me, mind you.’ He put his cup down. ‘It sounds ridiculous, even to me. I’ll try to explain.’ Over the next hours, Jack talked and talked. Twice he lit his pipe, and each time it went out as he forgot about it. Kate listened carefully, weaving the complex pattern of threads together to create a tapestry of story. Each new thread introduced brought a flash of insight, of colour and understanding to the whole. By the time the late afternoon sun slanted into the room, Jack seemed almost as close and as familiar as her father.

Finally, Jack stood and stretched. ‘Come on, I need to go for a walk. I get cramps in my legs if I don’t walk every afternoon. You up for a stroll?’ He reached for her hand, and she allowed him to steady her as she stood up. On an impulse, she hugged him.

‘I am so happy to be here with you. And so grateful that you would see me. After what I’ve heard today, I could understand if you had refused.’

‘And not meet my boy’s daughter? Couldn’t risk that, could I? And I knew what sort of a young woman you are; I watched you comforting your parents at Mary’s funeral. You know, if you hadn’t found me, there’s a chance I would have contacted you.’

‘You’re a lot like my father, in some ways. All that is good and kind and gentle in my father, I can see in you.’

Jack gazed at her, serious. ‘Thank you, Kate. Now come on, before the light beats us.’

As they strolled, Kate thought a few curtains twitched, but they met nobody, and completed a full circuit of the village without meeting another soul. Jack pointed out the features and amenities. ‘It’s a good life here, an easy life. And there’s help at hand for those who need it.’

Back in Jack’s kitchen, he swung the fridge open and peered in. ‘I could make us a sandwich, if that would be enough for your dinner. Would you like to stay?’

Kate smiled warmly. ‘I’d better be going, I’m not sure of the trains in the evening.’
‘I’ve got a timetable, somewhere…’ He rifled through papers folded into a china toast rack. ‘Here…’

Kate ran her finger down the timetable and glanced at the clock. ‘I’ll make this one easily.’ She tipped her head to one side. ‘May I visit you again?’

For reply, he simply hugged her.

He was still at his door when she reached the top of the drive and turned for a last wave. That’s my grandfather! I’ve found him. She barely noticed the trip home, as she replayed the day in her mind. But later, as she stepped into a hot shower, she was struck by a new thought. What will I tell Dad? More lies? Oh God, what now?
CHAPTER 25


Kate sent flowers the following day, a ridiculous extravagance and a strain on her budget but, she felt, the only way to express her joy. She examined the flowers standing in buckets around the fragrant little shop.

‘These ones, perhaps? And…’ She turned to examine another bunch.

‘We don’t do them up here, love. We phone the order through to the nearest florist, they do the order up and deliver. That’s how it works.’ She smiled at Kate’s obvious disappointment. ‘You pick out the flowers you want, and I’ll tell them what you like, okay? What message do you want on the card?’

‘Ummmm. To Jack, with heartfelt thanks for a wonderful day, and with lots of love. And sign it, Kate.’

‘He’s a lucky man, I’d say.’

Kate glanced up, startled, then amused at the misunderstanding. ‘I’m the lucky one, I think.’ But the thought stayed with her as she walked home, puzzling her.

Lucky? In what sense was she lucky to have found a grandfather who had actively chosen to live a life apart from his own flesh and blood? It was hardly luck that she had tracked him down. It struck her how easy it had been to find him. Hiding in plain sight! The records were there for anyone to access. So why hadn’t Charlie tried to find him?

There could be no doubt that Jack was, indeed, Charlie’s father, the resemblance was striking. Had Charlie, as a thirteen-year old, not recognised that? Had he believed that Grandpa Will was his real father? And what did that mean anyway? Surely a ‘real father’ was one who was there, every day, keeping food on the table, guiding, listening, doing all the things a father does for his kids. Jack was not there, so … So what?

