

Return to Prior Park

BOOK 3 IN THE
BELLEVILLE FAMILY SERIES

J MARY MASTERS



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About the author

J Mary Masters (Judith) was born in Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia in the 1950s, the youngest of four children and raised on a cattle property.

For more than twenty years, she was involved in the magazine publishing industry as a senior executive.

Having now given up full time magazine work, Judith is devoting her time to her writing career, with an emphasis on writing for women readers. Her stories feature a mix of town and country settings, drawing heavily on her early life.

She is a member of the Queensland Writers Centre (QWC) and the Australian Society of Authors (ASA).

Judith now lives on Queensland's Sunshine Coast with her husband Peter.

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Also by J Mary Masters

Julia's Story

(previously published as *The House of Secrets: Julia's Story*)

Book 1 of the Belleville family series

To Love, Honour and Betray

Book 2 of the Belleville family series

To the readers of my first two books in the Belleville family series, thank you for your encouragement, feedback and ongoing interest in the lives of the Belleville family.

To my husband Peter, thank you for your unfailing encouragement and love.

And thank you to my dear sisters Deidre and Beverley for your enthusiasm and support.

Key characters - book 3

AUSTRALIA

BELLEVILLE FAMILY (Prior Park)

Richard Belleville	Elder son of the family
William Belleville	Younger son of the family
Alice Belleville (formerly Fitzroy)	William's wife
Julia Fitzroy (formerly Belleville)	Only daughter, James's wife
Paul Belleville	Richard & Catherine's son
Anthony Belleville	Richard & Catherine's son
Marianne Belleville	William & Alice's daughter
Mrs Duffy	Housekeeper, Prior Park
Charles Brockman	Manager, Prior Park
Alistair McGovern	Francis Belleville's natural son

FITZROY FAMILY (Mayfield Downs)

Amelia Fitzroy	Mother
James Fitzroy	Son
John Fitzroy	James & Julia's son

WARNER FAMILY (Armoobilla)

Tom Warner	Owner of Armoobilla
Jane Warner (formerly Saville)	His wife

OTHERS

Dr Philippe Duval	Surgeon
Pippa Jensen	Julia Belleville's daughter
Edith Henderson	Pippa's Great Aunt
John Bertram	Richard's friend
Dr Robert Clarke	Registrar/Surgeon
Patricia Clarke	His wife
Anita Clarke	His daughter
Karen Clarke	Robert Clarke's niece
David Clarke	Robert Clarke's brother
Deborah Clarke	His wife
Bianca Ferrari	Karen's friend
Ian Dixon	QC
Angela Dixon	His wife
Lucy Dixon	His daughter
Gerald Lester	Owner of Berrima Park
Kate Lester	His wife
Tim Lester, Nancy Lester	His son & daughter

ENGLAND

CAVENDISH FAMILY (Haldon Hall)

Lady Marina Cavendish	Mother, daughter of an Earl
Catherine Cavendish (now Belleville)	Only daughter
Sir Edward Cavendish	Distant cousin to Catherine

Prologue

In December 1957 we left the Belleville family at a crossroads. The family matriarch Elizabeth Belleville is dead, killed by a fire lit maliciously by her late husband Francis's embittered bastard son Alistair McGovern.

The family's grand nineteenth century country home at Prior Park lies in ruins, a smouldering wreck from which nothing can be salvaged.

Unaware of the awful events at Prior Park, Julia, Elizabeth Belleville's only daughter, who has lived her life haunted by the memory of the baby girl she was forced to give up, is unexpectedly confronted by her past in a hotel dining room. In the moment of candour that follows, her marriage to James Fitzroy collapses as she turns back to her first love Philippe Duval and embraces the daughter she had long thought lost to her forever.

Meanwhile, her brother, war hero Richard Belleville, who tried desperately to rescue his mother from the burning house, struggles with the collapse of his marriage to the English aristocrat Catherine Cavendish who has returned to her native England following the death of her father.

Against this backdrop, it is William Belleville, together with his wife Alice, who is left to pick up the pieces at Prior Park but Alice's loyalties are tested with her brother James raging against the duplicity of his estranged wife Julia.

As the Belleville siblings face life without their matriarch amid the horror of what Alistair McGovern has done, they must also look to rebuild their own shattered lives from the rubble.

CHAPTER 1

January 1958

There had been no happy Christmas for the Belleville family and now in the heat of January, Richard Belleville, together with his brother William and his sister Julia, stood silently side by side in front of their mother's grave. Her name – Elizabeth Marianne Belleville - was etched deep into the newly erected white marble headstone. She had been just sixty years old. Beside her grave, the weathered headstone of her long dead husband had begun to lean as the dry ground cracked around it. Richard made a half-hearted attempt to stand it upright.

For each of them, the shock of their mother's death was still raw, coupled as it had been with the loss of their grand home, Prior Park, the burnt remnants of which lay just behind them.

It was William who broke the silence.

'Well, we did what she asked,' he said sadly. 'We buried her alongside our father. If she had known what we knew, would she have wanted that?'

He posed the question, even though he knew that no one could say for sure.

It had been her final fatal decision to rescue a photograph of her late husband from the burning house that had, in the end, cost her life. She had broken from Richard's grasp and flung herself back into the house in a final desperate bid to save the photograph, not knowing the extent of her husband's deception and that his actions, ultimately,

had been the real cause of the tragedy.

‘It was better that she did not know,’ Julia said finally.

The memory of her reconciliation with her mother as she lay dying was something she cherished.

‘Perhaps you’re right,’ Richard said quietly. ‘Perhaps you’re right. She could at least maintain the charade of a successful marriage right up until the end.’

William turned his head to look at his brother. He was surprised at the unmistakable bitterness in his words.

‘I think they had some good times,’ William said.

It was as if William felt someone should at least make a pretence of defending their father’s reputation.

‘I think there was disappointment on both sides,’ Julia murmured.

She might well have been speaking about her own failed marriage and both her brothers were keenly aware of it.

She bent down and began to rearrange the flowers they had each brought to honour their mother. It was a futile gesture for they each knew that the flowers would not last in the heat.

After a few minutes they began to move away, but none of them could bring themselves to look at the ruin that lay before them. In parts, the outer walls of the house remained standing but the walls of the dining room and the front porch had collapsed in on themselves into a pile of tangled bricks and burnt timber.

Weeds and grass were already growing up through the broken bricks. It was clear it would not be long before what remained of the house was completely engulfed.

It was William who raised the question.

‘Are we just going to leave it like that?’ he said, gesturing towards the burnt out ruin.

Richard shrugged his shoulders.

‘As we’ve agreed not to rebuild, what else do you suggest?’ he asked.

His own marriage had failed partly because of his wife’s unhappiness at Prior Park, so far from the sophisticated society she craved. Their arguments all seemed so futile now that the house was in ruins. Had he been wrong, he wondered, to cling so stubbornly to an idea of home that, in the end, had been reduced to a pile of unrecognisable

rubble in just minutes?

‘I thought perhaps we should clear the rubble,’ William said, ever practical in his approach. ‘It could be something of a hazard in years to come.’

‘If you like,’ Richard said, ‘but I’d like to see it stay for a while. Call me sentimental if you like.’

He wasn’t ready just yet to obliterate all signs of the house. William turned towards him and nodded his head in agreement.

‘That’s fine, Richard,’ he conceded. ‘We’ll leave it as it is for the time being but I might get the men to fence it for safety.’

Julia moved ahead of them, not taking part in the conversation, but hoping that the ruins would be left. She had no stake in Prior Park for it had been left to her brothers, but she had loved the house and all it represented. Now, just when she would have revelled in the comfort of being welcomed back home, it was no longer there.

With her mother’s death, she had become a wealthy woman but for her the price had been too high. The chance discovery of the daughter her mother had forced her to give up for adoption had changed her life. But it was too late now to erase the bitter memories. She mourned the loss of her mother not only for herself, but for her daughter Pippa who would never know her grandmother.

As Julia headed towards her car, her brothers, deep in conversation, followed. It was William who spoke but it was clear to Julia that her brothers had been discussing her situation quietly between them.

‘How is your mother-in-law treating you?’ he said, his tone clearly sympathetic.

Amelia Fitzroy had always been very cordial towards William, whom she regarded as an excellent catch for her daughter Alice. On the other hand, she had not warmed to Julia as the wife of her favourite child and only son James. With the revelations of Julia’s daughter, born before her marriage, she had been outraged at the duplicity of both mother and daughter in tricking her son into such a marriage.

