

FREE READING

Julia's Story

BOOK 1 IN THE
BELLEVILLE FAMILY SERIES

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a white dress and a floral crown, stands on a dirt road, looking back over her shoulder. In the background, a biplane flies across a sunset sky. The scene is set in a rural, wooded area.

Set against the backdrop of the Second World War, this is the heartbreaking story of a young girl in love, the secret she must never reveal and the family who betrayed her trust.

J MARY MASTERS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judith Masters writing as J Mary Masters was born in Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia in the 1950s, the youngest of four children. She is married to Peter.

For more than twenty years, she was involved in the magazine publishing industry in Australia as a senior executive while all the time looking to find the time to fulfil her ultimate ambition to be a writer of fiction. Having now given up full time work, writing is her principal activity.

This story evolved from a vivid dream. The story reaches its dramatic climax in the sequel to this book, 'To Love, Honour & Betray', first published in 2017.

Much of the setting is fictionalised but knowledgeable readers will recognise real places used in the story, particularly in Queensland, Australia and real historical events that have made their way into the story.

You can set up a conversation with the author online

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FIRST PUBLISHED AS
THE HOUSE OF SECRETS: JULIA'S STORY



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This book was first published as

THE HOUSE OF SECRETS: JULIA'S STORY

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*To my dear sister Deidre
and to those who believed*

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OTHER BOOKS IN THE SERIES

To Love, Honour and Betray

BOOK 2 in the Belleville family series

Return to Prior Park

BOOK 3 in the Belleville family series

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Cast of characters

AUSTRALIA

BELLEVILLE FAMILY (Prior Park)

Francis Belleville	Father
Elizabeth Belleville	Mother
Richard Belleville	Son
William Belleville	Son
Julia Belleville	Daughter

Jean Dalrymple Elizabeth's cousin (Melbourne)

Mrs Duffy	Housekeeper, Prior Park
Charles Brockman	Manager, Prior Park
Muriel McGovern	(Brisbane)

FITZROY FAMILY (Mayfield Downs)

Jack Fitzroy	Father
Amelia Fitzroy	Mother
James Fitzroy	Son
Alice Fitzroy	Daughter

Mrs Fry Housekeeper

WARNER FAMILY (Armoobilla)

Tom Warner	Son
Rebecca Warner	Daughter
Jane Saville	Governess to Rebecca

MANNING FAMILY (Venus Downs)

Stephen Manning	Husband
Margaret Manning	Wife (sister to Jack Fitzroy)

OTHERS

Nathaniel Dodds	Family solicitor
Hospital matron	Maureen Jones

ENGLAND

CAVENDISH FAMILY (Haldon Hall)

Lady Marina Cavendish	Mother, daughter of an Earl
Sir Anthony Cavendish	Father, a Baronet
Catherine Cavendish	Only daughter
John Bertram	nephew to Lady Marina

USA

Captain Philippe Duval US Army doctor

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CHAPTER ONE: THE SECRETS BEGIN

To unravel the secrets of Prior Park and its inhabitants, we must find a moment in time at which to begin the story. The time to begin is when Elizabeth Belleville's children are reaching adulthood.

The year is 1942. It is a warm day in late March, almost the end of summer in the southern hemisphere, although it hardly seems like it to Elizabeth Belleville who sits at her small, highly polished desk addressing envelopes in her elegant sloping handwriting, her task hampered by the perspiration that trickles down the hollow of her right palm.

She muses almost aloud that the first signs of spring would be appearing in Europe. She imagines a bluebell wood, the tiny fragile flowers merging into a mass of green and blue among sunlit trees. She does not imagine an England fighting for its very survival, where everything is rationed and life is grim and for many, futureless.

At this point in the story, Elizabeth Belleville has no anxiety at all for the fate of the northern hemisphere beyond the most casual interest in the war raging across Europe, which she frets about only because it has thwarted her plans for a grand tour to show her daughter the sophisticated delights of civilised society so lacking, she frequently complains, in their own immediate neighbourhood.

Yet, despite her deep misgivings about her immediate neighbours, Elizabeth Belleville has invited them all, with one exception, to

her daughter Julia's eighteenth birthday party. The appointed date for the big event is just two weeks away.

Up until this point, it's true to say that the inhabitants of Prior Park have almost ignored the war in Europe, or so it was thought. It had little direct impact on their lives. It was the menace in the Pacific that drew most of their attention. Of course the men of the household read avidly about the war in Europe in the local newspaper but the reports were already at least a week out of date and the action far away. It was a topic that was hardly discussed at all, unlike the Japanese threat, which seemed real and imminent.

Elizabeth Belleville had been seated at her desk for more than an hour before she finally put down her pen, sealed the last of the envelopes and gathered the invitations together.

She walked briskly downstairs to the front door, just in time to intercept her husband Francis walking across the driveway. Francis was deep in conversation with the Prior Park estate manager, Charles Brockman.

Charles was taller than Francis and she noticed, for the first time, how he outpaced her husband with his long, purposeful stride. Both men were dressed for riding, their horses tethered in the paddock just beyond the garden.

She waved to catch their attention.

'Will anyone be going into town later?' she enquired expectantly. 'The invitations must be posted.'

She held the envelopes aloft to make her point.

The two men stopped but it was Charles Brockman who spoke, first raising his hat in a polite gesture she took for granted.

'I'll call for them later, Mrs Belleville,' he said. 'Before I go, I promise.'

'Thank you, Charles. I'd appreciate it.'

Her husband said nothing but raised his hand in a half salute.

Elizabeth Belleville remained standing at the front door, watching the two men as they strode towards the horses. She looked critically at her husband.

For the first time, she thought her husband wore all of his fifty-five years on his once handsome face. At that distance she couldn't see the small red spider veins that had sprung a faint web across his cheeks but there was nonetheless a hint of dissolution about his face even observed from afar; she had noticed recently how his fair hair had thinned; his once trim figure had spread so that his middle shirt buttons strained across his stomach, although in reality it was barely discernible. He was, on any day, as on this one, immaculately dressed.

On the little finger of his left hand, although she couldn't see it at a distance but she was sure it was there, he wore a heavy gold signet ring that had once belonged to his father. It bore the Belleville family crest with its intricate mediaeval scrolls and upright sword of honour. The crest had been commissioned by his father but everyone who saw it assumed the distinction went back generations into their European past and she did not dispute the assumption.

For a few minutes, she stood there at the top of steps, thinking how much had been expected of her husband and how little, in reality, he had delivered.

How could she know that the local gossips said much the same as she was thinking, because the gossip did not reach her.

Had she heard the local people speak of him, she would have been surprised at how much he was admired despite his tendency to drink too much and 'reap the fruits' of his father's endeavours and his mother's inheritance, rather than his own efforts, as the idle chatter agreed. There was a resigned acceptance of these facts among those who knew him, well or otherwise.

'Never made a shilling himself' was a popular refrain. But it was from envy that they spoke for they would all have been happy to swap places with him, except, as one or two pointed out, for the necessity of being married to Elizabeth Belleville.

Elizabeth of course knew the Belleville story well. Francis had told her that his father had worked hard and prospered in the gold boom of the nineteenth century, turning gold profits to

land acquisition.

New money was all there was in a new country. They both agreed with that sentiment. There were no 'old families' only successful families who laid claim to the same refinements the old families had taken for granted in the old country, and, yes, they harboured the same ambitions through marriage.

Marry one fortune to another and you built a bigger fortune. With a fortune, you could buy power. It was a simple plan that Francis's father Louis had employed in seeking a match for his only son, just as he had done himself by marrying the pretty but insipid heiress Adeline Prior, Francis's mother.

From his mother, Francis had inherited a handsome legacy – Prior Park – to add to the Belleville inheritance but he had inherited too her weaknesses. In her, these weaknesses of character were harmless if somewhat irritating but in him they were devastating.

Where his father's business judgement had been unwavering, Elizabeth mused, his judgement was almost always found wanting. They had argued or rather she had argued and he had humoured her. In the end, she had settled for knowing that his decisions, when he made them, were almost invariably wrong or misguided and that he would always fall prey to the flattery of sharp men for whom she knew he was an easy target. But he would not listen to her so in the end she gave up trying.

All this Elizabeth knew and it regularly played across her mind. How much of the Belleville fortune remained she could only guess at. Money, never once a topic of conversation early in their marriage, had started to become central in their lives, but he would not – or could not – tell her why.

As her daughter approached her eighteenth birthday, Elizabeth began to wonder what lay in store for her only daughter. Would she fall prey to fortune seekers too? Or would she make a better choice than her mother?

Julia doted on her father but did she see his shortcomings? Elizabeth did not know and could not ask. She was not yet ready

to disillusion the girl.

She remembered how the chill breeze had caught her veil on her wedding day nearly twenty-five years ago; she had been just twenty years old; Francis ten years older. In a year or two, that could be Julia. It seemed improbable to Elizabeth, who thought of her daughter still as a child.

She sighed quietly and walked back into the house as the two men rode off. The pile of invitations lay neatly stacked on the hall table. She was sure Charles Brockman would not forget. On him, she knew she could depend without question.

Just a few miles from Prior Park, another woman appeared at least to be more satisfied with her life although she commanded much less than Elizabeth Belleville. Jane Saville's only responsibility was her young charge, Rebecca Warner, who was responding well to the lessons she set for her and was doing her study with a dedication that surprised Jane.

The girl had been delighted at the decision to hire a governess, instead of sending her back to boarding school, following the sudden deaths of both parents. Jane in turn responded to the girl's open sunny nature and natural intelligence. She became less teacher and more older sister. The arrangement suited them both.

During this particular week, Jane had driven into the nearby town several times in spite of the petrol rationing. She was in daily anticipation of receiving a parcel of books and materials she had ordered for Rebecca's tuition but it seemed she was to be frustrated on each occasion for there were no parcels waiting for her at the post office.

It was the war, they said. Everything was in short supply. It seemed to be the excuse for every shortage and every failure now.

She was annoyed but there was little she could do. To save her another wasted trip, they promised to telephone when the parcel arrived. With this she had to be satisfied.

