

# First Born Son

BOOK 1 IN THE  
PHILIPPE DUVAL 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 country life and also paying homage to her favourite city: Sydney.

She is a member of the Queensland Writers Centre (QWC) and the Australian Society of Authors (ASA). Judith has also completed a fiction writing course with noted literary agency Curtis Brown.

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

Readers are invited to contact Judith through the following channels.

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### *Belleville series*

BOOK 1 Julia's Story

BOOK 2 To Love, Honour and Betray

BOOK 3 Return to Prior Park

BOOK 4 Heirs and Successors (2023)

### *Philippe Duval series*

BOOK 1 First Born Son (2023)

BOOK 2 Price to Pay (coming 2024)

## Acknowledgements & insights

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the readers who have contacted me to say they enjoyed my Belleville series. It means a lot to an author to know someone is reading—and enjoying—their work. *Thank you.*

I describe *First Born Son* as a companion book to the latest Belleville book, *Heirs and Successors*. It covers a similar time frame to *Heirs and Successors*; however this book deals with the Julia Belleville/Philippe Duval relationship. I had to make the choice to publish a separate title to ensure that *Heirs and Successors* did not become a book too large, too complicated and too unwieldy to read.

Writers often say characters take on a life of their own, the writing being a mere conduit to getting their story on the page. As soon as I began exploring the early life of Philippe Duval, I knew it had to be more than a few chapters in the fourth Belleville novel.

Inevitably, there is some overlap between *Heirs and Successors* and *First Born Son*. And for readers meeting these characters for the first time, I hope I have provided enough information by way of background. You're invited to check out [www.jmarymasters.com](http://www.jmarymasters.com) for more information.

I hope you enjoy the book. And if you do, please tell your friends.

Good reading.

*Judith M Masters writing as J Mary Masters*

## Key characters

Dr Philippe Duval  
Julia Duval (formerly Belleville/Fitzroy)  
Pippa Duval

Surgeon  
Philippe's wife  
Julia & Philippe's daughter

### *AUSTRALIA*

Richard Belleville  
Kate Belleville (formerly Lester)  
William Belleville  
Alice Belleville (formerly Fitzroy)  
Paul Belleville  
Anthony Belleville  
Susan Belleville  
Marianne Belleville  
James Fitzroy  
John Fitzroy

Elder son of the family  
Richard's second wife  
Younger son of the family  
William's wife  
Richard & Catherine's son  
Richard & Catherine's son  
Richard & Kate's daughter  
William & Alice's daughter  
Julia's former husband  
James & Julia's son

### *SYDNEY*

Dr Robert Clarke  
Patricia Clarke  
Anita Clarke  
David Clarke  
Deborah Clarke  
Karen Clarke  
Bianca Ferrari  
Ian Dixon  
Angela Dixon  
Lucy Dixon  
Tim Lester  
Nancy Lester  
Kenneth Wright  
Nicholas Gleeson

Registrar/Surgeon  
His wife  
Their daughter  
Robert Clarke's brother  
His wife  
Their daughter  
Karen's business partner  
Barrister  
His wife  
Their daughter  
Kate Belleville's son  
Kate Belleville's daughter  
Lawyer  
Lawyer

### *AMERICA*

Walter William Cox II  
Walter William Cox III  
Barbara Cox  
Walter William Cox IV  
Virginia Cox  
Clarence White  
Frederick  
Mrs Anderson  
Howard Davis

Patriarch  
Son  
Wife  
Son  
Daughter  
Butler  
Chauffeur  
Housekeeper  
Lawyer

# PROLOGUE

*June 1968*

AS PHILIPPE DUVAL, EMINENT SURGEON, husband to Julia, father to Pippa, boarded the aeroplane that would take him back to the land of his birth, he had no inkling of what lay ahead of him, no foreknowledge of how his life was about to change forever. He had no way of knowing the journey, which began on a cold blustery winter's day in Sydney, would mark the end of the life he had known.

To him, the journey was simply a chance to revisit New York, the city of his younger days, while he helped his daughter fast track her medical career.

As he settled into his seat, he let his thoughts drift aimlessly across the full spectrum of his life so far, as if silently marking some invisible report card, but only he would know where he had marked himself as a failure.

