



SALLY'S INHERITANCE

Steve Gray

SALLY LEARNS TO THINK, TO EXPLORE AND TO UNRAVEL
A SERIES OF MYSTERIES IN HER BOOKSHOP.

INTRIGUING, FASCINATING AND LOADED WITH MYSTERY!

Sally's Inheritance

Steve Gray © 2026

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Chapter One

The air inside Sally's Bookstore was not merely still; it was deeply sedimented, a fragrant blend of aged paper, desiccated cedar, and the subtle, sharp tang of binding glue. Sunlight, filtered through the small, square-paned windows facing the cobbled side alley, fracturing light into delicate beams, illuminating specks of dust dancing above the towering, precarious stacks of broadly forgotten novels. The shop was narrow, a seemingly endless corridor of fiction and philosophy that burrowed deep into the block, its worn wooden floorboards groaning a symphony of protest beneath every cautious step.

Sally, the proprietress, stood behind a counter fashioned from a salvaged Victorian chest of drawers. In her late forties, with a face usually softened by the gentle contemplation of a rare first edition, today her expression was tight, shadowed by a quiet dread. Her gaze kept drifting to a slim, official envelope tucked beneath a copy of *The Annotated Alice*.

Sally is a fascinating person, just ask any of her friends, or even some of her family. She always was some sort of bookworm, then one day fell in love with an antiquarian

bookstore that she and a friend, Holly, wandered past one bright Friday afternoon on the edge of central Melbourne, the moment she opened the door and wandered in, she was transfixed, the sights, sounds and smells took her to a far off land, steeped in knowledge, wisdom and eclectic meanderings.

Holly knew that it was a watershed moment, the chance for a person like Sally to get lost amongst tomes, words, lexicology and all sorts of other 'cologies' for that matter. Sally walked the length of the store very slowly and oh so deliberately. She turned to face Holly who noted that Sally's face had somehow become 'more alive'. Her pupils dilated and a wry smile appeared, she slowly smiled wider and said to Holly, 'Oh Hol, this place is FANTASTIC!' The guy behind the counter looked up and over his glasses. He smiled also, he knew when he had a 'new recruit.' He then stepped out from behind the counter and introduced himself.

'Hello I'm John, I work here and I happened to see you have a smile forming from ear to ear. I take it you're a book devotee of some kind? Perhaps a person who favours the older, the eclectic and or the historical?'

Sally made eye contact and said, 'Maybe all of the above! And perhaps add in whimsical.' John gave her and Holly a more formal tour of the establishment. He left her in awe, pointing out some of the older texts and books they had, he managed to mention their value.

Sally mentioned an old Great-Aunt, Aunt Agnes who had an amazing collection of books, she's an avid traveller and has been able to collect many weird and wonderful items from all over. She mentioned how she enjoyed seeing some of her collection on a couple of visits to her house. Agnes had a wildly wonderful rich friend, Frida Meyers, she sometimes travelled with Agnes and the two got on famously, both having a deeply intriguing interest in various aspects of history. Sally pointed out that Agnes and Frida would love this place. John

smiled and said 'Frida Meyers has been here a number of times and I am very aware of your Great Aunt Agnes' collection of items.'

Sally was amazed and then after a while of looking further she realised that it would not be uncommon for Frida and Agnes to frequent such an establishment. John then mentioned that Frida was in the process of setting up her own space to house various parts of their collection. Sally was awestruck.

Aunt Agnes' friend Frida went on to set up a space to house many of the things she and Agnes had collected. Well actually they stored some of the items there, most of it ended up in storage or at Agnes' place. Frida then decided that although that was a 'nice idea, she actually wanted to set up something with more of her own items. Agnes was often overseas and Frida was, 'Left to her own devices' so to speak. Frida hatched a plan.

The plan was simple and she had to think LONG TERM, Store things, but in an interesting way, have things but have them to enjoy and, here's an idea, let others enjoy them too. Frida went searching and explored all manner of options. Then one day everything just seemed to fall into place. A simply lovely building revealed itself, it was on an old corner tucked away, It was basically empty, with dusty windows and a grand front door that hadn't been opened in ages.

A few enquiries with the local council and a phone number and name was revealed. It was in the hands of a family trust and the owners were simply keeping it as an asset that 'lost money' as their other assets were earning too much and this one along with a few others were never let out, but they cost money to keep.