Enjoying the break in her daily routine and with an hour or so

to spare on her return journey, it was an unaccustomed impulse that made her stop at the river crossing several miles from the Warner property. She was in no particular hurry to get home. She did not look forward to the rest of the drive. It was only a few miles but the road was badly rutted from the summer storms and no one had been along to make repairs.

The war. That was all they said. Can't spare the machinery or the men to do it.

Jane had been sitting out of sight of the road down an embankment on a grassy patch, above the largest of the waterholes, for only a few minutes. A stillness settled about her as she stretched out and enjoyed the luxury of contemplating nothing very much in particular, except the pleasure of indolence in the shade.

With her eyes half closed, she vaguely became aware that she was no longer alone. Momentarily she was startled but she soon regained her composure.

'Richard, what are you doing here? I thought you were away? I didn't hear you pull up.'

Without invitation, Richard Belleville dropped down beside her.

'I haven't been home yet. I just got back. I'd hoped to see you. It's lucky I saw your car. What are you doing here?'

'I've been into town. I'd ordered some books but they haven't arrived yet. They tell me paper is in short supply. I'm tired of this war. Everything is for the war,' she answered, before turning the same question to him.

'It's good to see you,' Richard said, ignoring her question.

But she could tell immediately that he was bursting to impart some important news to her.

They were now sitting very close together. His fingers caressed the side of her cheek, but she pulled away from him, to look at his face, her senses now fully alert.

He almost blurted it out. She could sense his excitement even as he said the words.

'I'm joining up, Jane.'

'What? You can't be serious. You never mentioned you had plans to do this? When did you do this. What does it mean for us?'

She moved further away from him. Her face immediately creased into a frown. Something moved in the grass beside her but she took no notice.

He didn't answer immediately. He was trying to gauge her reaction first.

'When? When are you joining up?'

Finally, knowing that he could delay the answer no longer, he said: 'I leave on Tuesday. I have to get south to Sydney by Saturday.'

There was so little information coming from him. It came in fits and starts because he didn't know how to say it to her.

'Why Sydney? Surely there are training camps hereabouts?'

It was an obvious question which he had known would be asked. Anticipating the question was one thing; it was quite another to give her the answer, an answer he knew she would not want to hear.

'I'm going to Canada.' He almost blurted it out.

He waited for her response. For what seemed like minutes, there was absolute silence between them.

'Canada? Why Canada?' was all she could find to say. It didn't make sense. There was no war in Canada.

She shielded her eyes from the glare with her hand. He'd noticed an almost imperceptible tremor in her voice.

'I've decided I want to be a pilot. They're doing air crew training for the air force in Canada. A lot of our fellows are already flying missions out of England. It takes about nine months of training, then I hope to be posted to a squadron in England.'

In the way he spoke, so matter of fact, it all sounded like a great adventure for spirited young men keen to see the world. She sensed it was a practised speech that attempted to hide the true facts.

He was embarking on perhaps the most dangerous undertaking

of the war that raged across Europe and the Pacific: flying missions from England through the Ruhr Valley of Germany to inflict as much damage as possible on the German war effort. That he thought she might not know the danger he would face seemed disingenuous, even to his ears.

‘I thought you’d be staying here now you’ve finished university. You never said anything about leaving.’

Her eyes filled with tears; her accusing words were scarcely audible.

To her, his explanation sounded very matter of fact, with barely a hint of concern for his own safety or the years of separation that could stretch in front of them.

Involuntarily, she stiffened as his hand touched her arm.

This news, he knew, was being received as badly as he feared it might yet it couldn’t dampen his enthusiasm for his decision nor could it dampen his need for her.

‘I want you to understand; this doesn’t change anything between us. I still want to marry you but I must do this. It’s my duty, don’t you see? And I know I’ll be a good pilot.’

For just a moment, she couldn’t speak. She couldn’t look at him. It was a shock. Worse still, she was angry and confused that he hadn’t attempted to soften the news nor to consult her in advance about his decision.

‘So that’s that, then,’ she said. ‘No more to be said. There is no point in saying ‘don’t go’ because you are going, regardless of what I say, aren’t you?’

She turned her face towards him but he couldn’t meet her eyes just then. He couldn’t lie outright but he didn’t want to disappoint her. He didn’t want to make it sound like an either/or choice although he knew it was. He was going and that was that but not because he needed her less but because he felt the demands of loyalty to his country more.

He had tried to soften the blow but he had really only ended up sounding defensive, as if he should apologise for wanting to go.

'There are plenty of couples who are separated by the war. We won't be the first. I have to do my bit, don't you see that? I do love you, you know that, don't you?'

She didn't answer him directly. She wasn't sure of her own feelings now except, in the depths of her being, she felt the return of an aching emptiness that their time together in the past few months had filled.

She was older than him, although not by much. It was the disparity in their circumstances that had caused them to keep their developing relationship secret. Now the hopes and dreams that she had begun to nurture were over. Gone, probably forever, she thought. Just then, as she sat a grass beside, it seemed a hard fact to grasp.

'So that's why you went to Brisbane?' she said, changing tack. 'To join up?'

Her voice was still very quiet but a hint of bitterness was creeping in as she began to realise the extent of his deception. To his mind, he had deceived her because he had wanted to avoid a confrontation. To her, it seemed as if she was less important in his life than he had led her to believe. At the point where there was a big decision to be made, he had done it alone and not considered her at all.

'Yes. And you're the first person I've told, apart from the family lawyer.'

'So your mother doesn't know?'

He shook his head.

For a few seconds they were both silent, each contemplating the likely effect of the news on Elizabeth Belleville. Of her three children, Elizabeth Belleville doted on her first-born, Richard. Almost all her motherly attentions had been focused on his well-being and his comfort, although she would have hotly disputed any suggestion that she had done so at the expense of the less well favoured William, her second son, or her daughter Julia.

Jane, at least, had some insight into how the news would be received.

'She won't be happy, Richard. I can tell you that for certain. She will be very, very upset.'

He smiled, acknowledging the truth of what she said, but confident that in the end, he could charm his mother into acceptance, as he always done in the past.

'I know. I know. But I have to tell her sooner rather than later. I can't just take off next week and leave a note on my pillow.'

'Will I see you again before you go?'

'I hope so,' was all he would say.

He jumped up quickly from the riverbank and held his hand out to help her up. He tried to take her in his arms but she was still angry with him so he kissed her on the cheek and held the car door open for her.

He raised his hand to wave goodbye but all she could see, through her tears, was a cloud of dust.

A short while later, Elizabeth Belleville heard the familiar sound of a car engine, which was quickly followed by the unmistakable sound of the gravel of the driveway being scattered beneath the wheels of Richard's hard-driven Buick.

She peered out of the window of her small upstairs sitting room and raised an unseen hand in greeting to her elder son just as he slammed the door of the car, shaking some of the dust from the black bodywork. It would likely settle back just as quickly.

She noticed with satisfaction that he was well dressed although, on a second glance, she thought there was something careless about his appearance today. His light brown hair fell across his forehead giving him a rakish charm that matched his intense blue eyes. He'll break some hearts, she thought, if he hasn't already.

He had been expected by the household since early morning, so the fact that he did not arrive home until three o'clock excited some eager questioning from his mother.

She reached the bottom of the stairs just as he entered the hallway.

'Richard, we expected you earlier. How was your journey?'

'It went well, thank you, Mother.'

He bent to kiss her cheek in the hope that his short almost curt answer would suffice for now.

'How is everything here?' he asked, casually.

It was more a rhetorical question than one to which he expected an answer but she started to answer it any way.

'It's much the same as when you left. I've done the invitations for your sister's birthday party. But more importantly how did you get on in Brisbane? You said you had some business there, but when I asked your father what it could be, he didn't seem to know or at least he wasn't telling me.'

The words hung in the air between mother and son. He could sense his mother's rising curiosity but he was determined to head off her questions.

'You know, I've never seen Brisbane like it. It's really a city at war and likely to be more so before the year is out with the war in the Pacific becoming more intense.'

'Do you think we are likely to be threatened here?' she asked.

There was no panic in her voice, only incredulity. It required a stretch of the imagination she did not possess to visualise Japanese domination of the vast Australian mainland.

'Who knows,' he shrugged.

'I see General MacArthur has arrived in Australia to take charge, so that must be a good thing.'

His mother was silent waiting for him to say more but he remained silent too.

Francis, making a feeble attempt to brush the dust and dirt from his riding clothes, strode into the hallway and greeted his son enthusiastically.

'So, what did you get up to in Brisbane, son? Come in and tell us all about it.'

There was a hollow falseness to the cheeriness that neither father nor son acknowledged.

That Francis was reluctant to vigorously criticise his elder

son's decision to use scarce petrol resources on a trip of unknown purpose was as much a concern for his wife's certain rebuke as for the futility of expressing the opinion.

Francis had long since given up attempting to exert any authority over his twenty-two year old heir. There was never a time he could recall when his wife had sided with him on any issue that had arisen regarding their first son, for Elizabeth Belleville had very early on chosen sides. For Richard's part, he had come to understand that the father he idolised as a boy was not a man he could admire in adulthood.

They stood together awkwardly for a few moments.

Richard knew instinctively that his mother would not be easily sidetracked. He wondered if she suspected something but she gave no hint of it in her reply.

'Come in and tell us about your trip. It's a long drive. You must be tired.'

'A bit,' he conceded. 'It is a long way.'

As the three of them gathered in the drawing room and Elizabeth Belleville ordered tea, Francis Belleville was about to discover to his surprise there were matters on which both he and his wife were in agreement with regard to their elder son.

Under the determined gaze of his parents, Richard had at first faltered but it wasn't long before the whole truth emerged.

Elizabeth Belleville, quite unused to the idea of anyone in the household making a decision that she had not first endorsed, was almost rendered speechless at the prospect of her elder son undertaking such a dangerous mission so needlessly.

She could not understand any reason why someone with a protected occupation would volunteer to put themselves in harm's way half way around the world. That was for other sons to do, not hers, and she said as much.