What was it Gran said? That it was her life and she had understood none of it? *I’m beginning to know how you felt, Gran. No wonder you seemed such a crabby, bitter old woman. You had every reason to be angry with Jack, and with what life dished up for you. And you must have felt helpless – no personal choices for you, just having to make the best of each new disaster.*
She offered a silent apology for judging Gran so harshly. Her earlier euphoria drained away as she struggled to understand the complexity of choices that had led to this point where she was lying, or at least not telling the full truth, to her own father. *I’m doing it to protect him, and because he insists he doesn’t want to know. Aren’t I?* Had Jack deceived Charlie for the same reasons? To protect him? And because Charlie didn’t want to know? And Jack’s father, way back when Jack was a boy – hadn’t he lied too, by stealing money, by being a secret gambler? His lies were to protect his family, she supposed. Was that lying? Or shielding someone from an awkward truth? Why did it have to be so complicated? She shook her head, hearing the whining child’s complaint in that thought. *Nobody asked me to do this. Dad even tried to stop me. But I was so bloody righteous, so sure I was entitled to find my heroic grandfather, and to fix everything up. Now I’m not so sure. I didn’t break it, and it isn’t mine to fix.*

Back home, she lifted Jack’s journal from her bag, and sat to read it again. *He’s a lucky man.* It didn’t seem like the story of a lucky man, more the story of a man who had made some terrible choices.

For a moment, she considered bundling the journal, the medals, and all her notes into the rubbish. *Forget it all. Follow Dad’s example, simply live without that knowledge.* But it was too late, too late. Sure, she had found her grandfather. But at what cost? Had she lost her own father in the process? In setting out to bridge one rift, had she created another? And this one was her fault. And hers to fix? What Pandora’s box had she opened?

Utterly defeated, Kate slumped into the chair. *Okay, I created this mess, now how to get out of it. First question – do I want to keep Jack in my life? Yes, I do, and I doubt I have much choice in that now anyway. Two – does that mean cutting Dad out of my life? Certainly not! So…*

She scrambled to her feet, and reached for her ancient piggy bank. *Heavy! Good.* She emptied the coins into her palm, tipped the lot into her coin purse and headed back to the shops.

‘Another bouquet, please. This one to Charlie Conway. The message is *To the best father in the world, with all my love, Kate.*’ She counted out the weighty coins, ignoring the amusement of the florist.

*So much for the budget. This will even up a different ledger.*
Her mother arrived the following afternoon, and wrapped Kate in a hug. ‘The flowers are lovely, Kate, and your father is thrilled. And I’m concerned. What’s going on?’

‘What? Nothing.’ She could hear the defensive tone in her own voice, and caught her mother’s wry smile. ‘Well, maybe something.’ It will be a relief to talk to Mum. She’ll know what I should do...

She started slowly, but soon the words tumbled out as she revealed her search, her meeting with Jack, and her subsequent confusion. Even as she talked, she watched her mother’s unsurprised reaction. She already knew! Did she? How? ‘And I felt rotten, so I sent flowers to Dad too.’

She stopped speaking, and forced herself to allow the silence to stretch. Finally her mother spoke.

‘So you tracked him down, you met him, and now you want to … what?’

‘I don’t know, Mum. I really don’t. I thought I was solving a mystery, but I think I have created a mess. And someone, everyone, is going to be hurt, because of me.’ Kate reached for a fresh tissue.

‘And you’ve told me all this because you want me to fix it now, to make everything better?’

Kate flinched at the anger in her mother’s voice. ‘Mum, I…’

‘Don’t interrupt, let me finish. You saw yourself as some sort of ministering angel, bringing two lost souls together, making things better, so everybody lives happily ever after, right? Well, it’s time to tell you a few home truths, my girl. Your father has always known where Jack was, and Jack has always known where Charlie was. They’ve seen each other over the years – no, Jack didn’t tell you that, did he! – and the simple truth is, Charlie accepts that Jack is his father, but he has no affection, no respect and no time for him. William, the man who cared for him, and for his mother, that is the man Charlie learned to love and respect.’ She held up her hand. ‘Wait, let me finish. For years, Charlie blamed himself for his father’s absence, he thought he must have done something to cause his father to leave. But, whatever went on before the war, William was a good father, and Charlie grew to love him. Then Jack came back. Charlie recognised him immediately, he knew this man was his real father, but
Jack made no move to acknowledge Charlie, which confirmed Charlie’s belief that Jack had chosen to not be his father. And that hurt him deeply. Oh, after some years Jack put across a self-serving story, and gave Charlie the journal and medals. And Charlie read every word, many times. But when you were born, and when you were the age he was when Jack left him, and when you reached the age when Jack came back, your father grieved all over again, and wondered how his father could have left him like that. Because he was sure he would never, under any circumstances, have left you.’ She reached across the table and covered Kate’s hand with her own. ‘We’ve always lived with the knowledge of Jack. He’s been a huge and painful part of our lives. That’s why your father asked you to leave it alone.’ She sighed. ‘But you are your father’s daughter, just as strong-willed and capable. I think he knew, once you had the scent of a grandfather, you wouldn’t give up the chase.’