Frida crafted a letter, did some research on the property's value and sent it off, an offer for the property. Frida spent the next few weeks dropping by the property, looking through the window and thinking carefully about how the space could be used. Well it took a while but the family decided with the help of their accountant that they would sell it. They liked her offer and also liked that there was no real estate agent involved in the transaction.

The paperwork was settled and the keys handed over. Now Frida had a 'fresh, but dusty', new project to get stuck into. All the while she thought about the future of the space and how it could be such a wonderful place to hand over as an asset to some aspiring youngster with the inclination, energy and raw 'spunk' to take over and explore what Frida and Agnes had to offer.

Through Agnes she heard of her niece Sally and her interest in books, so she then spent some time figuring out how she might get her involved. In this weird and whacky shop Frida had various trades people renovate, clean up, sort out and create a space where people would walk in and be instantly intrigued. There were some rather quirky features and some intricate details that were going to offer some level of intrigue at some stage.

Frida bought some old books from old estates and clearing sales, then some first editions and so on that held pride of place behind glass. Frida spent many hours putting those things in, figuring out how to sort and categorise things. She then figured she had the thing ready to run and hired a person to run the shop. She found a forty something book nerd, Graham Reed, she trained him in how to keep the place ticking over. He liked to sit behind the counter and run things, well that actually meant sit and read. It was a cozy spot he could see out the window and enjoy the morning sun. He had a wealth of literary and other knowledge but was, how would you say... a little lazy.

Frida's plan had come to fruition, it was all set up. She worked most days and then weaned herself off being there. Her aim was to employ Sally and get her involved. She could then know that the items Agnes and she had collected could go to someone who would really get involved in the whole place. Frida had spent a fair bit of her inheritance on the business, renovations, getting things to 'sell' and so forth. The sign out the front read 'Frida's Bookstore and old things.'

Frida and Agnes then hatched a plan, Agnes got Sally's mum involved and laid out what they wanted to achieve. They had heard Sally was crazy about books and her

experiences with other bookstores and so forth, that was all good. Sally's mum said she felt the time was coming near where Frida might be able to get Sally involved.

Well folks time has moved on, Sally continues her studies and ends up visiting the Old Antiquarian bookstore on many occasions and manages to get some work experience there through school, a fortnight she will never forget.

Sally's education took her through a surreal world of history, literature and so much more. It led her to some part time work at a standard bookstore and then finally some work in another historic bookstore that sold old prints as well.

In between there was reading, her hugely important companion. Her mother would keep her up to date on what 'Aunt' Agnes was up to, and the various places she had been and some of the things she had collected. Sally followed on an old printed map, putting markers where her Aunt had been and was starting to get some knowledge of each place from reading at the local library.

After much ado about nothing along the way, her knowledge led to an amazing discovery a couple of bookstores which were looking at closing, John from the Antiquarian bookstore dropped her a text message. 'Opportunities rock. I think a savvy person could take the lead and create something wonderful from the sale of these two bookshops.'

By this stage, somehow a bunch of things seemed to magically fall into place, and Sally ended up working at Frida's bookstore. It was part time at first, but she loved it. She sent a message to John, 'I'm now working in a book shop and I think I might take a look at what's on offer, who knows. Many thanks.'

Over time Sally took the reins of the bookstore, old Graham, well he was getting old, things changed and he now worked part time, it turned out his health wasn't the best and so things altered. Frida was happy with that and helped Sally with the transition to full time work.

Sally was now in charge and found the whole thing a fascinating delight. She and Frida spent many hours chatting and exploring books and items that people would bring in to be evaluated. Sally's knowledge grew and grew.

Some books and small items she bought, some she was given and some she was never quite sure how she ended up with them. She had to be strict about the sorts of books she wanted to 'represent', as they only had so much space.

Holly would drop by occasionally and marvel at the bookstore, and comment on how Sally seemed to be the ideal person to be there. And how lucky she was to have the opportunity. They both recalled the initial visit to the Antiquarian bookshop in what seemed like many years ago.

Frida suggested that the place needed a name change and wanted to make Sally a 'partner'. It had now been a number of years, so it seemed quite natural. Frida had carefully worked with Sally, and made various suggestions about the types of things they had in the store and what things they could and could not sell, despite some strong interest from some collectors. She also worked to make the store sound more and more like it was Sally's.

