

FREE READING

To Love, Honour *and* Betray

BOOK 2 IN THE
BELLEVILLE FAMILY SERIES



A chance encounter. A secret from the grave. A brutal act of revenge.
Ten years on and heartbreak threatens to tear the Belleville family
apart as their deepest secrets are tragically exposed.

J MARY MASTERS

FREE READING

**Praise for Book 1
of the Belleville Family saga**

**THE HOUSE OF SECRETS: JULIA'S STORY
NOW REPUBLISHED AS 'JULIA'S STORY'**

'This tale is a well developed family saga ... with an interesting cast of characters and some deep secret plot lines that you just know will come back to haunt the main characters later. The characters are believable, full of depth and colour; and the writing is fresh.'

Amazon.com 4 stars review

'A well written story that pulls the reader into the era and the family. Looking forward to continuing the saga with book 2.'

Goodreads.com review

'Just wanted to let you know I have just finished reading your 1st novel, *House of Secrets* and can't wait for the follow on story.'

Library Reader via email

'Have just finished *House of Secrets Julia's Story*. Did not know until the last page that it was to be continued. Loved the book - probably the best novel that I have read for some time and now am waiting with great impatience for Book 2 - when can we hope to see it?'

Reader response via email

FREE READING

First published 2017
This edition published 2019

Copyright © J Mary Masters 2017

All rights reserved. No part of his book may be reproduced or transmitted by any person or entity in any form or by any means, without prior permission from the author.

PMA Books
A division of Peter Masters & Associates
ABN 72 172 119 877
111/1 Halcyon Way, Bli Bli Qld 4560
Australia
www.pmabooks.com
Mobile 0488 224 929
Email enquiries@pmabooks.com

ISBN 9780994327659

Cover design: J D Smith Design, UK, www.jdsmith-design.com

FREE READING

To Love, Honour and Betray

BOOK 2

IN THE BELLEVILLE FAMILY SAGA

J Mary Masters

FREE READING



About the author

J Mary Masters (Judith) was born in Rockhampton, Queensland, Australia in the 1950s, the youngest of four children. She is married to Peter and now lives on the Sunshine Coast of Queensland.

For more than twenty years, Judith has been involved in the magazine publishing industry as a managing editor and publisher.

Now retired from full time work, Judith devotes her time to her writing career, with emphasis on writing for women readers.

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

You can set up a conversation with the author online

Website

jmarymasters.com

Twitter

[@judithmasters](https://twitter.com/judithmasters)

Blog

judithmasters.wordpress.com

Facebook

www.facebook.com/JudithMMasters

Email

jmarymasters1@gmail.com

FREE READING

To Love, Honour and Betray

BOOK 2

IN THE BELLEVILLE FAMILY SERIES

J Mary Masters



FREE READING

To the readers of my first novel

Julia's Story

(First Published as The House of Secrets: Julia's Story)

*It was your encouragement and praise that kept me
going to write the second book in the series.*

And to my husband Peter

*who has encouraged me every step of the way
in my writing life.*

BELLEVILLE FAMILY SERIES

Julia's Story

BOOK 1

Return to Prior Park

BOOK 3

Cast of key characters - Book 2

AUSTRALIA

BELLEVILLE FAMILY (Prior Park)

Elizabeth Belleville	Mother
Richard Belleville	Son
William Belleville	Son
Alice Belleville (formerly Fitzroy)	William's wife
Paul Belleville	Richard & Catherine's son
Anthony Belleville	Richard & Catherine's son
Marianne Belleville	William & Alice's daughter
Mrs Duffy	Housekeeper, Prior Park
Charles Brockman	Manager, Prior Park
Jack Finch	Prior Park worker
Ted Lambert	Prior Park worker
Muriel McGovern	Francis Belleville's mistress
Alistair McGovern	Francis Belleville's son

FITZROY FAMILY (Mayfield Downs)

Amelia Fitzroy	Mother
James Fitzroy	Son
Julia Fitzroy (formerly Belleville)	James's wife
John Fitzroy	James & Julia's son
Mrs Fry	Housekeeper

WARNER FAMILY (Armoobilla)

Tom Warner	
Jane Warner (formerly Saville)	Former governess

OTHERS

Nathaniel Dodds	Belleville Family solicitor
Henry Baker	New Family solicitor
Pippa Jensen	Julia Belleville's daughter
Edith Henderson	Pippa's Great Aunt

ENGLAND

CAVENDISH FAMILY (Haldon Hall)

Lady Marina Cavendish	Mother, daughter of an Earl
Sir Anthony Cavendish	Father, a Baronet
Catherine Cavendish (now Belleville) Only daughter
Edward Cavendish	Heir to the Baronetcy
John Bertram	Nephew to Lady Marina

USA

Dr Philippe Duval	Former US Army doctor
-------------------	-----------------------

FREE READING

PROLOGUE

At the end of book 1, *The House of Secrets: Julia's Story*, we left the Belleville family just as Julia Belleville married James Fitzroy in 1947.

Now ten years on, we see the Belleville children all married with their own families, but behind the façade of their wealthy lives, trouble is brewing.

Long held secrets are about to bubble to the surface. All of them will be tested as 1957 becomes a year of crisis for the family and for those they love.

CHAPTER 1: APRIL 1957

It was late afternoon and cool in the shadows of the house. William Belleville strode out the front door in search of his elder brother Richard whom he suspected of avoiding him, although he could see no reason why he should do so, yet the suspicion lingered.

The house at Prior Park had begun to show its age. A team of men was working methodically on its exterior. Unsightly scaffolding covered two sides of the grand house.

‘I hope this scaffolding is gone in time for Mother’s birthday party,’ William said, when he finally caught up with his brother.