‘I need to tell Dad that I’m sorry…”

‘Yes, you do. Jack once told him that he was sorry. Another time Charlie apologised to Jack, for making him go away in the first place. Everyone is so very sorry. But somehow it’s not enough, is it.’

The two women sat in silence for some time, neither moving, both lost in thought. Finally, Kate stirred. ‘Secrets. It’s secrets that do the damage, I think.’

‘And that’s the other thing I need to say. I won’t keep secrets from your father. Never have, not about to start now.’

Kate nodded slowly, and took a deep breath. ‘Then I’d best tell him myself. Shall I go back home with you?’

Her mother smiled. ‘Good call, Kate. Why don’t we phone him, ask him to pick up a couple of pizzas and come here on his way home from work? You okay with that?’

Kate nodded. ‘You phone him,’ she whispered. ‘I can’t…” She moved into the kitchen and turned the taps on full, drowning out the murmur of her mother speaking on the phone.

Charlie held her hand as he faced her across the table. His face was serious, and Kate thought he looked suddenly older. ‘That’s quite a story, Katie girl. You’ve been busy. In an odd way, I feel a bit ashamed, because I could have saved you all that bother by
telling you where to find him. Because he’s never been far way. Turns up every now and then. You couldn’t have known it, but he was there at your Gran’s funeral.’

Kate nodded. ‘He told me that. He thought nobody saw him, he said he tried to be invisible.’

Charlie snorted. ‘Well, perhaps he believes that, but nobody else does. He was at the funeral. And he was in the back of the church when your mum and I married. And he was watching from across the street when we took you to your first day at school. And many many more times. Invisible? Hardly!’

‘What? How did he know…?’

‘No good asking me. Ask him. Look, I can understand your yearning for a grandfather, Katie. I romanticised my memory of my father in the years he was away in the AIF, and I know I hurt my mother and Will by the things I said and did. Mum told me he had turned into a stranger, and later she told me he had died in France. But I knew him as soon as I saw him at Buderim School. And it was like that moment in the fairy tale when the young prince’s real parents, the King and Queen, finally turn up to rescue him from the evil trolls. Except that it wasn’t like that at all. Because he totally ignored me. I was just a kid, and I went out of my way to talk to him, to be around him. But he never acknowledged me. He was there on the fringe of my life for a few years before he admitted he was my father. And only because I confronted him, not because he wanted to be my father.’ Charlie put his arm around Kate’s mother. ‘I was so lucky to meet your mum when I did, because I was a confused young man, I can tell you. Confused and angry.’

Kate shook her head slowly, fighting back tears. ‘Dad, I am so, so sorry. I’ve been so insensitive. And so stupid. It seems Jack has been lying to me too…’

Charlie raised his hand to stop her. ‘No, Kate, he’s not exactly lying, any more than I am or you are. I suppose it is a matter of individual perspective; his memory, his perception is somewhat different to my own. That’s what it is to be human. He had experiences I can’t know or imagine, and the same is true for me. And for you.’ He laughed softly. ‘Just be thankful you’re not a lawyer trying to establish the truth. Whatever that means.’

Kate gave up trying to stifle her sobs. She covered her face with her hands, leaned on her elbows and cried, her stuttered gasps filling the silence. Charlie moved around the
table and held her close. ‘Katie, your relationship with Jack is your own affair, your choice. My choice is otherwise. My story with Jack is completely separate, it’s not about you, you can’t possibly understand any of it. It was another world, another time. So change nothing, honour him as your grandfather. But leave me out of it, okay?’ He stroked her hair. ‘When you mum phoned me to come here tonight, my first thought was that you were having boyfriend trouble, and I needed to rescue my little girl.’ He laughed and gave her a little shake. ‘Well, you don’t need rescuing, but I’ll always be there to pick up the pieces. Now, where’s that pizza?’
As summer cooled into autumn, Kate fell into a pattern of weekly visits to Jack. They exchanged stories, went for meandering walks, and Jack taught her the rhythms of the garden. Kate relaxed into simply loving him, enjoying their time together, never questioning or challenging his stories. She was developing, she hoped, a healthy scepticism, an ability to interpret his yarns within a wider context. And his joy was obvious each time she arrived, bringing home-baked biscuits, or flowers, and once, hilariously, a tiny pottery garden gnome. ‘Thought you might like company out there.’ Jack inked her name on the base and set it on the kitchen windowsill, facing out into the garden. ‘It can keep an eye on me when you’re not here.’ His smile faded. ‘I probably should tell you, your name is on everything here. In a sense.’ He smiled again at her puzzled expression. ‘I made a new Will. I’ve left everything to you. It’s a relief, really. Better than leaving it to the charity. Charlie wanted nothing from me, I knew that, so…’

Kate’s eyes filled with tears. ‘I should thank you. But I wish you hadn’t told me.’