Frida let her run it most of the time and finally took off her financial assistance, that big inheritance from many years ago that meant she could set the whole place up and keep it running. Many said it was, 'More like a museum than a bookstore.'

Graham was long gone, retired off by Frida, on Agnes's insistence. Frida was now 'getting on in years' and any physical work was beyond her now.

One day she came in with a bunch of paperwork, some keys and other bits and said. 'It's time for me to hand over the reins. You have proven yourself to be a wonderful book person and learn so much every day. I've decided I can't sell all this to just anyone, so... I am GIFTING all this to you. Mind you there are some things you won't want to be gifted, like the bills etc, but you should be good for a few months before more money is required.'

The girls cracked a bottle of champagne as Frida explained the details, well not all of them, but most. Frida was going to spend some more time travelling with Agnes and seeing some sights she hadn't seen for a long while.

Now it was Sally's Bookstore, nestled on a picturesque corner in an old quarter of Melbourne, it was a sanctuary, a beautiful anachronism in a city increasingly devoted to glass and speed. Yet, even sanctuaries required rent, and rent required cash. Frida wasn't silly, she owned the building but rented it to Sally, she had to have some income to carry on with.

The clock on the wall, a brass pendulum affair that permanently claimed it was ten minutes past three, regardless of the actual time, ticked in defiance of the real world pressing in. The real world was represented by the letter from the bank: a final notice. Sally needed a miracle by the end of the week, or the quirky bronze doorknob, mounted so eccentrically in the middle of her inset front door, would turn for the last time under her custodianship. The prospect felt like a physical blow, a betrayal of the thousands of silent stories contained within her walls.

It turned out that Frida had bought a bunch of items with a loan from the bank and that had now transferred to Sally as the new Director of the company. Sally was learning and learning fast!

She heard the familiar rasp of the heavy glass door next door being pushed open, a shop called Eclectica. A minute later, a generous mug of perfectly brewed hot chocolate appeared on her counter.

'Morning, Sally,' Tom, the barista from next door, grinned, leaning across the counter. He was a friendly anchor in her sometimes precarious world, a young man who somehow managed to make a coffee shop named 'Eclectica' feel both modern and comforting. 'You look like you've just finished reading *The Trial* again. Is everything alright?'

'It's simply the daily weight of overdue inventory fees, Tom,' she managed, her attempt at lightness failing.

Tom's smile faded. He knew the score, he could see the letter from the bank on her counter. 'Ah, a bank letter?'

Sally nodded, tracing the script of the shop sign, 'Sally's Bookstore,' visible just above her head, etched in deep gold and green scrollwork. 'They've run out of patience. I think this time... this time is it, and Frida has only been gone a few months.'

The bookstore, she noted sadly, was one of the most beautiful things she had ever known. From the dark, small square windows that gave the shop a colonial, almost dollhouse appearance from the front, to the tall, windows along the side alley that offered a serene, lush vista of the immaculate private garden across the cobbles, it was perfect. To lose it would be to lose a piece of her soul.

Just then, a figure appeared in the doorway. It was not a browser, or a local poet seeking inspiration, but an aberration. Tom took the cue, he bid Sally a good day with a broad hopeful smile and exited the store.

The man was Mr. Silas Blackwood, and he entered Sally's quiet world like a draught of sterile air. His suit was a midnight charcoal, so impeccably tailored it seemed chemically bonded to his frame. His shoes were polished to a mirror sheen, his silver hair was slicked back, and a faint, expensive scent, something aggressive and metallic, clashed violently with the organic, comforting aroma of the shop.

The small bell above the door, which usually chimed a gentle welcome, seemed to recoil from him, emitting a nervous, thin *tinkle*.

'Good day,' Mr Blackwood announced, his voice a low, precise instrument, honed to cut through pleasantries. 'I am searching for Sally Finch. Proprietress, I believe.'

Sally straightened, the Hot Chocolate suddenly lukewarm in her hand. 'I am Sally Finch. How may I assist, Mr...?'

'Blackwood. Silas Blackwood, from solicitors Blackwood and Humphrey. I am the sole executor of the estate of Ms. Agnes Periwinkle.' He approached the counter, managing to look vaguely repulsed by the proximity of the sun-faded, brittle pages lining the shelves and passed over his business card.

Sally frowned. Agnes Periwinkle. Her great-aunt, a woman she had met perhaps five or six in her life. Agnes was known in family lore primarily for two things: her unrivalled eccentricity and her chronic reclusiveness. She was an amateur world traveller who sent postcards written generally in ancient Greek and collected small intricate pieces of petrified wood.