On the whole, he was satisfied. Professionally, he was content. And personally? He enjoyed the companionship of his daughter. And their shared interest in medicine. Beyond that, his mind began to wander. His marriage? Not a failure certainly. But if he was honest he wouldn't count it as an unqualified success either. Had it come too late for them?

His mind drifted to the probable reason for his doubt. And then

he rebuked himself silently. Even to think such thoughts was a disloyalty. He turned back to the medical journal that had previously failed to hold his attention.

Pippa sat quietly beside him, immersed in her own thoughts.

‘I hope my mother’s not lonely while we’re away,’ she said suddenly, aware they were both abandoning her.

‘If she’s lonely,’ her father said with absolute assurance, ‘she’ll go up north to visit her family.’

Pippa nodded. Like her father, her thoughts had drifted to her mother. There had been times when she had wondered if her mother was truly happy with city life compared with her country upbringing.

Time and again the same questions came unbidden into Pippa’s mind. What if she had never discovered me and my father? Would she have been happier and more contented continuing with her first marriage rather than marrying my father? Had the marriage come too late for them? She would have been alarmed to know the same thought had occurred to her father as he sat beside her.

With these half-formed thoughts, Pippa’s mind turned to what lay ahead. Her father had gone to great lengths to secure the short hospital internship for her. She worried, given his reputation, they would have the same high expectations of her as a doctor. Even now she doubted she would ever be as committed to medicine as he had been. And still was.

And then she reminded herself there was another, even more pressing reason, for her to go to America and especially to New York. She had a desperate urge to fill in the blanks in her father’s life, just as she had finally been able to fill in the blanks in her own early life.

Would she ever be able to fully forgive her mother for giving her up at birth? Just occasionally, her bitterness resurfaced until her rational mind prevailed. Her mother had been given no choice by her family. By her own mother, in fact. The shame of an illegitimate child was unendurable to the Belleville family of Prior Park.

But this time, she did not dwell on the past as she might have done. Instead she settled back in her seat and began to contemplate



the future with a mixture of anxiety and excitement.

Beside her, her father seemed immersed in the latest medical journal yet after a few minutes, she noticed he had not turned a page at all.

‘A good article?’ she asked, nodding towards the magazine.

He smiled.

‘Interesting,’ he said, ‘but I’m finding it hard to concentrate.’

She nodded and smiled, thinking she understood exactly what he meant.

He let his daughter go on assuming she knew what had caused his concentration to falter. She would have been alarmed to know the truth.

Even as he had attempted to return to his reading, Philippe’s mind had drifted back to his final visitor on his last day at the hospital for some time. In the middle of writing up the final patient notes, his office door had opened unexpectedly. He could remember every little detail about his unexpected visitor. How her auburn hair cascaded delightfully over her shoulders. How her seductive smile lit up her perfect face.

He had avoided her for so long, but in the privacy of his office late that afternoon, he had weakened.

*Don’t forget about me,* she had said as she put her arms around him. *I’m still here if you ever want me.*

*As if there was ever any doubt I still want her.* The idea was laughable, he thought. But since his marriage to Julia, he had avoided her. Deliberately. But that day, he had taken her in his arms and kissed her, tentatively at first, and then passionately.

He recalled her words exactly. *Will you go back to ignoring me when you get back?*

He had hurt her when he had walked away from her and married Julia. *No, I won’t go back to ignoring you,* he had promised. *I’ve never stopped wanting you. Not for one moment.* By avoiding her, he had avoided facing the truth for years.

And then she had smiled and walked out of his office. And he had been left to consider how it was that one beautiful young woman had

the power to undermine everything he believed were the foundations on which he had built his life. Honesty. Integrity. Fidelity.

Yet he found himself beginning to contemplate the pleasure of seeing her on his return. And beyond that? He knew it would only take one small step on his part to become her lover again. The fact he thought himself capable of taking that step surprised him.

And then he banished those thoughts from his mind. He had finished with Karen Clarke years ago. She was part of his past. *I'm happily married*, he reminded himself, as if somehow by repeating the words silently, it would be rendered true. As if those few words could by themselves act as a protection against temptation.

But still he could not banish the image of her from his mind. Nor could he banish the memory of being her lover. And everything about the encounter continued to unsettle him.