But that was not his only news. It was the news of his intended marriage that cemented the opposition of both parents but they were to discover that their opposition to his plans were futile.

In the days and months ahead, they would not dare speak the

unspeakable but there were to be many times, when days turned to weeks without news of him, that they each began to think the unthinkable.

But as much as she prayed for the safe return of her son, Elizabeth Belleville could not sanction the marriage he proposed for his return. On this subject she was absolutely fixed in her mind. It was, she insisted, a secret they must keep until he returned.

He agreed, reluctantly, that there would be no announcement of an engagement. On that point he was eventually forced to yield but the relationship between son and parents remained tense as the date of his departure approached.

CHAPTER TWO: APRIL 1942

It seemed that everyone at Prior Park heaved a sigh of relief when Easter Saturday, the day of Julia's birthday party, dawned bright and hot with the expectation that the heat of the day would give way to a perfect warm evening.

As the sun headed towards the distant horizon, a constant stream of cars snaked their way up the Prior Park driveway towards the house, which was already ablaze with lights. It stood out like a beacon against the swiftly encroaching darkness of the surrounding countryside.

Margaret and Stephen Manning were the first to arrive. A small wiry woman with a plain honest face, Margaret Manning was nevertheless careful of her appearance on this particular night. She motioned to her husband to wait while she dabbed with her white lace handkerchief at her black suede shoes in a futile effort to rid them of a fine film of dust before timidly ringing the front door bell. She smoothed down the skirt of her beaded midnight blue dress, new for the occasion, while they waited for the door to be opened.

Stephen Manning looked ill at ease in a suit he rarely wore. His hands were roughened by years of manual labour. The side of his face bore the fading scar of an axe head that had broken away from its handle and hit him a glancing blow. He had taken himself off to the local hospital and been stitched up, so local gossips said, and been back to the hard work of mending fences and building stockyards the next day.

They seemed an ill-matched pair; she, placid but refined by country standards; he, a local stockman made good with his marriage to Margaret Fitzroy. The lack of offspring did not seem to trouble either of them. It had not happened so they went about their daily lives following the familiar patterns of the past twenty years. There were no cross words between them because they rarely exchanged any words at all, apart from the mundane conversation that had become part of their day to day living.

The Prior Park housekeeper Mrs Duffy opened the door to greet them and the orderly queue of people who had fallen in behind them. She knew them all by name, just as they knew her.

‘Come in, come in. Mr and Mrs Belleville are in the drawing room. Please go through.’

The sound of music could already be heard coming from the back garden where workmen had laboured most of the day to erect a temporary dance floor.

‘They haven’t spared any expense,’ Margaret whispered to her husband who merely grunted at the revelation.

She could see the brightly coloured lights swaying in the slight breeze as she looked along the hallway towards the open back door.

Quickly, this scene was lost to her view and she found herself being ushered into a beautifully furnished room by Francis Belleville who had kissed her awkwardly on the cheek.

‘Welcome, we’re so pleased you could come.’

She was pleased Elizabeth Belleville hadn’t followed her husband’s enthusiastic welcome.

Before she could protest, a delicate glass was thrust into her hands. She didn’t know what was in it so she sipped it cautiously. It wasn’t a bad taste, she decided. Her husband’s eyes lit up at the tall glass of beer which he was about to down in one thirsty gulp before he caught the warning look in his wife’s careful eyes.

‘I don’t see the young lady about,’ Stephen Manning said in whispered undertones to his wife.

Margaret said nothing but nodded her agreement.

'I've got lots to tell you, Margaret, I haven't seen you for so long.'

The voice came from behind her and this time she was happy to be embraced. Amelia Fitzroy could have been her sister, the likeness between the two was so often remarked, but in fact, Amelia was her sister-in-law.

The fact that Margaret's brother Jack continued to be annoyed at his parents' decision to give his sister part of the property intended for him in no way troubled the two women, who would seek each other's company on every occasion.

The two men were left to their own devices as the women headed for two comfortable chairs in the corner of the drawing room. With their backs to the wall and cosily seated together, they could observe all the comings and goings and gossip unseen.

'Stephen was just saying that Julia doesn't seem to be down yet,' Margaret ventured.

'No, I noticed that too. You'd think she would be standing alongside her mother. I thought Elizabeth looked a bit annoyed, although she hid it well. Mind you, she could still be brooding over the row they had with Richard. He's gone you know.'

Margaret's eyes widened at this revelation.

'Gone. Gone where?'

'Well, it's a long story,' Amelia said, as if its length meant it would take too long to tell.

Margaret drew closer to her.

'You must tell me all about it. I haven't heard anything at all.'

Amelia needed little encouragement as her eager listener leaned ever closer to the eager storyteller to catch every word.

Twice within half an hour, Julia had stepped out of her bedroom, caught sight of herself in the ornately framed mirror at the top of the stairs and, immediately dissatisfied, returned to her wardrobe to reconsider her choice.

Her first choice had been a black crepe de chine dress which,

according to her dressing-table mirror, bestowed a certain sophistication on her appearance. It gave her an air of elegance and maturity. A necklace of pure jet had completed the picture but now she was unsure. Did it make her look too old? Did it make her look like a widow rather than a young woman emerging into society?

She knew she was expected in the drawing room to stand alongside her parents to greet her guests. In fact she was overdue in the drawing room and she knew they would not be pleased at her lack of punctuality but still she found time to retreat to her bedroom and abandon the black dress in a pile on the floor.

She stood in her high heels and underwear surveying the possibilities, hardly mindful of the passing minutes. She scanned the few evening dresses hanging in her wardrobe and despaired that her options were, after all, limited. The war had seen to that. Of the few choices she drew out a figure-hugging bias-cut silk dress in the palest blue. Her mother had yielded to this addition to her wardrobe only after much persuasion. 'It is too risqué for a young girl,' she had said at the time. But Julia stood her ground and the pale blue silk had been acquired.

Late as she was, she found time as she was about to head downstairs, to return to the dressing table and apply her perfume which she had forgotten in the anxiety of choosing the right dress.

Almost as an afterthought, she added a diamond pendant and earrings, a gift for her eighteenth birthday from her parents. This time the mirror at the top of the stairs reflected back a totally different vision, one with which she felt vaguely satisfied.

'Do I really know all these people?' Julia whispered to her mother.

She had already been standing alongside her parents for half an hour, politely thanking each guest in turn for coming and for their good wishes. To her, it seemed quite long enough.

Her mother ignored the question entirely. The rooms set aside for the occasion – the drawing room and the dining room – were

filling up and, in spite of herself, Elizabeth felt a quiet sense of satisfaction as she glanced around at her guests. A quick knowing inspection of the assembled throng had reassured her that most of the women wore new frocks for the occasion.

‘You should be gratified, child, that so many people have come along,’ Elizabeth said to her daughter, who looked as if she was about to relinquish her place in the receiving line.

Julia bristled at the notion she was still a child but said nothing and continued to greet newcomers, until her mother was satisfied that everyone who was coming had, indeed, arrived.

In one corner of the room, Julia noticed Amelia Fitzroy and Margaret Manning deep in animated conversation but she thought little of it. The gossip of middle-aged women had yet to mean anything to her at all, and she thought no more about it.

She certainly did not overhear Amelia declaring that Julia’s elder brother Richard had left the household after a terrible argument with his parents.

‘I understand there was a frightful row,’ said Amelia, who could not hide a small sense of satisfaction that she knew something that was not yet general knowledge, although she supposed it would not be long.

‘Really? What about? What have you heard about it, Amelia?’

‘Mrs Fry, my housekeeper, is very friendly with Mrs Duffy, the housekeeper here. It seems Richard arrived home from Brisbane two weeks ago and announced he was joining up.’

Margaret absorbed this information but she sensed that Amelia was holding something back.

‘Strange. Elizabeth didn’t mention it at all at the Red Cross meeting this week,’ Margaret mused.

‘You weren’t there, of course. There was certainly no gossip that I heard there. Everything was much as usual.’

Amelia, uncharacteristically, was enjoying the fleeting pleasure of having information to share that was not widely known. She had not ever known herself to be in such a situation before and

she took pleasure in it. She only wished for a wider audience with which to share the news, for there was much more to tell.

‘Mrs Fry says that Mrs Duffy told her that the argument was not just about him joining up; it was that he has signed up for air crew training in Canada and will eventually end up in England, flying with the RAF, possibly bombing Germany. His mother was beside herself. According to Mrs Duffy, the raised voices could be heard all over the house. Once they knew they couldn’t change his mind, Elizabeth went upstairs to her bedroom in a huff; his father slammed the door of his study and wasn’t seen for hours. She said Richard left on the mail train two days afterwards and not a word has been spoken about him since, not that she has heard anyway.’

Margaret sat back in her chair. There was a small smile of satisfaction on Amelia’s face. The rumours, she knew, were already spreading like wildfire but the local gossip, not unusually, had been not entirely accurate, which probably accounted for the lack of direct enquiry as to Richard’s absence at his sister’s party.

But Amelia was far from finished. The best, it seemed, was yet to come.

‘Mrs Duffy apparently also hinted that he had announced his plans to marry on his return, but she did not know who the girl was that he mentioned. Whoever she is, she isn’t part of Elizabeth Belleville’s plans, that I can tell you.’

Amelia warmed to her theme, her face flushed with the excitement of revealing such delicious gossip against a woman who regarded them all with an air of disdain.

‘According to what I was told, this news inflamed the argument even further. I have really no idea who the girl is. I can’t think of anyone around here. I would know if it was Alice.’

The two women sat together in silence to digest the import of this most astonishing of news.

Amelia Fitzroy had for some years nursed the happy but unfulfilled prospect of their proximity to the Belleville house leading to an inevitable joining of their houses. Her daughter Alice she

did not claim as a beauty but pretty enough, she thought, to engage the elder son of the house so the news that Richard's heart was engaged elsewhere had been a devastating blow to her plans but there was always William, she thought.