‘It is frosty,’ Julia replied. ‘We haven’t actually had a conversation about any of it. Her only comment was that we must do the right thing by John.’

‘And Alice?’ William ventured.

He knew full well the depth of Alice’s disappointment at being excluded from the secret of Julia’s unacknowledged baby. Alice had been Julia’s best friend. He had found himself apologising again and again to his wife, as if it had all somehow been his fault.

‘I’ve hardly seen Alice,’ Julia lied.

What use was it to tell William that Alice had been very angry with her and that she had responded angrily herself trying to explain why she had not told Alice of her predicament all those years ago.

‘And James?’ he asked finally.

‘I rarely see him,’ she said, with a slight shrug of indifference. ‘With school in recess, John is staying at home with him at the moment and they seem to be managing without me.’

‘A boy in his father’s image, I would say,’ William said. ‘Has he been told about his half-sister?’

Julia nodded even as she tried to hide her surprise that William would ask the question. It was as if, having done nothing to help her when she found herself pregnant and unmarried at nineteen, he suddenly felt an urge to reach out and help her now.

‘He has. He didn’t say much. I’m not sure he could even understand what it really meant,’ she said.

‘We would all love to meet her, you know,’ he said. ‘I’ve said to Alice she will always be welcome at our home.’

Julia glanced up quickly at her brother, trying to read in his almost expressionless face what lay behind the sudden burst of warm feelings towards her.

‘That’s very kind of you, William, but are you sure Alice feels the same way?’ she asked doubtfully.

In any case it would be at least the end of the year before Alice and William would be able to move into their new home. All of them had been rendered homeless by the catastrophic events that had enveloped them. Alice and William had taken up residence with her mother in town. Both Richard and Julia had sought refuge in the Criterion Hotel as a temporary home.

‘Alice will be fine,’ he reassured her. ‘She’s just hurt she wasn’t taken into our confidence and sorry we hadn’t all been more honest with

James before you married him.'

Julia simply nodded her thanks.

'And have you told Marianne?' she asked. 'If she doesn't know she'll find out from John.'

William smiled at the memory of his daughter's reaction.

'Yes, we told her,' he said. 'She thinks having another girl in the family is a very good idea.'

Julia laughed. Marianne counted three boys among her cousins and clearly felt outnumbered at times.

'How funny life is,' Julia said, 'perhaps they will grow up to be good friends.'

Richard had been standing nearby listening intently to this exchange. Finally, he spoke.

'Well, I'm sorry to say they'll have to put up with terrible gossip if your daughter comes up here to stay,' he said. 'I don't care in the least on my own account but the gossips will have a field day.'

Julia ran her fingers through her blonde hair and thrust her head upwards in a gesture of defiance.

'Well let them, I say,' she said. 'As long as Alice and Marianne are aware of it, and John too of course, I don't think the gossip will concern them at all.'

'I hope that's the case,' Richard thought, but said no more on the topic.

'Is John going to stay living with James?' he asked.

'For the time being he is,' she said. 'At least until I'm settled.'

She did not add that her estranged husband had begun to question the wisdom of them sharing custody of the child. She decided that information could wait for another day.

'And when will that be?' Richard asked for they were both unsure of their sister's plans.

'I don't know to be honest,' she said.

If they were expecting certainty in her response, they were disappointed.

'A lot depends on how things turn out,' she added, without being specific.

It felt to her as if she was being torn between two lives, her old life

of which much remained and a possible new life in a new place that meant picking up a relationship after more than fourteen years with a man she had long believed to be dead and with a daughter she did not yet know well.

William could not meet her eyes just then. He bent down to brush an imaginary insect from the leg of his trousers. He had conspired with his mother to intercept Philippe Duval's letters to his sister until they stopped coming. Now, as he stood alongside her listening to the disintegration of her life, he was ashamed of his actions but it had been impossible to go against their mother who had insisted no letters ever reached Julia. Richard, of course, had not been at home.

In quiet moments, William could not help but feel how easy it had been for Richard to say things would have been different if he had not been away overseas.

It was an observation that had not done anything to assuage William's guilt or the perception he was somehow less caring of his sister than his elder brother. It happened less often now but every now and again small pangs of jealousy flared when he found himself compared unfavourably with his brother. Richard was taller, better looking, more charming and more polished than he would ever be and a small part of him resented his older brother for it.

Julia did not fail to notice her brother's discomfiture but she did not feel inclined just then to absolve him of the responsibility he shared for having deceived her. She could not erase the knowledge of how her brother and her mother had betrayed her trust so completely. In quiet moments, the extent of their deception troubled her afresh.

William tried to form more words of explanation and apology but failed completely. He was deeply ashamed of what they had done. He realised too late how they had changed the course of his sister's life. It was only luck that had brought her face to face with her former lover and the daughter she had been forced to abandon. He knew he would carry the regret he felt to the grave but he had found it hard to find the right words to ask for his sister's forgiveness. She generously had said they would not speak of it again but still the knowledge of it was a heavy burden for him.

'And you, Richard?' Julia asked.

She was keen to escape further questioning.

‘What does the future hold for you and your boys? Have you heard further from Catherine – or her lawyers?’

He gave a half laugh. He made a half-hearted gesture.

‘The legal wheels grind on,’ he shrugged. ‘I simply do what I am asked to do, sign whatever I am asked to sign, agree to whatever I am asked to agree to. By the end of next year or the year after, who knows, I expect our divorce will be finalised.’

He said it as if he were a mere bystander to some arcane process that he barely cared about. In truth he was bitterly disappointed at the failure of his marriage but he could not say so. He knew he was not blameless. He doubted he had tried hard enough to please Catherine but in the end the distance between them had been one of geography and upbringing and nothing could change that.

‘And apart from the divorce? What plans for the children? Where are you going to live?’ Julia asked, for neither she nor William were privy to his plans for the future.

‘I’m taking one day at a time,’ he said obliquely. ‘Paul is staying on with his school mate in Bowral during the holidays. Because of the fire, of course, and Anthony, no doubt, is becoming a proper little English gentleman. Catherine writes to me with regular reports and has sent a recent photo.’

He drew out his wallet and offered a small black and white photograph for their inspection. It showed a small boy, half smiling, half scowling for the camera against a backdrop of winter snow.

It was William who ventured an opinion on what Richard should do.

‘You need to get yourself a house in town,’ he said, ‘sooner rather than later. Then you can have Paul at least to stay during the school holidays.’

Richard almost laughed out loud as if that was the complete solution to his problems.

‘So, a house, yes, I agree,’ he said. ‘I have been looking. And are you suggesting I get a new wife too to go with the house?’

William reddened at his brother’s flippant tone. He’d heard the gossip about his brother and later been rendered speechless when his

brother had confessed to it being true, yet he did not want to believe that his brother would actively seek to lure away another man's wife.

William ignored the question, instead bringing them back to reason why they had gathered behind the ruins of the big house at Prior Park. He made one last effort to arrange the bunch of roses he had brought with him.

'I am sure Mother will rest peacefully here,' he said as they all looked at the gravestone one last time.

William was first to move.

'I must get back to town. I have a meeting with the architect who has drawn up some plans for our new house. We're keen to get it underway.'

He hugged his sister briefly and shook his brother by the hand.

Richard and Julia watched him reverse his car and then turn onto the Prior Park driveway. Within minutes the car was lost in a cloud of dust.

Julia turned towards Richard, smiling.

'I think you embarrassed our brother,' Julia said.

Richard laughed at the suggestion.

'I think we've both embarrassed him with our wayward lives,' he said, giving his sister a quick hug.

'Yes, I think his views on life and marriage are very orthodox,' she said.

She did not know the full details of her brother's indiscretions. But she knew, from the experience of her own marriage, how much it hurt to have a husband turn his attentions to another woman.

Yet she had sympathised with Richard. She did not blame her brother entirely. As much as she had liked Catherine, she had never believed the marriage would endure. Julia understood completely how the charms of rural Australia would quickly fade for someone whose upbringing had occurred in a privileged aristocratic world of sophisticated pleasures of which they knew nothing.

Richard managed a smile.

'William thinks everyone should be as certain about their life choices as he is,' he said. 'He is completely happy with Alice and with their daughter. There is no doubt in his mind, no question mark at

all about his existence. He thinks everyone else can have a life like that too but it isn't as simple or as straightforward as that, is it?

Julia was surprised by the question and surprised too by her brother's unexpected revelations.