# CHAPTER 1

## *America*

EVER SINCE SHE HAD heard it, Pippa had not been satisfied with the brief unembellished story of her father's early life. She knew there had to be more. More to know. More to understand. But he was a man who did not like to live in the past. Why was it that he did not want to confront the past, she wondered? She went over and over the scant facts she already knew.

His mother was the daughter of a gardener to one of the wealthy families of Long Island. His father? Unknown, he had said at first, trying to throw her off the scent. But she had not believed him. Was his father perhaps a son of the household where his grandfather had worked? She had asked him outright and he had shrugged. *How can I know for sure*, he had replied? *There is no father listed on my birth certificate.*

*But your mother must have told you something?* She had persisted. *You can't have gone through your life with your mother and not been curious to know who your father was.*

He had sighed deeply, she remembered, and repeated what little he knew of his birth. She could see then it was a pain buried so deep he had expected never to confront it again. It was a story of disappointment. Of loss. Of the loss of someone he had never known. His

father. A void in his life that could never now be filled.

With that, he had handed her a photo. It was a copy of the precious photo he had given Pippa's mother Julia just before he left Australia as war raged throughout the Pacific. On the back it had the same important inscription. His mother's address.

It was faded but she knew the story of the photo, how it had been the means by which he had discovered her birth. She had asked if she could keep the photograph. He had nodded. And she had put it away carefully. And kept it for years, promising herself one day she would be able to find out more. She was sure it would be the key that would unlock the door of who her father really was. And who his father was.

And now, on a warm summer's day, she was about to set out on the journey that would take her from the crowded sidewalks of Manhattan to the historic port of Sag Harbor except this was no sightseeing trip. She was setting out to find the Sag Harbor address, now almost unreadable, that her father had written years before on the back of the old photo. Would it be possible that neighbours would remember her grandmother? Remember her father? In her more rational moments, she convinced herself she was on a foolish errand. But even as these doubts assailed her, she fought back against them. How can I not try? The voice in her head finally won.

Now, after weeks of non-stop work at the hospital, she was finally free for five whole days. Her father had lamented the clash with his attendance at a medical conference in Chicago but she had been secretly pleased. It left her free to do as she pleased.

By late morning, she had found her way to the historic harborside but it took her some time to find the small street on which her grandmother had lived. It was tucked away several streets back from the famous harbor but now as she stood in front of the house so clearly identifiable in the background of the photograph, she looked up uncertainly. Should she go up to the front door?

To her critical eye, the house looked unkempt and uncared for. The lawn was weeks overdue for mowing and the few shrubs in the front garden had been allowed to grow unchecked, their faded flowers

left to wither on the stem. What had she expected? Not this, certainly. Something neater. She was dismayed. But she reminded herself this was not her grandmother's house. It hadn't been her grandmother's house for twenty years. Or more.

She pushed open the front gate and was about to head up the overgrown path towards the porch when she heard movement behind her.

'It's not available to rent,' a voice declared.

She stopped and turned, looking for the person who had spoken. She held her hand up to her eyes to help her see against the strong sunlight. The figure of a young man emerged from the haze of the sharp light. Within a few strides he was beside her and firmly pulling closed the gate she had pushed open.

'You should try down at the local real estate office,' he said, 'if you want a place to rent.'

She paused. Who was he? Did he own the place?

'Is this your place?' she asked.

'Not mine,' he said abruptly. 'It belongs to my grandfather, as do all the houses in this street.'

She looked around, noticing for the first time a line of similar small cottages, some much better kept than the house in front of her.

'That's a lot of houses to own,' Pippa said.

The young man shrugged.

'Maybe,' he said.

And then it was his turn to pause and look at her quizzically.

'You're not from round these parts, are you?'

Pippa shook her head, her long blonde hair cascading around her face.

'No. I'm Australian. My name is Pippa Duval.'

She wondered if the name might trigger a reaction but she was disappointed. He gave no sign of recognition.

'So, tell me, what's your interest in this house, Pippa Duval,' he asked, not having reciprocated with his own name.

Despite the pleasantries, she sensed an unmistakable air of arrogance in the young man so she hesitated. Was this the moment to

blurt out the full story? Would that ultimately help her quest? Or hinder it? She had only moments to make up her mind.

‘Someone I know used to live in this house,’ she said, deciding to go carefully.