Jack turned away to fill the kettle at the sink. ‘Now, don’t make a fuss. It’s not much, and maybe it is bad manners to tell you.’

The awkward moment slid into silence. Jack patted the little gnome and turned back to Kate. ‘I’ll make the tea if you’ll whip up a batch of your famous scones for our lunch.’

Relieved, Kate nodded, and moved into the kitchen.

Neither mentioned the subject again, but Kate was aware of a shift, a slight discomfort, as if some indefinable response was expected. She pushed it out of her mind. If there was correct protocol for such moments, she had no idea what it might be. Best to carry on as if it had never been said.

In late autumn, she knitted him a scarf, and then a pullover. Jack’s delight was childlike, and he embarrassed Kate by boasting about his clever granddaughter to everyone they met on their walks.
At the end of each visit, she took home a bag of fresh vegetables from his garden, and as winter set in, she started arriving with tall jars of homemade soups. ‘Put it in the fridge, it’ll do for lunch for a few days.’

Friday, September 1st, the first day of spring, was sunny but still cool. Buckets of golden jonquils glowed outside the florist, and Kate selected a bunch, adding a smaller clutch of fragrant freesias as an afterthought. ‘Yes, all in one wrapper, thanks.’ Jack will love these.

Kate knocked then pushed the door open. Silence. The patio door was open. He must be in the garden picking a few veges… She stepped out into the tiny courtyard. ‘Jack. Are you here?’ Silence. Maybe he’s popped in next door … She was bending to pick a tiny crimson tomato when she saw him, sprawled across a line of seedlings, almost hidden by the lush foliage of the lemon tree.


‘Hang on, Grandad, please, please…’ She raced inside and grabbed the phone.

Jack crouched on the firestep, his heart hammering, waiting for the order to advance. Men crouched or slumped in an unbroken line on each side, smoking, muttering prayers or curses. The roar of the guns shuddered through the trenches, and through his chest, and it was with relief he heard the shout to Go, Go, Go. They rose up like a wave. Jack felt as if he was watching them from above, a great blossoming of men bursting from the ground. The pounding roar filled his head, and he flung himself forward, even as the treacherous mud sucked and pulled at his feet. Shapes rushed forward alongside him, and he sensed a huge exhilaration and energy. I’ve never felt so alive! Away to his right, a machine gun stuttered and spat. He swung toward it, lifting his rifle higher. Beyond the machine gun nest, slightly to the left, a vague shape appeared, coming closer, clarifying into focus. It was Kate! Kate, dressed in a yellow sundress, running toward him, waving, calling Jack, Jack, where are you? What was she doing here? Couldn’t she see the danger? Her voice came closer, closer, and he swerved to run to her, to guide her to safety. This was no place for a kid like her! The machine gun spattered again and Jack watched as, in slow motion, a series of bright
red spots appeared across his tunic. Puzzled, feeling nothing but the urgency of protecting Kate, he hurled himself forward. At that moment, a shell screamed up from the enemy lines, shrieking, filling his head with its hellish frenzy. The pounding of the massive guns shook him through and through, and he sank to his knees, watching helplessly, already grieving for her. Go back, Katie, it’s not safe to come to me. The scream of the shell spun closer, bursting into a glorious flower of flame, as the roar engulfed him. In the sudden darkness, he felt Kate clutch his hand, and heard her voice. Grandad. She called me Grandad. She’s never said that before. He smiled.

The funeral was held in the tiny church outside the retirement village. Kate and her mother sat in the front row, Joan and a few others from the village scattered behind them. Organ music played softly as they faced the coffin, which was topped with a delicate sheaf of burgundy roses and carnations. Kate bowed her head and held her mother’s hand as the music slowed. She glanced up at a quiet movement at her side. Charlie slid into the pew as the minister stepped forward. Charlie leaned close to her ear and whispered, ‘Tried lurking at the back, not my style.’ He smiled gently, and took her free hand. ‘We’ll do this together. As a family, okay?’

~~~end~~~