'No, it isn't always straightforward, is it?' she answered quietly. 'I spent a long time grieving for my lost daughter and my lost love. Now that I have found them both, what do I do next? Is it reasonable to expect we can pick up where we left off? I don't know. I wish I had William's certainty.'

Richard nodded, only too well aware of Julia's dilemma. He did not say so but he faced the same problem. With little effort he knew he could once again draw Jane Warner back to his side but is that what he really wanted? Was he really prepared to offer her marriage? If he did so, it would leave another marriage in tatters.

'That's why I'm in no rush to make decisions, quite frankly,' he said, 'and neither should you be.'

There was a note of brotherly concern in his voice. He was four years her senior and now, as the eldest of them, he felt it his duty to caution his sister.

She laughed at the warning note in his voice.

'So, taking the fatherly line, are you?' she jibed. 'Playing big brother now?'

He laughed in turn.

'No, not really, I was never much good at it,' he replied. 'I never thought I'd have much success in reining in my headstrong sister.'

She hugged him and they laughed together.

'I must go,' she said. 'I promised John I would take him to the afternoon matinee to see some awful cowboy picture.'

Richard held open the door of the car as she slid in behind the steering wheel.

'Drive carefully,' he said. 'One day we'll get a better road out this way but you need to be really careful.'

She hardly needed reminding but smiled at him anyway.

He watched her car disappear, as William's had, in a haze of dust. He was about to turn to walk the short distance to his own car.

Without warning, a savage blow caught him from behind. As he

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began to fall, he twisted his body around and saw looming above him the grinning face of a madman. Seconds later, Alistair McGovern swung the broken tree branch again this time aiming for Richard's head.

At the last moment, Richard rolled to his right to avoid the blow but he could not avoid it entirely.

The full weight of the broken branch struck him on the side of the head. Blood began to flow as he lost consciousness, the shrill laughter of an evil lunatic ringing in his ears.

CHAPTER 2

January 1958

Alistair McGovern was breathing heavily. He paused, the bloodied stump of the broken tree branch raised above his head, as he prepared to deliver the fatal blow. He was gloating now, talking rapidly, his words incoherent. He felt only contempt for the badly injured man sprawled before him. Every utterance of hate and bile he directed at Richard Belleville went unheard. But that did not matter to him.

He had achieved his first great triumph against the Belleville family only a matter of two months earlier. Now he was about to have a second great moment of triumph. He was about to kill Richard Belleville, the much loved and revered elder son. The much-admired war hero. A man born to wealth and privilege.

He despised everything about Richard Belleville because Richard Belleville was everything he was not. In his deluded mind, he believed he could have been like Richard Belleville if only the Belleville family had accepted him.

He had dreamed of this moment of revenge ever since his arrest. It had been Richard Belleville who had thrown him out of the house when he had come wanting to be friends, to be accepted by the family. It had been Richard Belleville who had turned him away like a mongrel dog.

Well, he had shown them. The house was in ruins, their mother was dead, all at his hands. Now the elder son was about to die in the dust, his head split open, his blood oozing out of his wounds as his

life slipped away.

He was summoning his strength for the final blow. He tightened his grip on the stump of broken branch and tensed his muscles for the final assault on his helpless victim.

But Alistair McGovern, so intent on his victim, did not see Charles Brockman.

He did not see Charles bring a rifle to his shoulder in one swift practised action. He did not hear the sharp crack of the rifle as he fired. It was only his eyes that registered the shock of the bullet as it split his forehead open and forced his head to jerk backwards. His crude weapon fell harmlessly from his hands.

Blood began to trickle from the gaping hole left by the single bullet wound. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Charles Brockman wasted no time. He set his rifle down and ran inside the house. He had for years occupied the manager's house at Prior Park. He quickly picked up the telephone and called the local police sergeant who only an hour earlier had alerted him to Alistair McGovern's escape from custody.

When that warning came, he had taken precautions. He had unlocked his rifle cupboard and taken out his favoured .303 rifle, checking it carefully and loading it.

From his house he had noticed the Belleville siblings gather at their mother's graveside but he had chosen not to intrude. Instead he had watched from his verandah.

Later, as he saw first William and then Julia drive away, he had been about to go off to saddle his horse but at the last moment, something, he could not say what, caught his eye.

It was then he saw Alistair McGovern. He tried to shout a warning to Richard but he was too far away. He watched helplessly as the first blow hit Richard across the back. Before he could react, he watched Alistair McGovern strike Richard again.

In an instant, he knew he had one option to save Richard's life and he did not hesitate. He shouldered his rifle, took careful aim, and fired one shot. One lucky shot, he was later heard to say.

One shot and Alistair McGovern lay dead, sprawled in the dust.

Days later, Charles sat quietly beside Richard's hospital bed, his head in his hands, not quite praying, for he was not a religious man, but appealing all the same to a higher power to spare his friend. He did not regard Richard Belleville as his employer. He had known all the family for longer than he cared to remember. He was almost one of them. He regarded them as his own.

Just then, Richard stirred. He had been drifting in and out of consciousness for days.

'Charles,' he said. His voice was just above a whisper. 'What are you doing here? What happened to me?'

Charles moved his chair closer to the bed.

'Don't try and talk now,' he said soothingly. 'That bastard almost did for you.'

Richard's hand tentatively explored the bandages on the side of his head.

'What bastard would that be, Charles? Alistair McGovern?'

He nodded.

'That's right. He broke out of custody and they alerted me, just in case he came sniffing around. They had men out searching for him but they should have known where he would head to.'

Richard grimaced. He tried to move but every part of his upper body ached. The side of his face was covered in ugly bruises.

'I don't remember what happened,' Richard's voice trailed off.

'I saw it all. He came at you with a big solid lump of broken tree branch. He caught you by surprise. I was too far away to help but I had my rifle out of the cupboard luckily.'

Richard tried to smile.

'My lucky day, huh?'

'Your lucky day indeed,' Charles said.

'And only one shot I suppose?'

Even in his semi-conscious state Richard's memory had not failed him. Charles's marksmanship was legendary.

He nodded.

'I had to make sure I felled him with the first shot. I wouldn't have had time for a second one. It was enough.'

Richard closed his eyes, tired out by the effort of conversation, but

he seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

While Alistair McGovern lived, there had always been the slim chance that he would contrive a way to exact further revenge. Now that he was dead, they could all breathe more easily.

Charles too breathed a sigh of relief. He did not want to be seen as a hero. He had killed a man and that was no badge of honour. He had done it only to save his friend. He did not dwell on the sadness of having to kill Francis Belleville's youngest son to save his eldest son. He knew that Francis Belleville could never have foreseen the consequences of his betrayal of his family. There had been aspects of his late friend's character he had never admired but no one could have ever imagined that his actions would result, years later, in such an awful chain of events.

He left the room quietly, satisfied now that Richard was out of danger and would recover. Charles knew he would face police questioning but he had done what he had to do without concern for the consequences.

William seeing Charles coming down the steps at the front of the hospital raised his hand in greeting.

'How is he today?' William asked, dispensing with the normal pleasantries.

'I think he's getting better,' Charles replied. 'He spoke to me for the first time and he made sense.'

It seemed to him as if William had aged suddenly, as if the events of the past few days and of the past few months had worn him down.

'Thank God for that,' William said. 'I was cursing myself for not having been there to help him, but obviously that madman waited until Julia and I had left.'

They had discussed all this before. It had been William whom Charles had contacted as soon as Richard was on his way to hospital. Then there had been the days of acute anxiety for it had not been certain early on that Richard would survive the assault.

But other things had been praying on William's mind too.

'Will they charge you?' he asked.

He was clearly worried about the consequences.

‘I don’t know yet,’ he said. ‘It may just get buried, if you know what I mean.’

William nodded. He would use whatever influence he had to make sure that happened but he didn’t want to make empty promises to Charles. Instead, he was cautious.

‘But if it doesn’t,’ William said. ‘If they decide to charge you, we will hire the best legal team that money can buy, rest assured on that point.’

Charles shuffled his feet. He did not like to be put in such a position but he was grateful for William’s offer, although he couldn’t find the words to express it.

‘You saved my brother’s life. We won’t ever forget that,’ William said, as if he needed to make the point.

‘No need to thank me,’ he said quietly. ‘I did what I had to do. I couldn’t let that mongrel do any more damage.’

Some distance away from the front entrance of the hospital and unobserved by William and Charles, Jane Warner sat in her car.

She watched the short exchange between the two men and then waited patiently for William to re-emerge from the hospital and head towards his car. It was not until he had driven away that she walked to the hospital entrance and asked at the reception for directions to Richard’s private room. No one asked who she was and she was grateful for that.