‘Must have been a long time ago,’ he said. ‘It’s been vacant since I was a small child.’

‘Which accounts for the front garden being very overgrown, I suppose,’ Pippa said, realising there was much more to the story of the house being vacant than an unkempt garden.

‘My grandfather likes it that way,’ he admitted. ‘But we do send a gardener down every now and again to give it a tidy up.’

Pippa considered this small snippet of information for a few moments.

‘The house must be special to him to keep it empty,’ she said finally, hoping to prize more information from the young American.

‘It is, apparently,’ came the half-interested reply. ‘But no one is quite sure why. We just speculate.’

‘We just speculate?’

It seemed an odd thing to say.

‘My father and I,’ he explained.

The young man was more relaxed now. He lent against the gate, his arms folded casually across his chest. For the first time, Pippa was aware of him looking at her with greater interest. She moved a little to distance herself from him.

‘By the way, you didn’t tell me your name,’ she said, looking at him intently.

‘My apologies,’ he said. ‘Walter William Cox the fourth, at your service, ma’am.’

He made a mock bow in her direction.

‘It’s nice to meet you, Walter William Cox the fourth,’ Pippa replied, executing a mock curtesy in his direction.

‘Well, Pippa Duval,’ he said, ‘you haven’t explained what a young Australian girl is doing trying to break into one of our houses.’

She frowned and shrugged her shoulders. What should she say? How much should she tell him? Could she trust him?

‘It’s a long story probably best not begun in the middle of the street,’ she said finally. She was far from certain how much she should tell him.

‘Then come home with me for lunch and you can tell me the long story,’ he replied, with some semblance of gallantry.

Was he interested in her story or was this just a pick-up line, she wondered? He noticed her hesitation.

‘Don’t worry, you’ll be safe. My mother will be there,’ he said. ‘And my sister. Not sure about my father. My car’s just down the road.’

Was this a good idea, she wondered? It seemed like everything was happening too fast. He noticed her hesitation.

‘Shall we?’

He motioned down the street towards his gleaming red Chevrolet Camaro.

‘Thank you, I’d like that,’ she said. ‘Lead on.’

As they walked along the street together, she listened without interrupting to his commentary as he pointed out the workers cottages his grandfather owned naming each tenant as they passed slowly along the street until they reached his car. She wondered what his purpose had been visiting the street on a Saturday morning but whatever it was, he had not volunteered the information. Within minutes, he was deftly negotiating Sag Harbor’s historic streets and heading in the direction of East Hampton.

Fifteen minutes later, Walter William Cox brought his car to a standstill in front of what was a modest home compared with its immediate neighbour but of pleasingly grand proportions when compared with most of the neighbourhood. To her left, Pippa could see a majestic house she judged to be the size of a small palace. Walter Cox followed her gaze.

‘That’s grandfather’s house,’ he explained. ‘It will be father’s one day soon and then mine, I expect,’ without any real enthusiasm at the prospect.

‘It takes the gardeners almost two weeks to trim the borders that stretch from the south lawn to the south gate, I’ve been told,’ he added, somewhat unnecessarily.

Pippa turned back towards him. In her mind's eye, she believed she had already glimpsed the past, imagining her own father's grandfather hunched over the hedges, clippers in hand, snipping away until he was satisfied with his work.

'It looks like a palace,' she said, as much to cover her confusion as to pay a compliment.

He nodded and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, it's just a house.

'It's supposed to,' he said. 'It was built to impress.'

'Well, it certainly does that.'

Pippa had never seen a private home of such massive proportions.

'When my grandfather dies, I think my father may even demolish it and subdivide the land but my mother may have something to say about that,' he said, in a very matter of fact tone.

'Would that worry you? To see the family's heritage torn down?'

He shook his head.

'Not at all,' he said. 'It was a massive ego that built that house. It was never a happy home.'

'How do you know this?'

Pippa regretted the implicit challenge in her question almost as soon as she had uttered the words. It seemed such a personal question to put to a virtual stranger.

'Because that's what my father told me,' he replied as he climbed out of the driver's seat and walked to her side of the car to open the door.

'Will your mother be angry at an unexpected lunch guest?'

'Not at all,' he said. 'She's always encouraging me to bring girls home.'