Better the second son than none at all, and perhaps better him altogether if the split between Richard and his parents was irrevocable. She did not say this to Margaret preferring to keep her matchmaking intrigue entirely to herself.

For once in his life, Francis Belleville was cautious about the amount of whisky he was drinking. He recalled, not without embarrassment, the celebrations for his son Richard's twenty-first birthday. The night had gone well, until he rose to propose a toast to his son with words he barely recalled now. The telltale slurring of his words had sent a murmur of disapproval through the crowd of guests.

What he could recall most vividly was the look of contempt in his son's eyes. He would not repeat that performance, he promised himself. So for once the whisky decanter remained largely untouched.

He watched with a mixture of fatherly pride and expectation as James Fitzroy led Julia through the house to the back garden and on to the makeshift dance floor.

'You look beautiful tonight, Julia. The dress really suits you. You look very grown up.'

At twenty-two James Fitzroy was just a month or so younger than Julia's absent brother. The rough edges of his manners had been smoothed by the years away at school. There had been talk of an army career but his father's poor health had demanded he return to help run and then take over Mayfield Downs.

Where his father was known for his quick temper, reports of the son had been more favourable. He was not conventionally handsome in the way Richard was but his presence turned the heads of young women nonetheless. His dark hair, dark eyes and engaging smile were much in his favour; his easy manners

charmed those he took the trouble to impress.

Suddenly, Julia stumbled and found herself more intimately engaged with James Fitzroy than she had expected. He for one was not about to miss the opportunity of holding such an exquisite creature more tightly in his arms.

'I'm sorry,' she said, struggling to regain her footing. 'There must have been a nail left up in the boards.'

'No need to apologise, Julia, this is no hardship, I assure you.'

She blushed at the inference of his words and then more so at his reluctance to release her.

'I'm all right now, I won't fall,' she said, pushing him away.

He had rather hoped that he could go on holding her tightly and feeling her breasts against his chest, but he eased his grip on her slightly as she recovered her balance.

'I don't remember when I last saw you. It might have been two years ago when you were home from school.'

'Probably,' she said, a little ungraciously.

'Are you home for good now?'

'Yes, unfortunately with the war on, mother and I can't take the trip to Europe she had promised me at the end of school. I hate this beastly war. It spoils everything.'

'Yes, it's terrible. So many young men being killed too,' he said, as if to rebuke her for her selfish concerns.

'So you're not joining up?' Julia asked, trying to counter the impression that she was alone in her selfishness.

'No, I'm exempted because of my occupation and my father's ill health. There would be no one to run the property if I left. Is it true that Richard has joined up?'

His statement was matter of fact but he did not express false regret at his inability to join up.

'Yes. He's gone. I'm so disappointed he's not here for my birthday party. Mother and father are furious with him. They feel he could have been exempted too but he said we have enough help with the cattle to be able to spare him. It will be nearly a year before he's in the thick of things but we're all very worried about

him.'

He was on the point of asking if there had been an argument about it and was it true that Richard had announced plans to marry but, just then, the music ended and the opportunity was lost.

'We must do this again,' James said, his arm lingering around her waist.

Julia smiled but it was not meant to be the smile of encouragement he took it to be.

His eyes travelled deliberately over her figure. She blushed at the suggestiveness of his look. Had she known his thoughts, she would have blushed all the more at his silent vow to be the first to enjoy the delights of her maturing body. It was a pleasure he promised himself at some future date.

While Julia danced with James Fitzroy, his sister Alice Fitzroy sat alone on a chair, half hidden in the shadows, but with an excellent view of the dancers.

There were eight couples on the dance floor but one couple in particular had attracted her attention.

A slow smile had crept over her face as she watched her brother and Julia Belleville. She had seen her brother's fleeting look of surprise and then pleasure when Julia greeted him earlier in the evening. She hadn't failed to notice his desire to hold Julia more closely to him during their dance than decorum decreed. Not much escaped Alice's attention and this certainly had not. Her brother, she knew, was not used to having his desires thwarted.

Like Richard Belleville, he was the son and heir and the favoured child at home. That a small hint of arrogance had begun to creep into his character was no surprise at all. The surprise in fact was that it had not appeared earlier.

Although not as rich as the Bellevilles, the Fitzroys could lay claim to an ancestry that had its roots in the English aristocracy, a fact that hardly mattered at all to James and Alice, but mattered a great deal to their mother Amelia, although no one had bothered

to tell her that the surname had once been reserved for the bastard sons of a king.

Over the years, they had met the Belleville family from time to time, but no real closeness had grown up between them, despite her mother's best efforts and despite their similarity in ages.

Alice was just nine months older than Julia. The boys had attended a different school from James. Alice had had to be satisfied with the local grammar school whereas Julia had been sent away to school in Sydney, so their paths crossed less and less as they grew to adulthood.

Julia's party had been a welcome opportunity for them to renew their tenuous childhood friendships.

Julia's younger brother William Belleville was now also enjoying the night's festivities.

At first, he was surprised by the lack of enquiry about his brother Richard and then later, realising that the rift between his parents and Richard might go deeper and last longer than he had imagined, he felt a warm surge of reassurance that his position in the family was already enhanced by his brother's abrupt departure.

Next month, he would turn twenty and his father had, during the evening, introduced him to quite a number of leading men from the town.

He was quietly pleased with the introductions his father had made, and the warmth of the greetings.

'I'd like you to meet my son William,' his father Francis had said any number of times.

This gratified William more than he cared to admit. He had never before been introduced first. There had always been the words 'meet my son Richard' preceding any introduction of himself. But not now.

He had not been at home when Richard had returned from Brisbane two weeks earlier but the tension in the house before Richard left two days later was of a kind he could not recall, even on the occasions when his father drank too much, which seemed

to be more frequent in recent years.

His mother had never, not in his memory anyway, yielded to sentimental emotion so he was surprised at the animosity that existed between his parents and Richard prior to his departure.

William felt sure he had not been told the full story but he contented himself with the knowledge that now he was the only Belleville son being introduced to the important guests. It was an unexpected but not unwelcome elevation in status.

He did not wish his brother ill. Far from it; he just wished he was the elder son, the first born.

In this rather contented frame of mind, William went in search of a dance partner. He noticed Alice Fitzroy sitting by herself.

She wasn't the prettiest of the girls at the party, he mused, but then his sister was probably the prettiest and he wasn't going to dance with her.

In his current contented mood, he thought Miss Fitzroy would do very well indeed as a dance partner.

'Alice, how are you? You look very pretty tonight. Shall we dance?'

His approach lacked the charm of either her brother James or his brother Richard but she was flattered by William's approach and blushed prettily.

He had not waited for her reply in any case but held out his hand which she took a little awkwardly.

She could not shine in the company of Julia Belleville but in her own way, she was not unappealing.

Her slightly rounded face creased into a genuine smile. Her light brown hair bobbed around her shoulders. She radiated a wholesomeness that added to her womanly appeal.

William found himself attracted to her, despite his untested expectation that he was immune to the charms of women.

After a short while, Alice, her confidence returning, put the question no one else had been brave enough to ask during the evening.

'Mother said she heard that Richard had left and that there was a family argument about it.'

She hadn't quite meant to blurt it out that way but now that it had been said, she couldn't back away from the question, which seemed to hang in the air between them, even as they made their uncertain way around the dance floor.

'You and your mother shouldn't listen to gossip, Alice. Mother and Dad were obviously upset that he signed up without telling them first. He's on his way to Canada you know. He's going to learn to fly and hopes to join an air force squadron in England. It's brave of him, you know.'

It was his first real defence of his brother's actions. His mother had predicted that the gossip about the row would spread like wildfire among their neighbours but it was the first time he had encountered a direct question about it.

He remembered his mother's words: 'It will be all over the countryside within a week,' she had said. 'I do not like being the subject of gossip. We should not have argued with him. We should have just let him go with our blessing.'

William had been given a brief summary of the argument by Richard before he had left, but his brother had only hinted at there being more than one topic at the centre of the argument and William hadn't pressed him at the time. By nature, he lacked curiosity, but now, curious or not, he was about to find out.

'Yes, William, he is brave, I don't doubt that but Mother doesn't gossip idly. She had a very good account of it from our housekeeper Mrs Fry. Mrs Fry said there was more to the argument than just Richard signing up to go away. Apparently he said he was going to get married.'

If Alice hadn't quite meant to say as much, she wasn't going to admit it now. She felt that if she was to have any chance with William at all, she had to meet him on equal terms. She wasn't going to be intimidated by him, or by anyone.

William hadn't expected his conversation with Alice to head in this direction and he was tempted to leave her stranded on the

dance floor, but his good manners overrode his desire to get away from this line of questioning. There was more to the argument between Richard and his parents, he knew that, but he hadn't been told what it was and he hadn't pressed anyone to find out more. Now it seemed other people knew more than he did and that was intolerable.

He didn't want to admit to Alice that he hadn't known because he felt that this would immediately undermine his new-found confidence in his elevated position in the family. If he wasn't in their confidence, then was he really as valued as he thought he was?

He was beginning to grow angry, but in fairness, he reasoned, it wasn't Alice's fault. She was capable of many things but she wasn't capable of the slyness or the underhand ways he had encountered in other young girls. Alice said pretty much what came into her head.

The fact that he didn't like what she said didn't alter the fact that he didn't know the full story and it appeared other people outside the family did. He was determined to find out.

To Alice, he gave a curt reply: 'I don't think there's much to that, Alice. As I said, you shouldn't listen to gossip. Most of it is made up by people who don't know a damned thing.'

He was glad that just at that moment the music stopped and his father called everyone inside to propose a toast to his sister. He offered his arm to Alice and he escorted her inside but there was no further opportunity for her to question him.

As the guests gathered in the house, William noticed the youngest of the guests, Rebecca Warner, standing with her brother Tom, near the front of the group.

He knew both of them as neighbours but barely at all as friends. He supposed she was about sixteen. Her long reddish coloured hair, held in place by a childish ribbon, formed a mass of curls half way down her back. Of her governess, Jane Saville, whose appearance in the district had caused so much gossip,

there was no sign at all.