She approached his room tentatively. Should she be here? Doubts assailed her. They had not spoken in more than six months but on hearing news of his terrible injuries she was suddenly desperate to see him. The door to his room was slightly ajar so she pushed at the door.

It was only then that she saw Richard’s sister Julia sitting on a chair close to his bed. She had been partly obscured by the half open door.

Before Jane could retreat, Julia glanced up expecting to see a nurse or a doctor. Her face registered surprise but she recovered quickly.

‘Jane how are you?’ she said, quietly motioning her to the vacant chair alongside her.

‘Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know anyone was here,’ she said, trying desperately to cover her embarrassment. ‘I won’t stay but just tell me how he is?’

Julia too felt the awkwardness of the meeting. She had heard only a few shreds of gossip about her brother's dalliance with another woman and most of that had come from her husband James in the bitter spiteful row that had accelerated the collapse of her own marriage. She had defended Richard at the time, not knowing whether in fact it was true or not. Now she knew for certain. It was true. Why else would Jane be visiting by herself, desperate not to meet anyone else at his bedside?

Quietly and without fuss, for Richard was sleeping peacefully, Julia rose from her chair and took Jane by the arm, ushering her out of the room.

'Let's go and find a cup of tea,' Julia said.

Jane let herself be guided along the hospital corridor to a small sitting room. Both of them were relieved to find the room empty. Julia poured tea from a freshly made pot and handed Jane a cup of tea. She noticed how Jane's hands trembled slightly as she took it from her.

They sat down opposite one another in deep padded armchairs. It was Julia who broke the silence.

'Richard will recover fully, Jane,' she said. 'Early on we thought the worst but he has done well since he was brought in here.'

She noticed the relief spread across the other woman's face.

'I only heard about it yesterday,' she said. 'It was a garbled story of him being attacked at Prior Park and nearly killed.'

Which does not explain, Julia thought, why you felt compelled to come and visit him as soon as you possibly could.

'Did Tom tell you about it? He probably had it from Charles Brockman,' Julia asked.

Jane shook her head slightly. The movement was almost imperceptible.

'No, he didn't tell me,' she said. 'I heard it from a friend at the Red Cross morning tea. It was the main topic of conversation.'

Julia would have liked to ask if the identity of the perpetrator was part of the conversation but she didn't know how to frame the question. How do you ask someone if they knew it was your bastard half-brother who had tried to kill your beloved elder brother? But they must all know, she thought. They must all know who it was after what

happened at Prior Park and her mother's death.

For a minute or two they sat together in awkward silence. It crossed Julia's mind to wonder why Jane's husband Tom hadn't shared the news with her, for he must have known days earlier. It was clearly something that had not been discussed between them. She wondered idly if Tom knew about his wife's interest elsewhere. Could he not bring himself to mention Richard's name to her?

It was Jane who broke the silence.

'You and your family have been through quite a bit lately,' she ventured.

Julia got up and put her teacup down on the table. How to answer that? How much did Jane know? She would certainly know that Julia's marriage had ended. She would know about the very public destruction of Prior Park and its aftermath. But would she know all the terrible secrets that had given rise to these events?

She turned to face Jane, who had remained seated.

'Yes, we've all had a terrible time just lately,' she said, noncommittally.

'I believe the fellow who attacked Richard was killed. Is that right?' she asked. 'Was it the same fellow who was responsible for the attack on the house last year? That's the story I heard.'

'Yes, that's all true, Jane,' Julia said. 'He had escaped from custody. It seems he hated Richard the most so he took the opportunity to attack him.'

Julia quickly realised her mistake. Such an admission could not pass without further explanation.

'So why did he hate Richard so much in particular?' Jane asked, her curiosity peaked just as Julia feared it would be.

'Because...'

Julia paused, wondering how to frame her answer.

'Because it was Richard who threw him out of the house. He physically threw him out of the house the night of our mother's sixtieth birthday party last year.'

There she had said it.

Jane was silent for a few moments as she considered this information. She had heard rumours that the young man had claimed to be

Francis Belleville's bastard son. Julia had all but confirmed it.

'I'm not sure I can ask this but the gossips say ...'

Julia interrupted her.

'The gossips are right on this occasion. He was my father's bastard son. His name you no doubt know from the newspaper reports of him being charged.'

'And he was killed by Charles Brockman, is that right?' she asked.

Julia nodded.

'Yes,' she replied. 'Fortunately, Charles was close at hand otherwise Richard would be dead.'

She did not want to go into the details of exactly what Charles had done. It was enough that she confirm it was Charles who had saved Richard.

'Very lucky indeed,' Jane said.

She got up to place her own cup back on the table.

'I must be going,' she said. 'I only came to see that Richard was OK.'

There were many questions Jane wanted to ask but could not. Had Richard's wife been told of his injuries? Was his marriage really over as she had heard? Was he in the throes of a long-distance divorce?

She had felt increasing bitterness towards him as the months had passed and she had heard nothing from him following their passionate reunion the previous year, conveniently ignoring the letter she had written him to urge him to stay out of her life.

She was sure her own husband had been oblivious to their affair, absorbed as he was in the day to day work on their large cattle property.

'Shall I tell Richard you called to see him?' Julia asked, curious as to how Jane would answer.

Jane hesitated then nodded.

'Yes, tell him I called to see how he was,' she said.

She did not say anything further. She wondered how he would receive the news.

The two women parted at the doorway of the sitting room. Julia watched as Jane walked back towards the entrance of the hospital before she turned to head back to her brother's room to resume her bedside vigil.

Later that day William sat across the dinner table from his wife Alice. His mother-in-law's house in town had become a temporary home for him and his family with the destruction of Prior Park. He missed the comforts of the large house and the domestic order that had been a hallmark of his life. Amelia Fitzroy's house was much smaller than he was used to and he found himself unaccountably irritated by the small inconveniences of it.

On this particular day, there was added tension around the meal table. James, Alice's brother, sat next to Alice. He ate in silence despite his mother's valiant efforts to engage him in conversation. It was obvious to everyone that the failure of his marriage had hurt him deeply. Yet not for a moment had he considered how his own infidelities might have contributed to the failure.

In his mind, hers had been the greater deceit. He had been publicly humiliated, he had told his mother, and he could not forgive her. He did not add how much it had hurt him to realise Julia loved another man more than him. He could not bring himself to admit that he had loved her, in his own way, more than she had loved him.

It was left to Marianne, William and Alice's daughter, to break the uneasy silence that had settled over the dinner table.

'How's Uncle Richard?' she asked, for she was very concerned about her favourite uncle.

She had not been allowed to visit him even though she had argued vehemently she was now old enough to go to the hospital. At eleven years old, she regarded herself as no longer a child. It frustrated her that her parents did not agree.

'He's getting better, love,' her mother answered. 'He spoke for the first time today.'

'When can I go and see him?' she asked.

She was persistent. She had found in the past that with persistence she usually got what she wanted. Her cousin John chimed in too. After all Richard was his uncle too. Whatever Marianne did, John felt he was entitled to do as well, despite being more than a year younger.

'Perhaps tomorrow,' her father said. 'We'll see how things are tomorrow. We don't want to tire him out with too many visitors.'

Both children knew they had to be satisfied with that response.

There was a note of finality in William's voice that did not brook further discussion.

It was then that James looked up from his meal.

'Was it a sheer coincidence that I saw Jane Warner coming out of the hospital as I passed it earlier today?' he asked, his tone masking the malicious intent of the question.

William looked up suddenly. He was not good at dissembling. He remembered his brother's shock confession of the previous year. There was a faint flush spreading across his tanned face.

'No idea,' he mumbled. 'She was probably seeing a doctor there.'

James laughed. It was not a pretty sound. No one took up the thread of the conversation so silence descended once more on the dinner table.

CHAPTER 3

February 1958

Richard Belleville continued to confound his doctors, recovering much faster and more completely than anyone had expected. As he said repeatedly, it was Alice who made him better. Without a home of his own, Alice had prevailed upon her mother to have Richard stay with them while he convalesced. She proved to be an excellent nurse.

While he was still regaining his strength, he had adopted Alice's late father's routine of sitting on the small front verandah and watching the world unfold before him.

Despite his improving health, he was prone to bouts of despondency. The knowledge that Jane Warner had visited him in hospital had only added to his feelings of uncertainty. What had that visit really meant? And what had it meant to him? He did not know so it was John Bertram's unexpected visit that cheered him the most. His long-time friend and wartime navigator found him on the verandah late one morning.