He grinned broadly and she laughed.

'She'll be surprised you've picked up an Australian girl,' she teased.

'She will be at that,' he said, as together they made their way to the front door which opened seamlessly as they approached.

He ushered Pippa into an immaculate house of deceptively stately proportions. She noticed the quality of the furniture and the exquisite pictures that graced the walls. But most of all, she noticed how her young host was warmly welcomed back to his home by the butler, who chided him gently for not forewarning them of his guest.



Minutes later, Pippa found herself being surveyed from head to toe by Barbara Cox, to whom Walter had introduced her just moments before. For the first time, she wished she had taken more care with her dress. She had not counted on being a lunch guest in such a grand home. Her first instinct was to apologise but the words were left unsaid. Instead, she found herself an object of much curiosity. Not much escaped the gaze of Walter Cox's mother.

'Walter says he found you breaking into one of our houses,' she said, without any hint of humour in her voice. 'You don't look like a housebreaker.'

Pippa was about to laugh but opted instead for a serious reply.

'He was mistaken, Mrs Cox,' she replied. 'I simply wanted to speak to whoever lived there. I didn't know at the time it was vacant.'

'So tell me,' she said, hardly waiting to hear Pippa's explanation, 'what brings you to America? You're a long way from home.'

It was like an interrogation from a headmistress, Pippa thought. If you get an answer wrong, you'll find yourself in detention after school.

'I have a short internship at St John's hospital in Manhattan,' she replied.

She thought the simplest and shortest explanation was the best option.

'For a nurse? That's unusual, surely,' Barbara Cox replied.

'I'm Dr Pippa Duval, Mrs Cox,' she explained patiently. 'I'm planning to specialise in paediatrics. My father arranged it.'

Walter Cox, sensing the rising tension, chose that moment to intervene in the conversation.

'Pippa knows someone who lived in the cottage that Grandfather hasn't let out for years', he said. 'She says she has a long story to tell us.'

'Then we must hear it, Walter,' Barbara Cox said, her stiletto heels making a hollow sound as she led the way into the dining room where the table was laid for a lunch Pippa had assumed would be a casual family affair but which turned out to be something quite different.

As she entered the room, Barbara Cox motioned to the butler to lay another place. His white gloved hands obeyed the command swiftly even as the message of an additional guest was being conveyed to the kitchen.

‘My mother doesn’t like casual dining, even at lunch,’ Walter whispered in her ear.

Behind them, the sound of more footsteps alerted Pippa to the arrival of another person.

‘Ah, I see you’ve brought home a stray, brother dear.’

‘Now, Virginia, be nice,’ her mother commanded. ‘This is Pippa Duval. Your brother has invited her to lunch. She’s a doctor.’

‘Just what my brother needs,’ she retorted.

Was that look of disdain more than just sibling rivalry, Pippa wondered?

‘A psychiatrist I hope?’ she added, looking hopefully in Pippa’s direction, who shook her head.

‘I’m sorry to disappoint you on that score,’ she replied levelly. ‘I’m going to specialise in paediatric medicine.’

‘Sounds fascinating,’ she replied.

Having failed to score a point, she sunk into a sullen silence.

‘Is Father coming for lunch?’

Walter Cox had completely ignored his sister’s catty remarks, leaving Pippa to believe he was totally unmoved by her juvenile outburst.

‘I think so,’ his mother responded, consulting a diamond encrusted timepiece encircling her slim wrist, ‘so we will wait a few minutes for him.’

Barbara Cox indicated a place at the table for her unexpected guest and Walter, remembering the manners his mother had drummed into him, pulled back the chair for her to sit down.

‘Thank you,’ she said.

She nodded to Virginia who sat opposite but was greeted in return with only the merest hint of civility. Glasses of iced water appeared as if from nowhere.

‘Now we must hear your story, Pippa,’ Barbara Cox said. ‘Why were you so interested in the old cottage that no one has lived in for years?’

There was no hint of foreknowledge in Barbara Cox's question, nothing beyond polite curiosity, as if the question was the merest commonplace and Pippa's story would be nothing more than a diverting topic of conversation for a lunch table devoid of more interesting company.

'I don't quite know where to begin,' Pippa replied, hesitating.

Was this quite the right place and the right time to launch into her story?