'I'm afraid I haven't seen Aunt Agnes in ages,' Sally said. 'I was unaware... She was with her friend Frida?'

'Ms. Periwinkle passed away three weeks ago, peacefully, in Patagonia, of causes unknown except to her travel companions, who have since vanished,' Blackwood stated, completely devoid of emotion. 'However, I am pleased to inform you that you are her primary beneficiary.'

Sally blinked with disbelief. The financial dread, only moments ago a crushing weight from the bank letter, suddenly felt like a balloon, inflating rapidly with disbelief. 'Beneficiary? Of what in particular?'

Blackwood produced a slender folder and opened it, revealing a single line of immaculate script. 'Of her liquid assets. To the value of roughly eight hundred thousand Australian dollars, and her library and possibly some collectible items.'

Chapter Two

Eight hundred thousand. It was enough, enough to pay the debts, enough to secure the building perhaps, enough to give the old store a glorious, second life. Sally felt a strange, dizzying rush of relief so profound it was almost painful.

'That is... I am speechless,' she whispered.

Blackwood's lips barely moved. 'You should be aware, however, that Ms. Periwinkle attached a rather peculiar addition to the disbursement of these funds, or rather, the true legacy of the inheritance.' He paused, allowing his perpetually arched eyebrow to convey a measure of distaste. 'The initial sum is immediately transferable, pending your signature and some bank account details, but the full inheritance, Ms. Finch, carries a condition. Agnes's words were, and I quote: 'My library shall be delivered to Sally, and she must discover its true value within one lunar cycle, or its legacy shall be lost.'

'Discover the true value?' Sally repeated. 'What does that mean? Is there a second, hidden treasure of some kind?'

'Ms. Periwinkle was rarely literal,' Blackwood said stiffly. 'I have known her for quite some time, handling her various legal affairs. The contents of the library are currently stored in a warehouse. They are numerous, Ms. Finch, some twenty crates of varying sizes. The first installment of Ms. Periwinkle's immediate personal effects are already due for delivery this afternoon.' He pushed a document across the counter. 'Sign here for acceptance of the terms.'

Sally signed without hesitation. She would search through a million crates for eight hundred thousand dollars! The 'legacy' was a problem for a more solvent Sally.

Blackwood nodded curtly, gathering his papers. 'I shall check in on the due date. Do not disappoint me, Ms. Finch. Or, more accurately, do not disappoint the late Ms. Periwinkle.'

With a final, faint *click* of his heels on the floor and a wry smile, he was gone, leaving behind only the lingering, cold smell of cologne.

By 4 p.m., the narrow space of Sally's Bookstore had achieved a new level of clutter and mystique. Twenty crates had not yet arrived, but the 'first installment' was daunting enough. It consisted of two large, battered steamer trunks and three crates marked simply 'Agnes's Sundries.'

The first delivery was one thing, but the rest would need some serious thought.. 'Ah John, he can help me with this.' John was a dear friend, a handyman and odd jobs person with a range of nefarious skills and the ability to 'make things happen.' She was on the phone in a shot, Luckily John would be available in the afternoon, with a van and space to store things.

John had been a family friend for a long time, he lived a few doors down from Sally's mothers house and was always a positive willing helper if he could fit the work in he would.

Sally, heart pounding with a mixture of excitement and obligation, began to unpack the contents of the first delivery, which arrived in a small light green truck, driven by a small in stature Indian man, 'Sign here please.' He was gone in a flash.

Her original stock, shelved meticulously, now seemed demure compared to Agnes's collection. This was not a library; it was more like some form of curated chaos. There were books bound in everything from stingray leather to tarnished copper plates. One volume, a treatise on Antarctic flora, had been carved entirely out of ice, now merely a soggy but dried out, once melted puddle at the bottom of a trunk, now merely a stain.

She focused on the first crate. Underneath a skull of uncertain provenance and a collection of brass navigational instruments, she found a small, leather-bound journal. It was old, the colour of dried blood, and secured with a tiny, complex brass clasp. Beside it lay an

antique key, fashioned from dark metal, intricately looped at the head, looking more like an elaborate piece of forgotten jewelry than a functional tool.