'So, you make a habit of this do you?' he teased, as he mounted the few steps and extended his hand towards Richard.

Richard grasped the proffered hand enthusiastically but was unsure what his friend was alluding to.

'Make a habit of what, John?' he replied, perplexed. 'Not being beaten up, surely?'

'No,' laughed John. 'Moving into someone else's house and having them take care of you while you convalesce. I was thinking back to

Lady Marina Cavendish's warm welcome of the injured hero pilot.'

Even Richard smiled at this, remembering Catherine's mother with gratitude but hardly affection.

'Yes, I hadn't forgotten about that,' he replied. 'In fact I was only thinking about it this morning. I'm sure she regretted having asked me to stay. And she probably regretted you inviting me to tag along that first time we went on leave to Haldon Hall.'

John smiled as he recalled how Lady Marina had accused him of being responsible for her daughter's hasty marriage.

'She did say something to that effect as I recall when you'd got her daughter pregnant and spirited her off to the other side of the world,' he said. 'It was all my fault according to her. I gave her a wide berth for a couple of years after that.'

Richard laughed, for he could readily imagine how Lady Marina would have turned on John, accusing him of responsibility for her daughter's illicit wartime romance.

'So now you are homeless and wifeless,' John said, hoping his flip-pant tone would not be misconstrued.

He hardly needed Richard's confirmation of the impending divorce. He was a good friend to both of them.

'Yes, I'm homeless for the moment, and wifeless, as you elegantly pointed out.'

It still hurt him more than he cared to admit saying it out loud yet in his more rational moments he knew he had never believed the marriage would last. The differences between their life together in Australia and her privileged upper class life in England had always been there as the great unbridgeable gulf between them.

'You didn't think one last go at reconciliation was worth it?' his friend asked although he suspected he already knew the answer to his own question.

John had been at their wedding, the only one of the family to attend the hurried affair so he felt at liberty to voice his thoughts.

'No, I didn't think it was worth it.'

Richard answered his friend truthfully. He knew the question was well intentioned.

'As a matter of fact, I think my wife has moved on. I think she has

her sights set firmly on her next husband. An Australian husband proved to be too big a complication in her changed circumstances.'

John nodded, half smiling at Richard's accurate perception of how life had changed for Catherine.

'I think you're probably right, mate,' he said, his tone as warm and friendly as ever.

He was well aware that Catherine had never been able to settle in Australia and now, with the added responsibility of inheriting her family's estate from her father, there were ever more compelling reasons for her to live permanently in England. Equally, he knew Richard could never settle for the constraints of life as an English gentleman with a wife far more important socially than himself.

The growing importance of Sir Edward Cavendish in Catherine's life had not gone unnoticed by either of them but John kept to himself the other confidences that Catherine had shared with him.

She had told him about her suspicions of Richard's interest in another woman and that Richard had not denied it.

He could not say to Catherine that he sympathised with his long-time friend. He wanted to say, 'well, you did leave him for long periods during your trips back to England' but he did not. He thought that Richard's infidelity was more a symptom of the breakdown than the cause, for the cause went much deeper as they both knew.

It seemed to him that Catherine had used Richard's infidelity as an excuse for the divorce rather than admit her disdain for the provincial society in which she had found herself in Australia and that her preference for her life in England, which she had missed terribly, had been the real reason for the breakup.

'Have you seen Catherine since we last spoke?' Richard asked.

The two men kept in regular contact by telephone but it was John's work flying the Sydney to London route that made it possible for him to meet Catherine from time to time.

'I saw her in London, just before Christmas,' he said. 'We had lunch together. She looked well and she told me Anthony was doing well, although I gathered he is missing you.'

Richard looked surprised.

'Did she say so?' he asked directly. 'She hasn't mentioned it in any

of her letters although she did send me a photo of him with her most recent letter.’

John shifted in his chair. He was becoming uncomfortable at the direction of the conversation. He did not want to be the messenger between warring parents in a custody battle. He did not want to have to pick sides.

‘Just in passing you know,’ John replied. ‘It’s natural for a boy to ask about his father. But you won’t be travelling over there for some time, after what you’ve been through.’

Richard grimaced.

‘No, indeed I won’t and it’s really only possible for Paul to go in the long school holidays at Christmas time and he can’t go without me.’

‘Perhaps Catherine can make the trip to Australia, at least to Sydney, and bring Anthony with her,’ John suggested.

‘I expect she will, possibly later this year,’ he said. ‘I’m certainly going to suggest it.’

It was then that John Bertram began to understand the problems his good friend faced in the future. His sons needed a home, but would that home be with him in Australia or with Catherine in England? Now that Richard had no home John could see it gave extra impetus to Catherine’s belief she should have full custody of the two boys.

‘You need to get yourself a home sooner rather than later,’ John said.

‘I know, I know.’ Richard said. ‘You’re not the first person to tell me that. I’d begun to look seriously for something here in town and then this happened. It’s rather set me back.’

John nodded, fully aware now of what Richard faced. He looked up as the screen door leading on to the verandah opened.

It was Alice with the tea tray. She handed John his cup and then fussed over her patient, who greeted her warmly. Richard had begun to realise just how good a choice his brother William had made in choosing Alice to be his wife. There were times Richard secretly envied the domestic bliss his brother enjoyed for he understood now it had eluded him.

It was Saturday and the weather in Sydney had dawned hot and steamy. Pippa Jensen was feeling very frustrated. She paced the small living room of the neat suburban home she shared with her guardian Edith Henderson. In just over a month's time, she would turn fourteen. She was leaving childhood behind, as she reminded Edith daily. And yet nothing more had been resolved about her life and her future although three months had passed since she had met her mother Julia for the first time.

Weekly letters from her mother to which she replied diligently were hardly enough to satisfy her. Her father Philippe wrote from New York almost as often. She had received beautiful Christmas gifts from both of them, as if they were making amends for the Christmases and birthdays they had missed.

What frustrated her was the uncertainty that now pervaded her life. She had continued to live with Aunt Edith but her great aunt's kind reassuring words were beginning to irritate her. Still she did not want to appear ungrateful. She was genuinely fond of Aunt Edith who had willingly offered her a home when she had been turned out of Essex Downs on the death of her adoptive parents.

She watched as her aunt set the table for lunch.

'My father says he will be here at the end of the month to take up his new job,' Pippa said, waving his latest letter in her hand.

'He says I can help him look for a house when he arrives.'

Aunt Edith smiled. She admired the way in which Philippe Duval had taken his daughter to his heart and was prepared to include her in his life. It had been Edith Henderson who had first learnt of his existence and who had made it possible for him to meet Pippa.

'Now if my mother comes down here to live then we will all be together in one happy family,' Pippa added.

To the young teenager, life seemed so simple, so cut and dried, Edith thought. Her parents were in love once and lost each other. Now they could be together. What could possibly stand in their way?

For the umpteenth time, her aunt tried hard, and failed, to dampen her expectations.

'Pippa,' she said, with just a hint of exasperation. 'Your mother is still married to her first husband. Now, she may have told you she is

getting a divorce, but that will take years. And she has another, younger child to consider. And it was a long time ago that she and your father were ..’

She hesitated. She did not quite know how to say what she needed to say, but Pippa filled the void.

‘You mean it was a long time ago they were lovers,’ the girl said unexpectedly.

Her aunt was shocked by her words. She struggled with the idea that Pippa should have knowledge of such things.

‘Have you been talking to girls at school about what has happened? About who your real parents are?’ she asked for it occurred to her then that Pippa must have taken some girls into her confidence. She was sure the word ‘lovers’ would not have occurred to Pippa without prompting.

‘One or two,’ she admitted. ‘What’s wrong with that?’

Her tone was immediately defensive because she knew she had been warned about talking at school about her real parents.

Edith wanted to explain to the girl that being the orphaned child of a respectable married couple who had died tragically in a road accident was one thing but being the offspring of an illicit wartime romance between an Australian girl and an American soldier was quite another altogether.

She feared Pippa would pay a high price for her naivety. She feared she would be ostracised, not by the girls who would revel in the gossip but by their mothers who would consider Pippa not to be a suitable girl for their daughters to know. She wondered if it would go so far as to her receiving a request to withdraw Pippa from the school. Meriden had been Edith’s choice. It was close at hand and she was a friend of the principal. She hoped that would be enough to withstand any pressure from the most outspoken of the mothers who had high hopes for their daughters and who put great importance on the connections they made at school.