'Why don't you begin at the beginning, young lady,' a voice behind her demanded.

She half turned in her seat towards the direction of the newcomer. As her eyes focused on Walter William Cox the third, her face went pale. There was much about him that was different but not so very different that she could not recognise a man who must be very closely related to her father.

In shock, she blurted out the very first words that came to her mind. 'You look just like my father!'

'Well, Dr Duval,' Walter said, as they headed west from East Hampton. 'You gave us all something to chew on.'

Pippa smiled. He at least had not been hostile towards her. Her departure from the house had been outwardly very civil but beneath the forced smiles she had detected a frostiness she could not fail to notice.

'I'm sorry it turned out the way it did,' she said apologetically. 'It wasn't my intention to blurt out what I did but when I saw your father, it was an automatic response. It just came out.'

He laughed.

'It did, didn't it! But it explains a lot.'

Pippa was beginning to relive, with considerable embarrassment, the very awkward lunch following her outburst. But Walter's response intrigued her.

'What do you mean: it explains a lot?'

He risked a sideways glance even as he urged the car's powerful engine to a faster and faster speed.

‘Remember I said the big house was never a happy place,’ he reminded her. ‘Now we know why. My grandfather was forced to marry someone the family approved of, rather than the woman he loved. My grandmother must have known that. She died years ago, a sad unhappy woman as I remember.’

‘But your grandfather is still alive, isn’t he?’

‘Yes, he is. But he’s not well. And he and my father don’t get along.’

‘Why is that do you think?’

Pippa was curious. She and her father had their differences but she loved him dearly. And then she remembered her adoptive father. He had been a cold, disappointed man who had spared her very little time or love.

‘It’s funny you know,’ he replied. ‘My father always said he felt like a second son. Now it appears as if he was right. He was a second son.’

‘But your father seems very reluctant to want to take this any further,’ Pippa said. ‘He did not ask me to bring my father on a visit.’

To her, it was simple. She compared it with her own story. When it became known her mother Julia had given birth to her out of wedlock, she had been accepted without question into the Belleville family, regardless of the short-lived scandal that ensued. Why could the Cox family not do the same? It was a question that nagged at her.

She waited for Walter to respond. She looked at him. It seemed as if he was weighing up the options. Loyalty to his family. Or honesty. In the end, he chose to be honest with her.

‘My father will be worried that your father will want to make a claim on Grandfather’s estate,’ he said finally. ‘Prestige and wealth are important to my father, to my mother and to my sister. They couldn’t abide a scandal in the family. They might get dropped from the guest lists that count.’

Could people really be swayed by such considerations, Pippa wondered? Were they really so shallow as to care about a bit of gossip? But Walter hadn’t included himself. He hadn’t said prestige and wealth are important to us.

‘But not to you, Walter? Are you different from your family?’

‘I like to think so,’ he said, ‘but no one has ever really put that to

the test. I've had a dream life. I've been allowed to get away with practically anything. Failing college exams. Wrecking a motor launch. Writing off my first car. No consequences.'

He shrugged.

'I never have to work if I don't want to. I could just live the life of a playboy.'

She considered this new information. Behind his words, there was a hint of melancholy as if, already, his life was robbed of any true meaning.

'And your parents would be happy with that?'

'Not happy, exactly, but accepting, for a while anyway. I can get away with it while I'm in my twenties.'

'And after that?'

'It will be time for my father to step down from his various boards and for me to take his place. And keep the family coffers growing.'

'And become the father of Walter William Cox the fifth, I suppose,' Pippa added, understanding now the life that had been prescribed for Walter, whether he liked it or not.

He laughed, but it was not a happy sound.

'You get the picture completely,' he said, as he concentrated on negotiating the inevitable traffic snarl through the streets of lower Manhattan.

'But you haven't told me what your father will think of what happened today?'

She had hoped he wouldn't ask that question. She was also hoping that her father had not decided to skip the last session of the conference and come back to New York early.

'I don't know, to be honest,' she replied. 'He's always been very circumspect about what he told us about his early life with his mother. He's talked about the Army and medical school readily enough. But he's busy too.'

'A surgeon, you said?'

'Yes, a very good one.'

She was proud of the respect he commanded in his profession.

'Yet he left it all behind in New York to move to Sydney when he found you?'