Sally settled onto a velvet armchair near the side windows, the late afternoon sun streaming past, casting long, dramatic shadows across the pages of Agnes's journal. The writing inside was elegant but frantic, filled with precise descriptions of various geographical locations interspersed with arcane symbols and personal philosophical musings.

Entry 17, Puno, Peru: The shadow is less than the stone. The first step is not taken in the direction of the light, but the direction of the reflection. Followed by a detailed sketch of a colonial window frame, strangely familiar.

Entry 41, Fez, Morocco: The tongue of the Sphinx is silent, but the language of the map is eternal. Look for the fold where the sea meets the land and the bird is silenced.

Chapter Three

As Sally pondered the inscrutable entries, a new presence announced itself. Then there was a sudden change in the air, something felt odd, Sally was briefly perplexed, it was as if the front door bell had almost rung itself, was that even possible, perhaps a strong gust of wind had flexed the door to cause it to ring ever so slightly. She looked up and there was no wind outside. Then the door opened with an intriguing sense of ease, as if it was a door on a stage opening to allow an important person to enter the scene.

In came, Professor Alistair Finch, who did not so much enter the shop, as drift into it. He was an embodiment of academic disarray, wearing a tweed jacket that looked two sizes too large and carrying a briefcase so overstuffed it was held together with heavy-duty rubber bands. His grey hair stood up in permanent peaks of distraction.

He introduced himself, and inquired, 'And you are?' 'I'm Sally, Sally Finch, proprietor of this fine establishment, good sir.'

He smiled and perused the room then stopped abruptly, his eyes wide and fixed not on Sally, but on a pile of newly unpacked books near the till.

'By the eternal ink of Pliny the Elder!' he exclaimed, his voice a reedy whisper of awe. He rushed forward, nearly tripping over a stack of paperback thrillers, and gently lifted a large, square volume bound in rich, deep blue suede.

'My dear woman,' the Professor declared, spinning the book delicately in his hands. 'Where did you acquire this? This is the *Lexicon Mythographica Aeterna*, a comprehensive, hand-annotated catalogue of forgotten Iberian gods. It was believed to have been lost at sea in 1932. The binding, the paper—it's impeccably preserved! A treasure, a genuine treasure! May I?' as he gestured to the notion of picking up the book.

Sally, nodded in agreement, then slightly flustered, pointed vaguely at the crates. 'It was part of an inheritance. My great-aunt's things.'

The Professor was already flipping gently through the pages, his thin fingers tracing the delicate script. 'Fascinating, fascinating. Look here, Ms. Finch. See the marginalia? It's not Latin, nor is it Greek. It's a precursor, a type of proto-Iberian cipher, often used by the more... esoteric cartographers of the late 19th century to denote non-geographical significance, places of metaphysical importance, perhaps.' Some of the words the professor used were new to Sally, her mind thinking that Aunt Agnes would have probably been right at home here. She leaned in more intently as he gestured to some details.

He pointed to a small, stylized symbol near the index: a double spiral within a small, square frame.

The symbol struck Sally with sudden, electrifying familiarity. It was the same symbol that appeared frequently, almost hidden, in the margins of Agnes's journal.

'Professor,' Sally said, trying to keep the urgency out of her voice. 'That symbol. Do you know where I might find a key to deciphering that cipher?'

Alistair Finch sighed dramatically, gently placing the blue suede book down as if handling spun sugar. 'Cipher keys, my dear? They are often concealed. In plain sight. Within the apparatus itself. For instance,' he waved a vague hand towards the dusty book stacks, 'If a coded message is left within the structure of a book, the key is often in the book's skeleton, a hidden compartment, a specific typeface, or perhaps even the number of pages used in a fore-edge painting.'

He then spotted a small, unremarked book, a slim volume of Icelandic sagas, and his attention instantly evaporated. 'Ah! Now, if you'll excuse me, I must determine why this saga of Ragnarök is bound in what appears to be human hair.' He shuffled off, leaving Sally staring at the double spiral.

The professor was intrigued by all he saw and after some fossicking he bid Sally a good day and said, 'I will return!'

Sally went back to what she was focussing on.

A hidden compartment, in the book's skeleton.

Sally returned to Agnes's first trunk, the one with the brass hardware. She tested the small antique key in the lock, no. She tested it on the clasp of the journal, no. It felt heavy, substantial, as if designed for something larger.

Sally rumaged and explored the items with interest, she was very pleased that few people had been in the shop today and therefore she had the time to devote to exploring and flipping through various items.