‘I suppose you told Lucy Dixon? And Anita Clarke? And Nancy Lester?’ Edith asked, listing each of the girls she had heard Pippa speak about as being her closest friends.

Edith knew each of the girls to be very well connected. Mentally,

she ticked off their family connections: Lucy Dixon's illustrious relative was Chief Justice of the High Court, Anita Clarke's father was a highly regarded surgeon and Nancy Lester's family owned several well-known grazing properties in the central highlands south west of Sydney. Would these girls be happy to continue to be Pippa's friend, once their mothers knew the truth about Pippa's birth, she pondered?

'Yes,' Pippa said defiantly. 'I told them everything. I wanted people to know that I actually have a mother and a father and they shouldn't feel sorry for me. That I'm not really an orphan.'

Edith could see the girl was close to tears but she pressed her for more information.

'I hope you didn't reveal your parents' names?' she said, trying to hide her anxiety.

Philippe had privately canvassed with her the problems that might occur for him if his parentage of an illegitimate daughter became widely known. He had extracted a promise from his daughter to be discreet but could she keep that promise?

It worried him, not because he was ashamed of her, but he knew full well how it might affect his professional standing. He was in a new city among people he did not know. He was not yet a trusted member of the medical fraternity. He was an outsider with an unusual name who was still being viewed with some suspicion, despite his high professional standing.

Edith moved across the room and put her arm around the girl's shoulders. She hoped and prayed Pippa would not pay a heavy price for the trust she had placed in her friends. Only time would tell, Edith thought. Only time would tell.

In another part of Sydney, Paul Francis Belleville, who had celebrated his twelfth birthday just a week earlier, was holding a letter from his father, whom he had not seen in some months, his absence explained by the recent terrible events that Paul could only partly comprehend.

Paul had tried hard to hide his disappointment at neither parent being present to celebrate his birthday just as he had hidden his disappointment at being sent to stay with his good friend Tim Lester's family for the Christmas holidays. Tim's mother had done her best to

help him, sympathising with the boy at the loss of his family home and the death of his grandmother not knowing that he also faced the worry of his parents' impending divorce. This information he had kept to himself. The fire that destroyed his home had been reason enough for his need of an alternative home for the holidays and the Lester family had been generous in taking him in.

'Is that a letter from your Dad? How is he?' Tim asked his friend as he came upon him in a secluded part of the school grounds where they were both boarders. Being Saturday, they were free of schoolwork for a few precious hours.

'He's getting better he says,' Paul replied, folding the letter carefully and replacing it in the envelope.

Paul had heard the shocking news of the attack on his father from the headmaster who had spoken with his Uncle William. The extent of Richard's injuries and the reason for the attack had been downplayed so as not to alarm the boy.

'Did they get the bloke who did it?' Tim asked, for that question was upper most in his mind.

'Yes, they did get him,' Paul answered. 'In fact he's dead.'

Tim let out a low whistle. No one of his limited experience had ever been killed by anyone in a fight.

'Did your Dad kill him?' he asked, his eyes widening at the prospect of knowing the son of a man capable of killing an assailant.

'No, he didn't kill him,' Paul explained. 'Our estate manager did. My Dad was knocked out.'

That was as much as Paul knew. He had not been told the reason behind the attack on Prior Park that had killed his grandmother nor the name of the perpetrator. The fact that the same person had attacked his father had been omitted from the account his father had written. He had said only that it was someone with a grudge against the family.

'Wow, how did he kill him?' Tim asked breathlessly. 'Won't your estate manager go to jail?'

There had been too little detail in Paul's description to satisfy him. He knew he was going have to drag each little piece of information out of his friend.

The idea of Charles Brockman going to jail for saving his father had not occurred to Paul, who was shocked at the idea, yet he shook his head. It seemed cut and dried to him.

‘I don’t think so. Dad says he did it to save his life. And I don’t know how he killed him,’ Paul answered truthfully. ‘I expect he hit him hard. Charles is an old man but he is tall and very muscular. There wouldn’t be too many men who would get the better of him in a fight.’

In his letter to his son, Richard had carefully omitted the detail of how Charles had ended Alistair McGovern’s life with one lucky shot. Time enough, Richard thought, for the boy to know all the details when the story could be told face to face. It was enough now that he should know the bare facts.

There were other things too that Paul Belleville was being shielded from. He was yet to discover that he had a new cousin – a girl – and that his Aunt Julia’s marriage was in tatters. He was good mates with his cousin John who was two years younger but Paul’s absence at school so far away had meant the two boys now saw each other rarely.

Tim and Paul sat side by side on a low stone wall, looking out towards the harbour. It was a fine hot day and the water glistened. To them, it seemed unfair to be confined to the school grounds on such a day.

‘Let’s go down to the water,’ Tim said. ‘No one will miss us for an hour or two.’

Paul readily agreed. Today of all days he needed to be with his friend. He needed something to take his mind off the other letter he had received that week, this time from his mother. He was surprised at her suggestion he travel back to England with her on her next visit to live permanently in England.

‘At the moment your father doesn’t have a home,’ she had written. ‘You enjoyed being at Haldon Hall when you were younger ...’

He was confused by the terrible choice he faced. He knew, whichever option he chose, he was going to disappoint one of his parents.

In England he would be reunited with his mother and his younger brother Anthony and that would be something to look forward to,

Return to Prior Park

but his heart broke at the prospect of rarely seeing his father and the place he loved most in the world.

He had not seen the pile of rubble that had been his much-loved home at Prior Park. There was no image of the devastation lodged in his mind. In his imagination the grand house was still intact, adding grace and refinement to the bush landscape.

And he remembered how he had been free to roam the countryside for miles beyond the house. It was Belleville land and he assumed, without knowing for sure, that he would one day take ownership of it. That was where his heart belonged. That was where it would always belong.

CHAPTER 4

April 1958

Hopes of fine spring weather looked to be doomed with the cold winds of March continuing unabated at Haldon Hall in the days leading up to Easter.

But Catherine Belleville hardly noticed the weather at all. Inside the house, great log fires gave off their friendly warmth in each of the downstairs rooms.

For most of the morning, she had been in earnest discussions with Maurice Langton, the family solicitor, who secretly enjoyed the prestige of visiting his most important client at her home.

‘We have to deal with the death duties soon,’ Maurice Langton said, in a flat, matter of fact tone, once they had dispensed with the ordinary day-to-day business of the estate.

‘I know,’ Catherine answered quickly. ‘It seems such a lot of money. Does it mean I will have to sell some assets, do you think?’

She was aware that her father, surprisingly for someone of his background, had managed his financial affairs well but the estate could not escape the burden of taxes resulting from his death.

‘I think so,’ her solicitor replied cautiously. ‘There are several commercial properties in London that would fetch a good price, I believe.’

But she shook her head.

‘Are there no other options?’ she asked. ‘The properties in London are in prime areas and give us very good rental income.’

Since her father’s death, she had become aware of the income

needed to pay for the lifestyle they enjoyed at Haldon Hall. Selling income-producing assets did not strike her as a good idea.

‘You could sell one of the farms here,’ he said, despite knowing Catherine’s reluctance. The estate’s long serving tenant farmers might be turned off the farms if they were sold.

‘No, I don’t think that’s an option either,’ she said. ‘Are there stocks and shares or cash deposits perhaps?’

She had not yet fully grasped the extent of her father’s wealth or how it was held and he had never taken her into his confidence. She had come to her inheritance totally unprepared. Langton consulted his papers, but he did not really need to do so. He had studied all the financial holdings very closely.

‘There are some shares, some bonds and some cash holdings but they will never yield the sort of sum we will need,’ he said bluntly.

Catherine did not reply immediately. Instead she got up and headed towards the window. Walking about the room gave her time to think. It seemed to her to be a poor choice to be forced to sell good assets to pay death duties. She turned back towards the centre of the room, her face brightening. She resumed her seat opposite Langton.

‘What about paintings? We have two very good J M W Turner pieces?’

He smiled, not having previously considered the possibility of valuable pieces of art as a potential source of cash.

‘By all means, we could sell them, if you think you can bear to part with them,’ he said.

She shrugged. Better to sell the paintings than land or good commercial property, she thought. Her thoughts drifted to her place in Sydney. It too was bringing in income since she had decided to let it out. But to sell it would disappoint her elder son, she knew that.

She wondered then if she had taken notice of some of the conversations she had heard at the dinner table at Prior Park between Richard and his brother William. They had never asked her opinion about their business decisions but she had listened to their discussions all the same with more interest than they had known. Now it was all becoming useful to her.