He half suspected that his mother had not included her on the invitation.

On this occasion he came close to suspecting the truth as to why his mother had chosen to exclude Rebecca's governess from Julia's birthday party: her invitations did not include hired help, she would have said, if asked, although this ban did not extend to Charles Brockman who stood alongside Tom Warner.

What neither he nor his mother could have foreseen was that, in her decision to exclude Jane Saville, she had achieved far more than she could have ever hoped by this one simple action. Misread as a deliberate snub, the consequences for Richard were to be devastating.

As his father asked the assembled guests to charge their glasses to toast his daughter's eighteenth birthday, William quietly moved away from Alice's side ready to intercept his parents as they made their way from the drawing room to the hallway to begin farewelling their guests.

He blocked their path at the doorway.

'Alice Fitzroy has just been telling me an interesting little story. She says the row with Richard was more than just about him going away. She says he told you he was going to get married when he came back. You never told me that. He never told me. I want to know the truth,' he demanded.

He was angry now but still he whispered the words taking care to see that no one else was within earshot.

Elizabeth Belleville was the first to recover her composure from the unexpectedly hostile questioning from her second son.

'William, we'll talk about this later, just not *now*.'

Her tone was decisive with such marked emphasis on the word *now* that he backed away, conscious that his interception of his parents had attracted some attention from their guests. He did not want to create another scene to add fuel to the gossip.

Instead, he headed towards the back of the house where the band had already loaded their gear into the van. He was grateful for

the night air and the chance to get away from the crowd and think.

If Richard had announced he was going to get married, and none of them knew about it or knew that he was serious about a girl, then it all pointed to one conclusion: it was someone of whom his parents would not approve. That he needed to know more was certain.

Thinking back over his brother's past girlfriends had drawn a total and complete blank. Two of the girls were already married; the third had moved to New York with her parents. He could not recall his brother mentioning anyone recently.

It was no use; he would have to wait until he could talk privately with his parents, for there was no reliable answer that he could deduce himself.

More importantly, he needed to know just how things stood between his parents and Richard. Had this changed anything or was Richard still the favoured son and he the under-study to his older brother? This is what he needed to know most urgently. He would not rest until he knew the whole truth.

CHAPTER THREE: OCTOBER-NOVEMBER 1942

William Belleville was pacing the floor and growing exasperated with each passing minute. His mood since his sister's birthday six months earlier had not improved much.

His efforts to get to the heart of the violent disagreement between his parents and his elder brother Richard had proved fruitless. However much he importuned his parents, they would say nothing beyond that which he already knew. Every scrap of gossip he put to them they denied.

He had since written a long letter to his brother but had, as yet, received no reply. He had not asked the direct question about his brother's marriage plans but by what he hoped were subtle means, he thought his brother might take him into his confidence.

So he was left to ponder and speculate, which did not come naturally to a young man of William's temperament. He preferred to deal with certainties. He sensed that his parents did not trust him with the secret and that only made matters worse.

'Finally, you are ready. Let's get going. I never thought you'd come down.'

He barely glanced in the direction of his sister as she came down the main stairs. She did not respond because she was used to his brusque ways. She simply shrugged her shoulders to show that his irritation was of no interest to her at all but he wasn't looking at her anyway, so the small gesture went unnoticed.

Outside in the driveway, the engine of the big Buick had been

warming for a full ten minutes, more than strictly necessary, but then William was a much more careful custodian of the prized motor car than his brother had been.

In truth, Julia Belleville expected no gallantry from her brother. She knew he could be pleasant if he chose but he lacked the imagination of the romantic and a turn of phrase that could have pleased a young woman, even his sister, regularly failed to form in his mind.

Looking at him and his lack of charm, she understood why there were times in the past when William had resented his charming older brother. She had seen it. Even through a child's eyes it had been obvious so she could not fail to see it now.

'I think William secretly enjoys Richard not being here,' she had ventured to her mother in one of their rare conversations.

'I think he was tired of being compared unfavourably with him.'

Her mother's response had been predictable. She dismissed the suggestion with a sound that was not quite a word but conveyed her meaning nonetheless.

So Julia had said no more on the topic.

William pressed his foot heavily on the accelerator and the big car responded with a roar of its engine and a spinning of its wheels on the gravel driveway.

'I think we'll be late,' said William testily.

'It's an hour's drive at this time of day to Springfield.'

The poor country road demanded careful and slower driving than he would have liked.

Again, Julia shrugged dismissively.

'So what,' she said, 'I'm sure it's fashionable to be late, isn't it?'

'I hope we don't meet any Yank convoys on the road,' William said.

She hated the use of the slang term to describe Americans but she ignored it.

'Dad said that he'd been told that they've been forcing local drivers dangerously to the edge of the road because their trucks

are so big,' he added.

His sister couldn't resist adding another warning as she sat alongside him.

'Never mind the Americans. You should see the lights of their vehicles. You'll need to be careful of kangaroos at this time of day,' she reminded him.

As if on cue, a wallaby bounded across the road several yards in front of them. It was off into the bush before William could react.

'See what I mean,' she said.

'No trouble. I saw it,' he said. 'I'm not like Richard. I'm a very careful driver.'

At the mention of Richard's name, Julia decided to quiz her brother on the reason for the argument between Richard and their parents.

Like her brother William, she too had quizzed her parents but found out nothing more for her trouble.

'I don't know anymore than you do,' he said. 'Mother says that they were angry at him joining up without telling them, but backstairs gossip apparently says there was more to it than that.'

'I heard that he announced he was getting married when he came back. That would have been a big surprise to mother and father, I can tell you.'

Julia was secretly pleased at William's frankness and his willingness to discuss the matter with her. As the youngest in the family, she had been routinely excluded from knowing much about the family's business or the cause of the frequent stony silences between her parents.

'Really! He was getting married! Who to?'

He had assumed Julia would have heard the gossip too but apparently she had not.

'Nobody knows except mother and father and they're not saying. Which leads me to conclude it was someone entirely unsuitable.'

'Unsuitable? What do you mean?' asked Julia, naively.

‘Well, not of a good family. No money. Lower class. No property or suitable family,’ he ventured. ‘You do realise these things are important, don’t you?’

He risked a sideways glance at his sister, concerned lest she have other ideas or not understand the expectations placed on them all.

‘Does that matter now? In this day and age?’

William could see that she was about to become argumentative, so he didn’t respond except to say that he thought his parents would even now be looking out for a suitable husband for her.

William did not hear her response. Just at that moment, he was jerked back to full alertness by a large American army truck being driven on the wrong side of the road.

With almost no time to react, William cursed and swung hard right on the Buick’s steering wheel to avoid an almost certain collision. The big car lurched to the right and its wheels left a shower of gravel in their wake as the two vehicles passed with inches to spare.

With the sudden jerking movement, Julia slid sideways across the smooth leather seat towards the driver’s side. Instinctively she put out her hand to steady herself, but she was too slow to prevent herself crashing sideways into the steering column.

‘Blast it, when will they learn to drive on the left hand side of the road, instead of the right hand side,’ was all William said, as he struggled to control the car.

He finally brought the car to a shuddering halt on the wrong side of the road with its wheels in the shallow ditch that ran the length of the roadway. Only then did he become aware that his sister had been hurt.

‘Are you all right, Julia?’

His concern was immediate although his first thought had been for the condition of the car, which on later inspection, had escaped largely unscathed, except for some scratches on the body-work and a slight dent in the front bumper bar.

Before William had a chance to do anything at all to help his

sister, there was a tap on the passenger's window followed by the car door being yanked open with some force.

Captain Philippe Duval did not waste time with introductions. His hands searched for Julia's pulse on her slender wrist and he began checking for vital signs until he was satisfied there were no life-threatening injuries and that she had simply been stunned when her head hit the hard edge of the steering wheel.

'Ma'am, can you hear me? Are you all right? Speak to me.'

He shook her gently, but reassuringly.

Julia groaned and struggled to sit upright. Her silk dress was torn and a small trickle of blood had begun to work its way slowly down the side of her face.

'It's my arm. My arm hurts,' she groaned.

Captain Duval gently eased her into a sitting position to examine her right arm, as best he could in the fading light.

'It could be broken – I'm not sure, I can't really tell here – it will need an x-ray to be sure one way or the other,' he said.

He gently wiped away the blood from her cheek.

Looking at William who was by this stage standing alongside the army medic, he said: 'You'd better get her to hospital.'

'I saw your car run off the side of the road as we passed you,' the American said, by way of explanation.

'I'm sorry. It's so hard for our drivers to get used to driving on the left, especially as the truck is left hand drive. I'm so sorry.'

He apologised again and introduced himself.

William, by this stage, was in no mood for explanations, reasonable or otherwise, or introductions.

'Bloody hell, you could have killed us,' he said. 'A truck that size would make mincemeat of any car. It's lucky I saw you at the last minute.'

'Please, get your wife to hospital. It's only another four or five miles – she needs attention,' Captain Duval said.

'I don't have a full medical kit with me. I can't do anymore here on the roadside,' he said apologetically.

The man's words broke through William's anger.

‘Yes, I will. We’ll go now. Thank you anyway, and by the way, she’s not my wife, she’s my sister, Julia. I’m William Belleville from Prior Park. You’ll pass our place on this road.’

With that terse response, William slid back into the driver’s seat and fired the Buick’s big engine back to life. He cautiously eased the car out of the shallow ditch and back onto the roadway.

Captain Duval watched for a few minutes to make certain the car was safely on its way towards the hospital and then turned and walked back to the truck.

‘I’m sorry, sir. I forgot about this being a left hand drive place. Are they all right?’

The driver expected to receive a dressing down but it was not forthcoming.

‘Don’t worry, corporal, so did I, so did I. Hopefully everything will be all right. I think the girl has a broken arm, nothing worse. Let’s get going or we won’t make camp by dark.’

He did not think it fair to reprimand the driver for he thought the blame was as much his as the driver’s but he prayed that the young woman had suffered nothing worse than a broken arm for their lapse of concentration.

‘She was a pretty girl from what I could see, sir,’ the corporal said.