She suddenly remembered a small, heavily lacquered box tucked deep inside the trunk, wrapped in an old silk scarf. It was dark wood, lacquered to a black mirror finish, and looked like a miniature coffin. She unwrapped it and tried the key. It slid in smoothly.

The lid *clicked* open. Inside, nestled on a bed of dark green velvet, was not money, but a piece of paper: a brittle, honey-coloured fragment of parchment rolled into a tight scroll, and a single, smooth, grey pebble.

She unrolled the parchment. It was a partial map, drawn in fine India ink, showing a section of cobbled streets, a familiar-looking alleyway, and a block of colonial buildings. But one corner of the map was highlighted in shimmering, faded gold paint. The location was unmistakably *her* corner, Sally's Bookstore.

The text in the margin was a fresh, more personal riddle, written in Agnes's elegant hand:

Where the Light is caught, but never held, And the Stone sings softly to the Moss, The Keeper of the Gate, thrice repelled, Reveals the Treasure, born of Loss.

The 'Stone sings softly to the Moss' made her think of the luscious green garden across the side alley, visible from her side windows, but who or what was the 'Keeper of the Gate?'

She looked up, her gaze drifting around the shop, seeking something *reflected* or *singing*. Her eyes landed on the front door. The eccentric bronze doorknob, mounted perfectly in the center, glinted faintly in the afternoon light. It was cast in the shape of a detailed, snarling lion's head, holding a heavy ring in its mouth, the 'Keeper of the Gate.'

Intrigued, Sally walked to the door and examined the doorknob. She pressed it, turned it, rattled it. It was fixed, solid. She checked the three square colonial windows beside the door, they were dark, sealed. Nothing seemed to move. *Thrice repelled.*

The day was growing darker and Sally realised she was ready to shut up shop so she could recharge and be ready to tackle things from a fresh perspective the next day. Sally put

a sign on the door that she would open later the next day. She had to go to the bank and fix up her debt. Out the door she went with the bank letter in hand.

The following morning brought the second eccentric character and a crucial link. Sally's night was restful but it took a few extra hours to get to sleep, so much had happened the previous day and seemingly there would be more to come.

Ms. Evelyn Reed arrived at 10.35am not with a drifting walk, but more of a theatrical flourish. The front door bell rang out as if it had been beaten solidly, the door had been set solidly ajar with one mighty push 'RINGGGGG!' Sally looked up, rather startled at the intense sound.

Evelyn Reed was a local historian and passionate enthusiast of all things Melbourne Gothic. She wore a bright red silk scarf, silver earrings shaped like tiny gargoyles, and carried a worn, oversized leather satchel.

'Sally, my dear, I hear rumours! Tales of an inheritance! Tales of Agnes Periwinkle's infamous collection!' Evelyn cried, gliding past the towering stacks of dusty volumes. 'My darling Agnes, what a woman! Did you know she believed the Melbourne Sewerage Commission was a front for a society of Atlantean refugees?'

Sally then said, 'Well that's good and fine, but how do you know me? And you are?' Evelyn pushed her hand forward and shook Sally's I do apologise my dear, I knew Agnes and Frida, to a lesser degree for ages, Agnes would return from some far flung place and regale our women's club with stories and humorous travel anecdotes. As a local historian I have taken quite an interest in her exploits, I have spent a number of hours at her place being spellbound by her knowledge of history, both local and global. Then one day Frida let me know that you are taking over this fine establishment, oh you MUST be so excited, and now you have the collection in your midst.'

'Evelyn,' Sally said, pulling out a recently discovered parchment map. 'I think I may need your knowledge of local architecture. Specifically, this block. And what you know of 'The Keeper of the Gate' here.'

Evelyn was instantly serious, her historian's eye focusing on the India ink. 'Ah, yes. The Map of Lost Facades. This section here,' she pointed to the highlighted corner, 'Was the original 1880s corner block. Note the small square windows. They were unusual. They weren't designed for light, but for secrecy. This particular building, yours, was originally a customs broker's office, handling sensitive maritime manifests, at least for a brief while.'

'And the Keeper of the Gate?'

Evelyn chuckled, pointing a long, dramatic finger at the bronze lion doorknob. 'The lion? It's magnificent, and notoriously difficult. That's not just a knob, Sally. That's a Victorian security feature. The lion's ring, the handle, is also a highly sensitive trigger. I once read an old article about a similar one, it required the handler to press the ring at three distinct, precise locations, a top, a side, a bottom, to disengage the hidden bolt.'