‘I’ll think about it,’ she said finally. ‘How much time do I have to pay?’

He smiled, understanding very well that the settlement of death duties could be delayed.

‘I can stall them with a letter so we have time yet,’ he said, but he took the opportunity to raise the other urgent matters.

He cleared his throat. These were difficult subjects to broach but it was his duty, as her lawyer, to raise them.

‘Your divorce,’ he said, uncertain how to frame the question. ‘How shall we proceed?’

The discussion was awkward for him. He paled at the prospect of her reputation being shredded by the tabloid press. He hoped there would not be any talk of adultery.

‘How nicely you frame the question for such a distasteful matter, Mr Langton,’ she retorted.

He nodded his head politely.

‘We have already sent documents to your husband to sign to establish the separation, which he has done.’

‘Thank you,’ she said quickly, without giving him the opportunity to ask more questions.

She suspected, without being certain, that he had heard gossip about her relationship with her distant cousin Edward Cavendish.

‘And custody of the children?’ he asked quietly. ‘Have you and Mr Belleville agreed on an arrangement?’

‘There is nothing in writing, Mr Langton,’ she said quickly. ‘Anthony is to remain here with me for the time being and I now have an inclination to seek custody of Paul too. My husband no longer has a stable home to offer them since Prior Park burnt down.’

Maurice Langton was surprised and somewhat alarmed at this latest suggestion and said so.

‘I think, if I am to understand your informal arrangement, your husband believed the older boy would remain in Australia,’ he said. ‘Have you considered if you start making demands like this he might make the divorce proceedings more difficult for you?’

It was as close as he could come to outright disagreement with her. He thought her husband had been very fair in allowing the younger child to remain with her. But he did not think Richard Belleville would take kindly to both of his sons being brought up on the other

side the world. He doubted a court would side with his client but he did not go so far as to say so. He knew Richard Belleville was a wealthy man with the resources to fight a court battle if it came to it. And a war hero. That would raise his standing in the eyes of any judge.

‘Well,’ she said finally, ‘I’ve written to Paul asking if he wants to come back with me next time I visit and live permanently with me here.’

‘I see,’ he said. ‘Have you written to your husband with the same request?’

‘No, I haven’t,’ she admitted. ‘I wanted to see what Paul’s reaction is first before I raised it with Richard.’

Langton paused, carefully considering what he should say next.

‘Was that entirely fair on the child, Mrs Belleville?’ he asked. ‘He is only twelve years old after all. It’s a tough choice to be asked to make.’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘We will see, I guess,’ she said.

‘I take it your husband has recovered from the injuries he sustained in the terrible assault?’ he asked, deciding not to pursue the question of custody any further.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I got a letter from him earlier this week.’

‘I haven’t told Anthony about it yet,’ she added. ‘I didn’t think a five-year-old would have much understanding of such a dreadful incident.’

‘Very wise I’m sure, Mrs Belleville,’ he responded. ‘And while we’re talking about your children, have you considered how you will dispose of the estate in your will? Have you thought any further about it?’

The issue had worried him greatly ever since she had inherited everything from her father but she had continually stalled his efforts to discuss the matter in greater detail. She had two sons but neither of them was English. Would they, in later years, want the burden of running an English estate, he wondered?

‘I haven’t decided what to do yet, Mr Langton,’ she said finally. ‘I think that’s a matter for another day.’

She looked quickly at her wristwatch and rose from her chair, indicating that the meeting was over. He quickly gathered up his papers and walked with her towards the door.

Just as the butler opened the front door, they were greeted by the noise of a car speeding down the driveway towards the house.

‘I assume that’s Sir Edward coming to pay a call,’ Langton said, looking in the direction of a deep green Jaguar. It’s so shiny it must be new, he thought.

‘Yes,’ said Catherine smiling broadly. ‘I’ve been expecting him. In fact, he’s late. He wants to show off his new car. By the look of it, he’s just collected it from the showroom.’

As Maurice Langton walked towards his own car, he raised a hand in greeting to the visitor who did likewise as he walked hurriedly towards the house to greet Catherine.

Looking back as he slowed his car to turn out of the driveway onto the main road back to town, Maurice Langton caught sight of a brief warm embrace before Catherine and Edward disappeared into the house. It confirmed the suspicions he already harboured: that Catherine Belleville had already found her next husband. All that remained was for her to become a free woman so she could marry again.

And what then would the future hold for her Australian children, he wondered, if she was to have a child with Sir Edward? A son of the marriage would inherit the baronetcy which her Australian sons could never do. Would the temptation then be to leave all her wealth to such a child to ensure the viability of the estate? Would the Belleville children in those circumstances be better off being brought up by their father in Australia, where they would no doubt inherit his wealth and feel more at home, he mused.

He mulled over the possibilities as he drove away, oblivious to the biting cold wind and the rain squall that threatened to turn into a torrential downpour.

In Sydney Good Friday dawned bright and sunny. A slight breeze helped propel the myriad of small sailing boats that had taken to the water. The Manly ferry chugged away from Circular Quay. It was making slow but steady progress across the harbour on its regular route around Middle Head to its destination on the far side of the harbour.

Julia Belleville sat beside her daughter Pippa on a park bench near the harbour’s edge. Together they watched the endless activity on the

water. Julia had quickly reverted to using her maiden name. The name Fitzroy, she said, belonged to another life.

Aunt Edith came towards them, clutching an ice cream for each of them. She joined mother and daughter on the seat.

‘This is going to be my best birthday,’ Julia said, as she took the proffered ice cream.

The three of them sat together in silence for some time. Julia’s thoughts drifted to the night of her eighteenth birthday party at Prior Park sixteen years earlier. To her, it seemed like a lifetime ago. She had been an innocent then, not knowing what lay ahead of her. It was only a little over a year later she discovered she was pregnant and Philippe had gone, posted away from Australia. She shuddered at the memory of what she had been through.

Pippa was oblivious to the slight tremor but Edith noticed it. Yet she said nothing. She did not want to embarrass Julia. Edith did not know the full story but had pieced together the snippets she had been told. It was enough for her. She sympathised with Julia. She knew how hard it must have been for Julia to give up her daughter. But she sympathised with Julia’s mother too. What other choice could she have made, she wondered?

‘Are we expecting Philippe to join us?’ Edith asked, for she was sure that had been the arrangement.

Julia shook her head slowly. She was beginning to understand the demands on surgeons. Sometimes surgery could not wait until a more convenient time.

‘He phoned me at the hotel this morning,’ she said. ‘He was called in to do an emergency operation. It was a patient who was injured in a traffic accident last night.’

She had already told Pippa, who had expressed her unhappiness at the news.

‘Was there no one else available?’ Edith asked, surprised, because she had thought Philippe had not expected to be on call over the Easter break.

‘Apparently the surgeon who should have done the operation sprained his ankle playing tennis yesterday,’ she said.

Edith nodded. A neurosurgeon of Philippe’s skill was always in

demand, especially for the most traumatic cases. She wondered how many events he had missed and how many dinners he had forgone to save someone's life.

'And when are you going to see the house he has purchased?' Edith asked.

She had not seen it but Philippe had been as good as his word and taken Pippa with him to see a number of prospective houses.

Pippa interrupted before her mother could answer.

'We're going tomorrow,' she said, 'but we can't see inside it, just from the outside, because the sale isn't finalised yet.'

Julia smiled. She felt as if she hardly needed to see it. Pippa had told her a good deal about it, especially about the garden and the very modern kitchen, and the room she imagined would be her bedroom.

'And how long before the sale is finalised?' Edith asked.

Once again, it was Pippa who answered.

'It won't be final until at least the middle of next month,' she said authoritatively.

Julia and Edith exchanged quiet smiles. They both knew Philippe would have no success at all in keeping anything from Pippa in the future. But what was the future? Julia could not say for certain.

She and Philippe had exchanged letters over the intervening months since they had met unexpectedly in Sydney. But so much had happened since that time. Her marriage had collapsed, as she knew it would. Her childhood home Prior Park had burnt down at the hand of a madman and worst of all her mother had died as a result. Then Richard had been attacked and nearly killed. Life had become complicated.

Could she put all that behind her and rekindle her romantic relationship with Philippe? And what about John? If she was to live with Philippe, did that mean she was abandoning her son?

There appeared to be no easy choices. For now, she had to be content to live in the moment.

The three of them began to walk back along the almost empty city streets towards her hotel. This time they would lunch together for the first time in the hotel dining room where she had first seen Pippa with Philippe.