‘Indeed, corporal. Now let’s concentrate on the road. We don’t want any more mishaps.’

They drove on in silence.

Within fifteen minutes of the accident, William was turning into the emergency entrance of the Springfield General Hospital. It was a large, well-equipped hospital situated high on the hill overlooking the city. In the distance you could see the river winding its way through the city centre.

William stood by helplessly as medical staff eased his sister out of the passenger seat and onto a waiting stretcher. He gave a quick summary of events, for which he received only a cursory acknowledgement. All attention was focused on his sister.

Julia held out her left hand to her brother in a small gesture of reassurance as she was wheeled through the emergency room doors.

'I'll be fine, William, I'm just a bit battered and bruised. They'll look after me but you should telephone mother to let her know what happened.'

And then she disappeared from view. There wasn't much more for him to do except provide his sister's details to the admissions nurse at the front desk and deliver the news to Prior Park.

News of Julia's injuries spread quickly. It was an event that was greatly exaggerated for each retelling such that her wellbeing became the subject of much consternation especially among the guests who had attended her birthday party six months previously.

The fact that she had remained in hospital a mere four days and thereafter bore little visible sign of her trauma, apart from the plaster on her arm and a cut already almost healed on her forehead, was little consolation to those who had heard the wildly exaggerated accounts of the accident and its outcome.

First among her visitors when she returned home was James Fitzroy. Since her birthday party in April, he had become more attentive or as attentive as the demands of Mayfield Downs would allow.

On the Wednesday after the accident, he found her sitting in the back garden at Prior Park, her arm in a sling, but otherwise cheerful and not much the worse for the adventure.

'Julia, how are you feeling? Mother sends her best and Alice will be over tomorrow to see you, but I wanted to see you for myself, to make sure you're fine. We heard you were knocked out completely and all sorts of terrible things.'

She smiled a welcome, pleased to have the diversion of a visitor.

'James, I'm fine. There's been such a fuss, I can't tell you the half of it. But William did very well to avoid the truck. It was on

the wrong side of the road you know.’

‘I heard that. All those big army trucks on these narrow roads are very dangerous. I’m surprised no one’s been killed.’

He pulled a chair close to her and bent down to kiss her on the cheek. She had neither encouraged nor discouraged his attentions since her birthday, but he in turn was not discouraged in his pursuit by her neutral stance.

‘Alice and I couldn’t understand why you and William weren’t at Christina Lowry’s engagement party.

‘We found out the next day – I was out riding to look at some of our cattle and came across Charles Brockman on the boundary fence. He told me the whole story. He said you’d likely be home from hospital on Tuesday afternoon. How are you? I’ve been worried about you since I heard about it all.’

She could see that he was genuinely worried although she guessed that the account he had heard of her injuries was much overdone.

‘James. Really I’m fine. Mother sent a note to Christina to explain what happened. It will only be a few weeks before I can use my right arm again, but tennis is out of the question for a few months.’

Tennis parties had become an added feature of life at Prior Park since her birthday party. James and his sister Alice were regular partners now for Julia and William on occasional Sunday afternoons.

‘And we will have to get Christina a new engagement present; the crystal vase didn’t survive the accident either. Was it a good party?’

James, as she expected, was a poor judge of such things and said she must wait for Alice to tell her the details.

To him it had been unremarkable except that Christina’s father had been quite drunk when he proposed the toast to the happy couple.

However there was one piece of news that he was able to tell her that she had not yet heard.

'Oh, did you know the Criterion Hotel is being taken over completely by the Americans for their officers? Can you believe it! Christina's was the last function to be held there for an indefinite period.'

The Criterion Hotel had been built around eighty years earlier as the city itself was being established.

The fine Victorian building occupied a prime corner position overlooking the river but with elevation enough that only the worst floods would ever reach the hotel. Its proportions were graceful and elegant, so its choice as a billet for officers by the American forces would have come as no surprise to the locals.

'Do you mean the whole hotel? Where will people stay now? There aren't many hotels in town.'

She had only been to the hotel twice before with her mother to call on friends from Melbourne who were visiting.

Having satisfied himself that she had come to no real harm, James rose to go, but he hesitated.

'I must go. I haven't told you by the way, that I'll be away for a while. I have to get some cattle on the move to some better pasture. We're leaving the day after tomorrow. I may not be back for a month or two.'

Julia was quite surprised at this news and even more surprised that he had not mentioned it earlier.

The winter had been dry, but that wasn't unexpected. It was the failure of the early summer storms and the early onset of hot weather that had made the situation worse, according to her father.

'I heard Father and William discussing the weather last week. I know they're concerned about the stock on Prior Park. I could see how dry it was when I went riding last week.'

'You won't be riding for a while.'

It was stating the obvious but Julia wasn't pleased to be reminded, so she ignored his words.

'I think Father is preparing to send some cattle to the next sale,' she said.

'I may have to do that too, but there'll be a glut of cattle on the

market in the next month I reckon.

‘I can hold out if I can get some feed along the road and lighten the load on Mayfield and we get rain by Christmas. I think the prices will improve too with more mouths to feed in the district. I know Americans like their steaks.’

She knew it was a common practice in dry times to take cattle on the road. The long paddock, it was called. Three or four men on horseback would drive a herd of cattle feeding along the roadside for miles in search of better feed.

‘Well, I won’t be going anywhere that’s for sure. Mother and I had planned to go to Sydney for shopping, but we can’t go until my arm is out of plaster, and that will be a week or two before Christmas, at the earliest. Good luck with the cattle. I hope it rains soon.’

With the prospect of separation for some months, she did not resist his more passionate kiss good-bye.

‘I’ll see you when I get back. Perhaps we can talk about us then.’

With that, he was gone.

She was, she acknowledged to herself, confused about her feelings for him; she found him attractive yet she hesitated to respond to him in the way he wanted.

Instinctively, she felt there was a subtle danger in encouraging James Fitzroy, and she was not yet sure enough of herself to feel she could manage his demands.

She was surprised that her mother had not discouraged James Fitzroy; in fact she was quite open in her encouragement.

Since he would inherit Mayfield Downs, there was no objection from her parents but her own thoughts resisted such a tidy and obvious solution for her future life.

In a country at war, much remained uncertain and such uncertainty permeated every aspect of their lives, even if their everyday lives were largely unaffected.

It was a restless Julia, already more than a week into her recovery,

who greeted an unexpected visitor the following Wednesday. She had been ambling along the covered walkway connecting the house to the tennis court, which lay just beyond the back garden of Prior Park.

Lost in her own thoughts, she had not heard her father's voice calling her name until he was almost upon her.

'Julia, there you are - this is the American army doctor who stopped and treated you when you and William had your accident. He's called in to see how you are.'

She did not recognise Captain Philippe Duval because she had no recall of the accident and its aftermath but he recognised her in an instant. His professional interest was immediately drawn by the heavy plaster cast on her right arm.

'Miss Belleville, I came to see how you are and to see if there is anything I can do. I'm glad to see you up and about and clearly on the mend. How is the arm? Is it still painful?'

He smiled at her, encouragingly.

'Uncomfortable. A terrible nuisance, but they tell me I'll mend. But thank you for coming to see me. I believe you diagnosed the broken arm at the time and you were right. It was so kind of you to stop and help us.'

'I'm just so sorry we were responsible for running your car off the road. On a road with no centre markings and little traffic, it's easy to forget about driving on the left hand side. But that's no excuse.'

Until this meeting, Julia had thought nothing further about the American doctor who had come to her aid on the side of the road. She had not remembered him, relying instead on William's accounts of the incident, which in truth were more designed to exonerate him from any blame than applaud the efforts of others.

'I see there is still some swelling,' he said, reverting seamlessly to his professional role.

'It does give me some pain,' she admitted. 'They told me it's quite a bad fracture, but I'll have the plaster off before Christmas.'

Before she could add anything further, her mother appeared

at the top of the back stairs, motioning them into the house for refreshments.

‘How do you do, Mrs Belleville. I came to make sure your daughter is well on the way to recovery.’

Julia could see how the American charmed her mother with his polished manners.

‘Thank you, Captain Duval. We’re grateful for your help. It could have been so much worse but she will make a full recovery. I hope you’re more careful on our roads in future.’

Elizabeth Belleville was determined to make her point, but it was clear the American was already taking steps to ensure that there was no repeat of the incident.

‘Our drivers are much more careful on the roads since that day, I can assure you, Mrs Belleville.

‘We have put big signs in all the trucks to remind the drivers to keep to the left and we’ve held a training workshop for all our drivers about local roads and local conditions.’

‘Well that’s something at least, although with the number of army trucks on this road now, we wonder what is going on. It’s almost like an invasion, Captain,’ Elizabeth Belleville said.

He bridled a little at this suggestion. His reply was polite but firm.

‘I’m afraid we cannot fight a war without somewhere to train and support our infantry away from the front line, Mrs Belleville.

‘I think you’ll find army camps right up and down the east coast of Australia now, but this area in particular is a useful staging point for our joint efforts to defeat the Japanese advance in New Guinea.

‘You’ll know that General Macarthur has been in Brisbane at his new headquarters for some months now.’

‘Yes, we’ve read about it, Captain,’ Francis Belleville interjected.

In truth, Francis Belleville was not entirely happy with the growing American army presence in the district but he did not say as much to their visitor.

If pressed, he would have had to concede that the cause of his displeasure was entirely related to the impact on Prior Park and therefore a very self-centred reason.

Without much notice, the army engineers had fenced off a small but very useful parcel of his land, which adjoined the road, for an army encampment. That he had no say over the matter and that it was only a matter of two miles north of the house at Prior Park was the real cause of his annoyance.

'We're not averse to the activities of the American forces,' he conceded. 'We know Australia cannot stand alone against the Japanese, so we're grateful for the help. It's just seeing so many men in the district, it's a bit of a shock at first.'

He said nothing further on the subject, except to once again express his gratitude for the assistance the medical man had rendered his injured daughter.