She was aware that part of her story had sounded incredible, yet she had insisted it was true. She could see how they doubted that a man keen to reach the top of the medical profession would willingly leave the one place that would help him achieve his career prospects only to bury himself in a country half a world away. But in the end, they believed her.

‘Did he have help with the college fees, do you think?’

This question, too, had occurred to Pippa and not for the first time. Had there been some money to support his studies he had not known about, she wondered?

‘I don’t know,’ was her honest answer. ‘I doubt he knows for sure. All I do know for sure is that he never met his father. Never knew who he was. His mother wouldn’t confirm his suspicions.’

‘So you said,’ Walter reminded her.

It occurred to her then that Walter thought her father might have wanted her to seek out his unknown family.

‘He doesn’t know I had this in mind,’ she explained, not wanting any doubt to remain. ‘He’s in Chicago at a medical conference, although he may have decided to come home today.’

‘He might be there when I drop you off at your apartment?’

‘He might be,’ she said, sorry now she had mentioned the possibility. Any encounter was likely to be extremely awkward and require a lot of explanation.

‘Don’t worry, just say I’m a hospital buddy. My name will be meaningless probably. Just introduce me as Walter.’

‘You’re curious to get a look at him, aren’t you?’

‘Well, he could, after all, be my uncle, and you could be my cousin. Reason enough to be curious.’

She smiled and relaxed. She felt she could trust him.

‘And what will you tell the rest of your family if you do meet him?’

‘Depends,’ he said. ‘But if I’m convinced your story is true it may be my grandfather I want to talk to.’

‘Would that be wise?’

‘Oh, he and I get along well. It’s just my father he locks horns with. My grandfather thinks I’m a young man in his own image.’

‘And are you?’

‘In some ways I think I am, but before you ask, I haven’t got any young women pregnant and tucked them away in one of the family’s rental houses.’

‘Well, that’s a relief,’ Pippa said, joining in his banter. ‘I’m not sure your mother would take such news well.’

For just a moment, Pippa imagined the scene and she could see he was visualising it too.

‘Wouldn’t be pretty, would it?’

And they both laughed as he edged the big Chevrolet into a convenient parking space just a few yards from the apartment block.

It was now late afternoon. It had been a long and emotional day and Pippa was tired.

‘Thank you for driving me home,’ she said as she climbed out of the car. ‘You saved me many hours on a crowded train. It was very good of you.’

‘It was the least I could do,’ he said, ‘after the grilling my family gave you.’

She was about to walk away but he stopped her.

‘Here’s my phone number,’ he said. ‘We can’t just leave it there.’

‘You’re right,’ she said, as she took the slip of paper from him and then searched in her bag for a pen to reciprocate the gesture.

‘Here’s my number too,’ she said quickly.

It was Walter who noticed the yellow cab pull up in front of the apartment building a matter of twenty yards away. Pippa, facing Walter, had not seen her father paying off the cab and then notice his daughter standing a short distance away on the sidewalk. He was beside her in a few quick strides having first handed his bag to the concierge.

Pippa greeted her father with a loving hug. She was pleased to see him back so she did not have to spend another night alone in their apartment but she hoped fervently that Walter would stick to the story they had concocted.

‘And who’s this?’ Philippe asked, extending his hand towards Walter.

‘Walter Cox, a hospital buddy,’ Pippa said, praying that Walter would play along.

‘A doctor too, Walter?’ Philippe assumed, shaking his hand while eyeing him keenly. ‘What’s your specialty?’

Pippa held her breath. What was he going to say?

‘Psychiatry, sir,’ he said, without hesitation.

‘That’s a good field, Walter,’ Philippe said. ‘Mental illness is still much under acknowledged and under researched.’

Walter nodded his head slightly, as if in agreement.

‘I won’t keep you, sir,’ he said, his impeccable manners impressing Philippe. ‘I think Pippa looks tired.’

‘She does indeed,’ Philippe agreed as he linked arms with his daughter and turned in the direction of their apartment building. ‘We’ll see you another time perhaps.’

As father and daughter walked away together, Pippa risked a quick backward glance.

In one small insignificant gesture, Walter acknowledged their kinship. He gave her a thumbs up and, pointing towards Philippe, mouthed the words: he is my uncle before turning back towards his car.