Thrice repelled. Sally's breath hitched. She had only pressed and turned it normally.

'And the 'Stone sings softly to the Moss'?' Sally pressed.

'The garden across the alley,' Evelyn mused, glancing out the arched side windows at the vibrant green and blooming hydrangeas. 'It belongs to the old municipal courthouse, a stone edifice built on top of a subterranean spring. People used to say you could hear the water singing through the stones on a quiet day. Agnes loved that garden view from your shop, she always said it was the only genuine *truth* in the city.'

Sally suddenly recalled the first entry in Agnes's journal: *The shadow is less than the stone. The first step is not taken in the direction of the light, but the direction of the reflection.*

The sun was now in the perfect position. Sally rushed to the front door, the bronze lion glinting. She didn't look *at* the stone, but at the reflection. The thought crossed her mind, what good luck for the sun to be in position right at this point in time, her mind soon brushed that thought off she had other things to contemplate.

The dark front windows were small squares, *colonial style*. And the key? The first key she had found was intricately looped, looking like a piece of jewelry.

She took the small antique key from her pocket. She held it up to the glass.

The window was made up of four small, dark squares. The glass was not merely old; it was slightly warped, catching the reflection of the light perfectly. She pressed the key, not against the doorknob, but against the glass of the window, using the tip of the key to tap the bronze ring held by the lion reflected in the glass.

One. She tapped the top of the reflected ring. *Two.* She tapped the left side. *Three.* She tapped the bottom.

There was a faint, almost inaudible *snick* from the heavy wood frame of the front door.

Evelyn gasped. 'Did you hear that?'

Sally, trembling with anticipation, pushed the lion's ring. The door didn't open. Instead, a previously unnoticed seam in the wall beside the door, disguised by the dark wood panelling, slid back silently, revealing a narrow, dust-choked alcove, no deeper than an arm's length.

It wasn't a bank vault. It wasn't a chest of gold, Sally had no idea what to expect, so her mind thought chest of gold, why not. She later thought *atha* Agnes was not one to go after financial riches but rather the riches that come with vivid memories, therefore a chest of gold! What was she thinking?

It was a small, lead-lined niche containing one single, thin, wooden box.

Inside the box, Sally found a third, and final, clue. It was a single, beautiful leather bookmark. The leather was soft, scented faintly of dried lavender, and embossed with the double spiral Professor Finch had identified.

On the back, a simple inscription in Agnes's spidery, elegant hand:

The true value lies where I found joy. Not in the beginning, nor the end, but in the middle, where I began again. The Book of Truth, held in the Hands of Time.

Evelyn smiled, delighted that Sally had started to uncover, explore and to some degree understand her inheritance. She left Sally satisfied that things would work out well. She suggested she would return soon enough and would be a keen observer of what would happen next.

Chapter Four

Sally felt a surge of adrenaline, followed by a dizzying moment of despair. *The Book of Truth?* The shop held tens of thousands of books. How could she possibly find one book?

She took the riddle to the middle of the shop, the point where the narrow front section met the slightly wider back.

Not in the beginning, nor the end, but at the middle, where I began again.

Sally looked around the middle section. Here was the travel literature, the history, the local Melbourne section. She focused on the last line: *The Book of Truth, held in the Hands of Time.*

Time. Clocks. She thought of the brass pendulum clock on the wall, permanently stuck at ten past three. It was a lovely, decorative piece, usually ignored. She walked over to it and gently lifted it off its bracket.

She turned the clock over. The back was sealed with small screws, but near the winding mechanism, there was a small, discreet engraving that had been there for decades, unnoticed by Sally. The engraving depicted two small hands holding up a book. Beneath it, a date: 1972.

She searched the local Melbourne history section for books published in 1972. There were three: a government report on infrastructure, a novel about the suburbs, and a thin, unassuming volume of poetry titled *Cobbles and Clay: Melbourne's Hidden Corners*.

Sally opened the poetry book. It was slightly thicker than she thought it should have been. She ran her fingers along the spine and felt a faint separation. Carefully, she pried the pages apart.

The spine was hollowed out. Inside was not a third map, nor a piece of jewellery, but a small, folded legal document.