'Anyway, thank you again for helping Julia and William. I think my son was worried I would blame him for the accident because I would have immediately assumed that he was driving too fast, but in reality I think he handled the situation well.'

'I can assure you, Mr Belleville, that the fault was all on our side,' Captain Duval insisted.

He stood up ready to take his leave.

Francis Belleville warmed to his subject.

'We just hope that our combined forces defeat the Japanese threat sooner rather than later,' he said.

'What they did at Pearl Harbour was quite dreadful. Now they've targeted Darwin too, we feel very vulnerable. And my elder son is currently in Canada for pilot training. This war is worse than we ever could have imagined.'

It was clear the young American shared Francis Belleville's sentiments.

'I agree Mr Belleville. None of us really wants to engage in war. It's just something we have to do and the quicker we win it, the better, as far as I am concerned.'

'I hope we see you again, Captain,' said Mrs Belleville, although

under what circumstances she could not imagine.

Julia Belleville watched from the front steps as his Jeep disappeared down the driveway leaving a following trail of fine dust in its wake.

Philippe Duval was the first American she had met. In the short time the American forces had been establishing their camps in the district, there had been no point at which she had crossed paths with any of them. She had certainly seen their vehicles on the road, but until now, she had expressed little curiosity about the strangers in their midst.

It was not that American accents were unfamiliar. In fact they were as familiar to Australians as their own through the wonders of Hollywood but the lingering strength of British culture had meant a marked preference for English and European travel for those who could afford it. America was a destination that was rarely spoken of by those who embarked on the long sea voyages that international travel dictated.

The war, of course, had put an end to all such ambitions, as Julia's mother remarked frequently. She had long expected to spend at least six months with her young daughter on an extended European tour following her graduation from school. Hitler's ambitions, she frequently complained, had put paid to her own ambitions for her only daughter.

As Julia turned to go back into the house, she quizzed her mother about the young American officer.

'I wonder what part of America he comes from? It sounds like a French name.'

'I don't know, Julia, I've no idea.'

Elizabeth Belleville clearly saw no reason to discuss the matter. For Julia's part, she did not want to pique her mother's interest beyond the casual enquiry, so she let the matter drop.

To ask further questions would have encouraged her mother to pontificate, for that was the only word that suited, on the unsuitability of mixed marriages, as she liked to call them.

'We should be pleased that the American soldiers are here but

they should leave and not take Australian girls with them as their wives,' she was heard to say on more than one occasion so Julia knew better than to continue her line of questioning about the American doctor.

For Philippe Duval's part, it would be hard to imagine that the twenty-seven year old American army doctor had not noticed the stunning beauty of his one time patient but he would nevertheless have been surprised at the brief conversation between mother and daughter, had he been around to hear it.

CHAPTER FOUR:
NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1942

Prior Park, 20 November 1942

Dear Son

Your letter from Canada reached me only yesterday. I take no news as good news and the delay in getting your letters not unsurprising, although in the dead of the night as I lie awake, such a notion is hardly reassuring.

From what little I know and understand of what you are training to do, I can conjure up the most fearful and awful scenarios of what is ahead of you when you finally get to England.

But you will want to know what has been going on here.

Around the very time you were writing to me, we were hosting the Fitzroys to a Sunday afternoon tennis party, although there won't be any tennis for Julia for a while – she has since broken her right arm.

William had to swerve to avoid an American army truck on the wrong side of the road. Julia was with him and she took quite a battering from sliding across the front seat and hitting the steering column, hence the broken arm. The plaster will be off before Christmas and she is, otherwise, none the worse for the accident. The car only sustained very minor damage.

But back to the tennis day. The two Fitzroy offspring, James and Alice, seemed to have turned out better than might have been expected. I had more opportunity to observe them at the tennis day

than at Julia's birthday party earlier in the year.

You would hardly recognise Alice now. She is 18 and quite fetching. She has pretty manners, something your own sister would do well to copy at times.

With you away, you can imagine that William is always keen to play the older brother and to assert his authority. He was particularly taken with Alice, I think. It is the first time I have seen him take an interest in a girl.

To see Mrs Fitzroy absolutely itching to know how the land might lie with William's prospects was quite amusing - I suspect she thinks they might improve a good deal because of the gossip she's heard - but, of course, she is too polite to ask.

If you ask 'what gossip?', I'll leave that to your imagination, remembering that our household staff hear most things that are said among us.

I do not judge Mrs Fitzroy too harshly on this point. Any mother with a daughter of marriageable age can be forgiven for needing to gauge the lie of the land, so to speak. It's no good to mark out a 'prospect' and then discover he has nothing to offer. It only leads to heartbreak all round.

No doubt I am soon to be led a merry dance by your sister who in every respect outshines the pretty Alice. The Dalrymple legacy may only add to the problem.

Mrs Fitzroy chose not to ask after you at all which only confirmed my suspicions that she believes there is a severe rift between us. But as I said before, it does appear to raise her hopes for William and therefore her ambitions for Alice. I think that will make you smile.

You would not know this place now. During the year, the American Army presence in the district has grown apace. We don't know much about what they are doing here so rumour abounds.

The Criterion Hotel is now a billet for American officers. We frequently pass their vehicles on the road into town (which is where William ran foul of them). For them, I have to say, there seems to be no shortage of petrol.

I do now take Julia with me to the Red Cross committee meetings

and working bees, if she feels inclined. I can't blame her for her reluctance though; knitting socks, she says, is something for grandmothers to do. At this point, she and I might well have been heading to England and Europe now that she has finished school but this terrible war has put an end to all the things we might have expected to do.

I do regret, as I have said in previous letters, the bitterness of our parting from you. I can only put it down to the shock of your news on both fronts and our unpreparedness for it.

I don't think life will ever be the same again but I pray that we all come through it safely, especially you, my dear son.

Your loving Mother

Elizabeth Belleville replaced the lid on her fountain pen and sealed the envelope ready for mailing. There was a faint layer of dust on the highly polished top of her writing desk, which she flicked away with her handkerchief.

As events transpired, it was only a matter of a few days before Mrs Belleville was reading something that she knew would be of profound interest to her elder son, but by that time her letter had already begun its long journey.

Under the simple heading *Wedding Bells*, which she could easily have missed in the crowded third page of the local newspaper, she spotted a small news item that turned out to be of far greater importance than that accorded to it by the newspaper, at least as far as Elizabeth Belleville was concerned.

St Andrew's Presbyterian Church provided the setting last Saturday for the marriage of Jane Marie Saville, only daughter of Mrs Irene Baxter and the late Mr John Saville, and Thomas Sidney Warner, only son of the late Mr and Mrs John Warner.

Instead of the traditional wedding gown the bride, who was given away by her stepfather Mr Peter Baxter, wore a dusty pink frock and hat, to which she added navy accessories.

After the ceremony, which was attended by close family members

only, twelve guests were entertained at the wedding breakfast at the Leichhardt Hotel. The couple will make their home at Armoobilla station.

It was three small paragraphs in total. But they were three small paragraphs of great interest to Elizabeth Belleville.

If there were more questions than answers that occurred to her as a result of the newspaper's simple report, she did not stop to consider them at all. Her first and overwhelming feeling at the unexpected news was one of relief. Beyond that, she barely considered any other aspects of the announcement.

There was only one person she could tell and that was her husband Francis, for no one else in the household had been privy to the real reason for their heated argument with Richard.

'Francis,' she called over the banister, but there was no immediate reply.

She hurried down the stairs and knocked on his study door, which she opened without waiting for an answer.

On this occasion, she did not rebuke her husband for the half empty glass of whisky in his hand. Instead she brandished the newspaper in his direction.

'Thank goodness we insisted that Richard not announce his marriage plans before he went away. Jane Saville got married. It's here in the paper. Can you believe it?'

Francis picked up his reading glasses from the desk and quickly scanned the few paragraphs that Elizabeth had pointed out to him.

'Well, that's good news, isn't it? It seems she wasn't as in love with him as he thought,' Francis said, as if there was nothing much more to say on the matter now.

But he could see that his wife was keen to say more so he asked the obvious question.

'Have you heard something about Jane Saville since Richard left?'

'Well, only gossip really but I heard that Tom Warner had become quite infatuated with her, but I didn't think anything of

it. He must be a year or two younger than her at least so I thought it was just idle gossip,' she said.

She was clearly surprised at the turn of events.

'Perhaps I need not have excluded her from the Warner's invitation to Julia's party after all. I only did it because I don't usually invite governesses and then, with Richard's news, I was pleased I hadn't included her.'

She turned to Francis for reassurance.

'I did think that was a bit harsh, old girl,' he said.

He rarely used any endearments to his wife these days. This was as close as he had come in recent times.

'Richard hasn't even mentioned her in any of his letters. Do you think he knows? Or even knew some time ago and didn't tell us. He says nothing about her at all.'

Francis pondered this question for a time but could not come up with a satisfactory explanation.

'It's hard to say – perhaps he does not write about her because he doesn't want to upset us. Or perhaps he does not write about her because it's in the past and they have both moved on?'

He looked expectantly at his wife who was looking bemused.

'I just don't know,' replied his wife, 'but I won't mention it when I write next time. If he doesn't know and still harbours hope for their marriage, I don't want to be the one to tell him. I don't want his mind on anything but what he is doing.'

Francis nodded his agreement.

'You're right. Leave it alone. Hopefully Jane Saville has had the decency to write to him and break it off, but we can't ask.'

'No, we can't ask. We can't ask anyone,' she said firmly.

With that, she left her husband to the comforts of the whisky decanter.

She read the article again to satisfy herself that she had not misread it.

Whatever the cause of the change of heart on the part of Jane Saville, there was no doubt that the outcome was a particularly pleasing one for Elizabeth.

It was on this same afternoon that Julia Belleville next encountered her saviour Philippe Duval.

Despite the awkwardness of walking with her arm in a sling, she set out across country, her destination Fairy Lagoon, just two miles from the house at Prior Park.

Before the war, Fairy Lagoon had been a popular spot for the local children. Julia had remembered afternoons spent swimming in its clear waters during school holidays. It was true that she could not swim now but she felt a pressing need to escape the boredom that was beginning to overwhelm her. She longed to have the heavy plaster removed from her arm but that was still at least a week away.