She often thought how easily she might have missed seeing them that day. It was the day on which her life had changed forever yet it was such an unlikely encounter that she hardly believed it was chance alone that had brought them all together.

‘And how do you know Dr Duval, Miss Belleville?’

Patricia Clarke asked the question as she guided Julia towards the room where the other female guests were leaving their evening wraps and repairing their makeup. A babble of voices greeted them as the hostess opened the door. Julia was quickly introduced to five or six women, all of whom seemed to be talking at once. They stopped suddenly on being told she was Dr Duval’s partner for the evening. Julia could not help but notice how they looked her up and down, ‘as if I was some prize exhibit’ she later told Philippe.

He did not know it but his arrival at St Vincent’s Hospital had not gone unnoticed by the doctors’ wives and daughters. His excellent manners, his reputation as a fine surgeon and his status as a single man had all combined to ignite interest in him on his appointment. An invitation to Patricia Clarke’s Easter dinner party had been in high demand when it had become known he would attend.

But Philippe had known that Julia would be questioned about their friendship so her story had been agreed between them. He had not needed to tell her to remove her wedding and engagement rings.

She had at first resisted his invitation to accompany him to the dinner party but he had persisted and she had agreed in the end. She had not wanted to disappoint him.

As she walked towards him in the hotel lobby, he had smiled and whispered, ‘you look beautiful’.

He could see she had gone to some trouble with her dress. But he could not allay her nervousness completely. He felt her body trembling as he guided her towards the exit.

‘It will be fine,’ he had whispered reassuringly.

His words echoed in her mind as she answered her hostess’s question.

‘I met Dr Duval during the war when he was stationed near my home,’ she said quickly. ‘We met again recently. I was on a visit to Sydney

late last year and he was attending a medical conference. We met by accident.'

Patricia Clarke listened intently. Up until Philippe had telephoned to ask if he may bring a friend, there had been no talk of his being attached. In fact, very little was known of his personal life, something she was quick to point out to her husband, who had quickly lost patience with her questions

'That was fortunate indeed,' Patricia Clarke replied.

The other women overheard her remark and noted the slight scepticism in her voice. The faint marks left on Julia's finger by the rings she had discarded had not escaped her notice but she said nothing more on the topic.

The older woman guided Julia down a long corridor towards a brightly lit drawing room. The house was large with a fine view up the harbour from the terrace which could be directly accessed from the drawing room, a fact her hostess did not fail to mention even though it was dark and the night too chilly for open windows.

'Now come through and meet my husband,' Patricia Clarke said. 'You are the only stranger in our midst.'

Dr Robert Clarke turned at the sound of his wife's voice and extended his hand towards Julia. He was not quite so diplomatic as his wife.

'Ah, so you're the mystery girl. All the other single females at the hospital are going to be green with envy,' he declared loudly.

It was a clumsy greeting but fortunately Philippe, who was standing alongside his host, filled the awful silence that followed. He could sense Julia's alarm. He slipped his arm loosely around her waist.

'What a lot of nonsense you talk sometimes, Robert,' Philippe said smoothly. 'I'm a middle-aged man well past my prime. I think the young girls have much better prospects than me.'

He turned towards Julia.

'I'd like you to meet an old friend of mine, Julia Belleville. I knew her family when I was posted here during the war.'

Robert Clarke held onto Julia's hand longer than politeness dictated.

'How do you do, Dr Clarke,' she said quietly.

It's as if I'm back in school at deportment classes, she thought. How many times had they practised those words and then dissolved in giggles? It seemed to her much safer to say very little than to begin to embellish the story of how she and Philippe first met.

She was saved by the hostess who, just at that moment, began to usher her guests into the dining room. She came alongside Julia.

'Don't mind my husband,' she said. 'He can be very tactless at times but he's a fine surgeon.'

Julia smiled but said nothing.

There were twelve guests in all. Philippe, distracted by a question from another guest, did not notice Julia's attention turn towards a number of photographs neatly arranged on the grand piano that stood near the doorway leading out of the drawing room. One photo in particular caught her eye and she could not look away. She had not asked who was in the picture but her hostess took her cue.

'That's my daughter Anita with some of her school chums at Meriden,' she said, picking up the photo for closer scrutiny. She pointed to the girls, one by one, for Julia's benefit.

'That's Lucy Dixon – her great uncle is Chief Justice – and Nancy Lester. Her people have property in the southern highlands. The girl on the right, standing slightly apart, is Pippa Jensen.'

She placed the photograph back on the piano.

'That last girl has a very sad story. She's an orphan but now she's telling the story at school that she's actually the illegitimate daughter of a wartime romance between a young girl and an American soldier and that her parents are still very much alive. All very sordid if you ask me. I've suggested to Anita she should see less of the girl.'

Patricia Clarke continued to chatter but Julia did not hear her. It was all she could do to nod politely. She breathed a sigh of relief as her hostess's attention was demanded elsewhere. She caught Philippe's eye and motioned silently towards the picture.

He looked at it but did not pick it up. He did not want to draw further attention to it. He said nothing but took her hand and slipped her arm through his.

'She does not think Pippa is a fit girl for her daughter to know,' she whispered. 'They are at the same school. I did not know.'

‘Neither did I,’ Philippe said quietly. ‘It never occurred to me to ask about their daughter. Robert has only ever mentioned her once and only then because she was in strife about something.’

For the first time, Julia began to realise how little she knew of her daughter’s life and how Pippa might be despised for the circumstances of her birth if it became widely known. Would that even be resolved if she and Philippe married, she wondered? How would they explain a teenage daughter?

Philippe too was beginning to see the problems that might lie ahead. He had always believed his professional standing and qualifications would be the determining factor in his career. But in a conservative hospital environment would they be prepared to look the other way if his personal life became the subject of gossip? He hoped it would not come to that. But in bringing Julia with him to the dinner party he realised too late he had foolishly exposed himself to the very conjecture he had hoped to avoid.

Why had he given up an outstanding career in New York to move to Sydney, they had all asked? No one he met had ever been entirely convinced by his explanation of wanting a new challenge. Yet he offered them no other reason. Now, he might have unwittingly provided that other reason.

For the first time, Julia noticed how tired he looked.

‘Are you quite well?’ she asked.

The concern in her voice was unmistakable. He smiled at her. The sight of her lifted his mood.

‘The surgery yesterday was very difficult and demanding,’ he said, ‘but successful. And I had a full week of surgery before that.’

She nodded. She knew very little of his work but it did not take much imagination to know the work he did was extremely demanding.

‘We must look after you,’ she said, just as they were separated by their hostess who was keen to ensure the carefully arranged seating plan at her dinner table was not upset by the unexpected presence of Dr Duval’s unknown friend.

‘I’ve put you next to Robert’s niece, Karen Clarke,’ Patricia Clarke said.

Without taking breath, she spoke quickly to the young woman alongside of whom she had indicated the empty chair for Philippe.

‘Karen, this is Dr Philippe Duval, the new surgeon working with your uncle. We must make him feel at home.’

Philippe extended his hand and felt a small cool hand touch his very briefly. He smiled acknowledging the introduction. She smiled at him in return.

‘I’ve heard a lot about you, Dr Duval,’ she said, ‘and all of it good.’

‘I can’t believe all the reports would have been favourable,’ he said, returning her friendly banter.

‘Oh, but they were, Dr Duval, they were,’ she said, disputing his attempts to make light of his reputation. Her voice, raised to emphasise the point, could be heard along the length of the table.

Julia, seated towards the end of the table, watched the exchange with just a small pang of anxiety.

Karen Clarke was, she calculated, at least five years younger than her. Her face, framed by a mass of auburn hair, was turned towards Philippe. Julia’s gaze moved to her dress, which was elegant and clearly expensive. She wore a diamond clasp on each shoulder. Julia never doubted the diamonds were real. Karen’s hand, she noticed, rested lightly on Philippe’s arm in playful rebuke of his refusal to believe everything she had heard of him was positive.

Dr Jules Hamilton, who sat alongside Julia, followed her gaze.

‘That’s Karen Clarke,’ he said without prompting. ‘On the lookout for a husband I believe. She was due to marry one of the Fairholm boys but she called it off before the big day, so she’s back on the market. Looks like she might have Duval in her sights. If that’s the case, he won’t have any chance of escape.’

Julia heard all this in stony silence.

Dr Jules Hamilton, totally unaware of Julia’s interest, shrugged his shoulders at her silence and instead attacked the entrée of prawns that had just been placed before him with gusto.