The document was a holographic will, handwritten by Agnes and notarized in Bolivia. It did not supersede the first will regarding the liquid assets, but it addressed the library.

Agnes Periwinkle had not only bequeathed her collection to Sally, but she had also designated the collection as a new, non-profit foundation: The Agnes Periwinkle Trust for Literary Preservation.

The documents Sally found detailed the entire operation: an endowment large enough to sustain the shop for the next century, funding the acquisition of rare texts and ensuring its continuation as an independent bookstore, free from the tyranny of market forces.

Sally pondered where Agnes got the money from? Was it a family inheritance of some kind from some past relative? Later on she rang her Mother, yes Agnes had inherited some funds but in her early twenties she had met a fine young gentleman who knew about investing, her inheritance took off and within a few years the funds had become considerable. It turned out the young gentleman also 'took off' and one of the reasons Agnes

travelled so much was in a vain attempt to forget him, or perhaps to find him. The puzzle about the funds was sorted, at least to some degree, now Sally had to get back to the task at hand. Understanding the details of the not for profit foundation and the rest of the will. She read on.

The catch, the condition, 'discover the true value', was the test. The monetary value was the initial gift; the *true value* was the priceless archive of first editions, manuscripts, and historical papers, the vast, uncatalogued portion of Agnes's library, which Blackwood would have otherwise simply sold off as bulk assets.

Agnes's final letter, slipped into the poetry book, confirmed it:

My dearest Sally,

The money is to stop the fear. The rest is to begin the joy. The bookstore, with its incomparable aroma and its deep, contemplative silence, is too important to be lost to quarterly reports. The true value is not what we own, but what we save. I have given you the custodianship of stories. Show yourself that you are worthy of them.

Sally spent the following days of the 'lunar cycle' rummaging and recording various tomes and volumes. In storage and in her shop.

Chapter Five

Mr. Blackwood returned as promised. He was, if possible, even more immaculately presented, and his air of subtly menacing professionalism was heightened by the deadline.

He found Sally not panicked, but remarkably calm, sitting behind her counter, the sunlight slanting perfectly across the aged wood.

'Ms. Finch,' he began, consulting his wristwatch, an instrument of Swiss precision. 'The lunar cycle is complete. Did you fulfill the condition of the will? Did you discover the library's 'true value'?'

Sally smiled, a genuine, profound smile that transformed her face. She slid the document across the counter, the holographic will establishing the trust.

'Yes, Mr. Blackwood. I did,' she said simply. 'I discovered that the value of my great-aunt's collection extends far beyond the monetary.'

She then presented him with a meticulously itemized list of the true treasures she had identified within the delivered crates: an original, signed manuscript page by Oscar Wilde used as a dust jacket stiffener; a set of 17th-century navigational charts with annotations by Captain Cook; and the aforementioned *Lexicon Mythographica Aeterna*.

Blackwood's mask of indifference finally slipped. He slowly picked up the list, his eyes scanning the impossible values. His calculation had clearly been to liquidate Agnes's assets quickly; he was now faced with a legally constituted trust.

He sighed, a barely perceptible hiss. 'Remarkable. Absolutely remarkable. Your great-aunt was a master of misdirection.'

'She was a master of preservation, Mr. Blackwood,' Sally corrected gently.

The shop was saved. More than that, it was transfigured.

Sally used the initial inheritance to settle the debts, hire an assistant, and renovate the back section into a proper reading room. The bookstore, once threatened by ruin, became a beacon. Tom from next door often brought his customers over to admire the 'Periwinkle Archive,' and Professor Finch spent his afternoons happily deciphering proto-Iberian ciphers. Ms. Evelyn Reed, delighted by the official nature of the trust, became its unofficial, rather dramatic spokesperson.

On a quiet evening, weeks later, Sally stood by the arching side windows. The sky outside was a deep, velvet blue, and the lanterns cast a warm glow on the gleaming, wet cobbles. She looked across the alley at the luscious, dark green garden, now whispering secrets to the evening air.

The shop no longer felt heavy with worry; it felt dense with possibility. The musty scent of the books was now a more comforting embrace, the creaking floorboards the sound of continuity. Sally reached out and touched the bronze lion doorknob, the 'Keeper of the Gate' that had opened the way to her future. It was not just a store; it was a legacy, a living, breathing testament to the enduring power of history, safely nested in the almost hidden quiet heart of old Melbourne.