She had read the small news item about Jane Saville's marriage but, having no idea of the importance of the news, had not connected this particular revelation with her mother's unusually buoyant mood.

Julia was surprised but it made it easy for her to slip away from the house without her mother's knowledge. She chose her path carefully, following the tree line that ran along the boundary fence heading north.

She had walked almost a mile keeping to the shade of the trees where possible but then she stopped suddenly.

Above the usual bush sounds, she thought she heard footsteps and muffled voices. She had not expected to meet anyone at all so the feeling she was being followed created a deep sense of unease.

She had never before felt the slightest concern in walking or riding alone around her father's property so the sense that she was not alone now began to make her feel slightly alarmed. If they were men her father employed, they would immediately make themselves known to her and greet her openly. The fact that this had not occurred made her feel slightly anxious.

For what seemed like ages, she stood stock still, listening intently, but there was almost complete silence, broken only by the sound of the slight breeze through the treetops and the occasional bird flitting from tree to tree. Had she imagined the

sounds? She wasn't sure but she could hear nothing unusual now.

So she walked on, following a path carved out by countless herds of cattle heading from one waterhole to the next. The grass swished against her legs where it had grown long and rank. It was beginning to make her itchy. She waved the flies away from her face with a small branch of leaves that served as a fan.

Before long, she reached a bend in the path where it skirted a stony ridge. The small stones she dislodged as she walked rattled down the short slope. She found it hard even on the gently sloping ground to keep her balance with her right arm making her unbalanced.

She was concentrating so hard on not losing her footing that she did not hear the soldiers until the first one spoke. His voice was mocking and self assured. The accent was unusual, its deep drawl a foreign sound in the Australian bush.

'Well, what have we here boys? A young lady all alone, maybe lost? What do you think eh?'

The man was just in front of her on the track, hands on hips, enjoying her confusion and bewilderment. A leering smile hovered on his lips. Julia stopped dead and swung around to retreat back down the way she had come. Before she could take more than a step or two, two men blocked her return path.

They were all wearing the now familiar khaki uniform of American soldiers.

'Let me pass, please.'

She was trying desperately to keep the alarm out of her voice. In fact it was anger that she felt most of all.

Anger that these men would dare to challenge her on her own father's property, but her anger was quickly replaced by something akin to fear, as she began to realise how isolated she was in this part of the property and that she would be no match for any of them physically.

She realised too late that her mother had been right to insist that she not wander about beyond the house with so many

strangers in the district.

'Now, wouldn't it be good if you just stayed awhile and were a little more friendly to me and my friends here. Don't be so hasty. Looks as though you've already met with a little accident,' he said, nodding towards her right arm.

'You don't want to make it worse now. My friends and I just want to be a little friendly now.'

He repeated the words. They sounded anything but friendly to Julia's ears.

There was menace in his voice, a subtle threat that she could not fail to understand.

The big man in front of her moved closer to her to put his arm around her shoulder, avoiding her broken arm but trying to draw her near to him.

She could feel his heavy breath on her face. She could smell his stale tobacco-ridden sweat as his body pressed close to her. She could hear the sniggering and the crude encouragement of the other two soldiers who clearly had high hopes of sharing in the amusement.

'Let me go,' she said. 'Let me go.'

She was frightened now and started to struggle. She was trying to think where her father's stockmen would be working but she had no idea.

She struck out with her left foot as hard as she could but the American stepped back nimbly and avoided it altogether.

It almost unbalanced her.

'That's not very friendly. We're just trying to be friends. Good friends, aren't we fellas?'

He reached out and started to fondle the front of her shirt with his big rough hands. His hand drifted over her left breast.

'Very pretty,' he mumbled almost to himself. 'Very pretty.'

The other two men, sensing that the sport was about to begin in earnest, crowded in around her.

She screamed and struggled to free herself from the encircling men.

At that very moment Philippe Duval was about to photograph a kookaburra that had perched very conveniently on a fencepost a short distance further along the track.

Julia's scream stunned him into action. He ran along the path towards the group that had previously been obscured from his view.

In one decisive action, he inserted himself between the big American soldier and the terrified girl.

'Corporal, leave that girl alone. What do you think you are doing? Have you taken leave of your senses! For God's sake man, get out of here.'

His anger was barely controlled as he shouted and pushed the soldier.

The self assurance drained quickly from the other man's voice, but he knew he must then and there strike a mitigating tone. Not to do so would go against him, he knew.

'We weren't doing anything, sir. We just wanted to be friendly.'

The excuse sounded lame and Philippe Duval was in no mood to listen to it. He glanced around him and noticed the other two men had melted away into the bush as soon as he approached. Whether he would be able to identify them later was going to be a vexed question but not one that worried him now. They would certainly not give themselves up voluntarily. Getting control of the situation was all that mattered.

His hand drifted to his side arm in a gesture that he hoped would bring some sense to the man in front of him.

'You, Corporal, will be dealt with later. Get back to camp. You'll have your chance to tell your story before your CO. Get out of here! Now!'

It was a direct command but also it was all he could trust himself to say. His anger threatened to overcome his normal measured tone.

He knew he stood little chance in a physical encounter with the bulky corporal but he knew instinctively that his rank would save him, because to strike an officer was an offence for which a

corporal would be court martialed. They both knew it. There was no mitigation that would justify such an offence.

The soldier, sizing up the situation quickly, turned on his heels and walked away from them without a backward glance.

It was then that Philippe turned his attention to Julia.

She had sunk to the ground and was struggling to get up so he gently put his arm around her and helped her to her feet.

He could see that she had been frightened by the encounter.

'Thank you.' It was all she could manage to say.

Her voice betrayed her anxiety although she was trying desperately to recover her composure. Her breath was coming in short sharp bursts as she attempted to suppress her panic.

'You always seem to be coming to my aid. I was so scared. I didn't expect to meet anyone at all here. I didn't know the camp was so close. I didn't know there would be anyone about.'

He could feel her shaking from the shock of the incident and he could hear a tremor in her voice.

'I'm so sorry those men acted like that towards you. It was unforgivable. Are you hurt?'

His voice now was gentle and encouraging, his anger gone, replaced by concern for her.

'I think I'm all right. I just didn't know how to deal with them. I didn't expect to see anyone here.'

She repeated her explanation, tears welling in her eyes, more from relief, he suspected, than any physical injury.

His words were softly spoken and encouraging as he continued to half support her.

'Miss Belleville, you don't have to explain. They were at fault. You have a perfect right to walk around your father's property. It's those men who are at fault.'

'They'll be dealt with, don't you worry. I'm so sorry for what they did to you. Their behaviour was totally unacceptable. They're just rough bullies and took an opportunity when they saw you were alone.'

Julia's head flicked up nervously, her face creased with a look

of alarm.

‘I don’t want to have to meet them again. You won’t need me will you to give any testimony or anything?’ she asked, clearly unwilling to have to face her tormentors again.

‘No, I saw enough. They’ll be disciplined and confined to camp. They’ll have privileges withdrawn, but you won’t have to be part of it. We wouldn’t ask that of you.’

His words were reassuring.

She could see he was concerned about her safety and her well-being, but it hadn’t occurred to her that he was also concerned about the reputation of the American forces that relied on the goodwill of the local people.

He knew that there could be unfortunate consequences from making the incident public. At all costs, it must be kept within a tight circle of officers who would mete out the punishment to the perpetrators.

‘I’m going to make sure you get home safely. Walk along here with me. I have to go back for my camera. Where were you heading, if I may ask?’

The question was an obvious one. He guessed she was almost two miles from Prior Park. It might have been natural to find her walking to visit the neighbours but there were no neighbouring houses in this direction.

‘I was going to Fairy Lagoon. It’s only a few hundred yards further along the track. I would normally ride my horse but I can’t with my broken arm. We always went there as children to swim. What were you photographing? It would be a good place to photograph.’

Philippe picked up his camera and gave it a cursory glance to ensure nothing had been broken in his haste to pull the strap over his head and drop it on the ground so he could run unhindered.

The kookaburra he’d been hoping to photograph had long since departed the scene. He’d have to hope for similar luck on another day.

‘I like photography just as a hobby,’ he explained.

'I wanted to take some photos of the Australian bush while I am here, with my new camera. I've joined a camera club in town. Things were quiet this afternoon so I decided to see what might be around here of interest. Just as well as it turned out.'

She smiled at him and nodded, acknowledging the truth of his words.

'I come out here to this camp to supervise the medical unit twice a week. I was on my way back when I decided to stop and walk from the road into the bush to see what there is to photograph.'

'Lucky for me,' she said.

She put extra emphasis on the words and there was a rueful smile hovering on her lips. He was pleased to see that she had almost completely regained her composure with the reassurance of his presence.

'How is the arm, by the way?'

Julia adjusted the sling around her neck with some difficulty.

'I'm really tired of this plaster cast but I expect to get it off next week, if the doctor is happy with the progress. I'll be so relieved. I haven't been able to do anything much at all.'

He smiled, nodding in agreement.

'Yes, awkward things, broken arms, but it will be healed soon. I really think you should be going home now. I'll drive you. We just have to walk back to the road. I don't think you should walk home by yourself.'

'Thanks. I'd appreciate that. Perhaps I can come out with you when you are next going to take some photos? I can show you the best spots.'

It was a naive offer from a young girl that Philippe Duval, older and wiser, knew he should have turned down.

He knew she did not understand the inappropriateness of her suggestion and every instinct within him said that Julia Belleville, young, beautiful and on the brink of womanhood, could lead to trouble, if he did not take the greatest care.

But the offer seemed such an innocent attempt at friendship

FREE READING

that he dismissed the inner voice that told him to beware.

Later, he was to remember this particular day with a mixture of regret and remorse that was to bear heavily on his conscience for the rest of his life.

Had he obeyed his first instinct to turn down her offer of assistance, his life and her life would never have become entwined in a way that was to cast a shadow over both their lives.