‘We can’t have people arriving and the house looking like this.’

Richard nodded agreement. He thought it was an unnecessary and pointless observation but he didn’t say so.

‘Have you heard from Catherine? Will she be back in time for Mother’s sixtieth birthday party?’ William asked pointedly.

Richard did not turn to face his brother but said simply in a low voice that William strained to hear: ‘I don’t know’.

William hesitated. He had expected a more positive answer. The lack of it left him uncertain as to whether he should press for more details.

It was Richard, in the end, who broke the silence.

‘I’m not altogether sure she is coming back for good,’ he said, finally lifting his head from examining some cracked stonework.

William made no comment. He did not know what to say. It had not occurred to him that his sister-in-law might not return to Prior Park.

‘I had a letter from her yesterday,’ Richard said. ‘It wasn’t a long letter. Rather a short letter really, saying she was struggling to imagine coming back to her life here. She’s not happy with it, apparently.’

Richard’s voice trailed off.

William wished he hadn’t asked the question. The state of Richard’s marriage was not entirely comfortable ground between them. Still he pressed on asking the obvious questions or rather almost blurting them out.

‘Just like that? She said that? Did you discuss anything before she left in February? And she has Anthony with her? Was she suggesting she remain in England?’

William’s mind was beginning to turn over the implications of what he had just heard.

‘And what about Paul? Does she say anything about Paul?’

Richard shrugged his shoulders. The arrangements regarding their two sons had not been canvassed.

‘I don’t know really,’ he replied. ‘I don’t know what solution she sees. I did worry, you know, when I married her that she wouldn’t settle here, but then I had to marry her. And I had to come home.’

William nodded but said nothing more. But his brother warmed to his subject.

‘She doesn’t really go into any detail at all about what’s next but if she thinks she is going to bring Anthony up in England, I will have something to say about that, you can depend upon it.’

William was left in no doubt as to Richard’s point of view on the matter. He pondered these latest scraps of information for a moment or two.

‘You know I did feel there was some tension between you, if you don’t mind me saying so,’ William volunteered. ‘Particularly when you finally declared you didn’t want to leave Prior Park. I really think she had hopes of getting you to settle in Sydney.’

Richard at first did not respond to William’s forthright analysis of the situation but he did not resent it either, as he might once have done. It was as if he was already resigned to the fact that his marital affairs would become the subject of general discussion.

‘What is she going to do with the place she bought in Sydney?’

It was always likely to be the next question to occur to the ever-practical William.

‘I assume she’ll keep it or maybe she plans to divide her time between England and Sydney,’ Richard said, as if she had already planned her future life.

‘She may want to visit Sydney while Paul is at school there. Perhaps Anthony will go to the same school eventually, but he’s not yet five so that’s some time off.’

William, not always the most perceptive of men, for once began to understand the gravity of the situation his brother faced.

‘Did you ever seriously try to settle in Sydney?’ he asked, out of mere curiosity really, because he felt he already knew the answer.

Almost as soon as he had said it, William regretted it and he said so.

‘Sorry, old man, it’s none of my business really.’

He put his hand awkwardly on Richard’s shoulder. But for once Richard did not resent his brother for his lifetime habit of frankness. He looked enquiringly at his younger brother.

‘Could you be happy holed up in a three bedroom flat with traffic roaring past your front door day and night?’ he retorted.

William responded as expected.

‘No of course not, but I understand it was close to the harbour and a good suburb,’ he said, in a feeble attempt to defend his absent sister-in-law.

‘Oh yes, it is a good suburb and of course Sydney society matrons were fawning over Catherine because of her aristocratic connections,’ he said. ‘The few times I was there, I became nothing much more than a reluctant escort.’

He grimaced at the memory.

‘I ate their food, drank their wine and admired their views of the harbour bridge and the manicured gardens on which they had expended no personal effort,’ he said.

‘And hated every minute of it,’ he added, unnecessarily, for his feelings on the matter were plain to see

William could see too that Richard was making a determined effort to control himself. He lit a cigarette, the slight tremor in his

hands barely noticeable but William could almost feel the tension in his brother. He could hear the rising anger in his brother's voice.

Unsure what more he could say, William was relieved to see Alice and Marianne heading towards them, bringing an abrupt end to their conversation.

At ten years old, Marianne was fast becoming an exact copy of her mother Alice. If there was a lingering disappointment that no more children had arrived, and especially a son, William did not display it at all. In fact he revelled in the tightknit threesome they had become. Another arrival would have been an outsider.

Marianne had been pestering him for a new pony and she never missed an opportunity to badger her father. He enjoyed the game of saying he would not buy her a new pony for years yet, knowing full well that as soon as a suitable animal was found, Marianne would have exactly what she wanted.

'Marianne was helping to set the table for dinner,' Alice said chattily to no one in particular.

Then, linking arms with William, she broached the subject uppermost in her mind.

'You know we will have to make a decision on a school for her very soon. Her little local school days are fast running out,' she said.

It had been a source of anxiety for Alice, worrying that William would expect to send Marianne off to a fancy boarding school in Sydney like her cousin Paul, but she had not counted on William's attachment to his only child and his own miserable experience away from home.

'I think your idea of letting her stay with your mother in town during the week is fine. She can go up to the Girls' Grammar School as a day student,' he said without prompting, as if the matter hardly needed discussion at all.

Alice smiled, knowing that it was now settled and the idea she had planted in his mind six months earlier had borne fruit.

'She'll be company for your mother,' William added, as they walked slowly towards the house together, 'now that your father has passed on.'

Alice nodded and smiled her agreement. She gave his arm a small

squeeze in thanks.

Her father Jack Fitzroy had confounded the doctors by living much longer than had been expected of a man with a heart condition. He had finally succumbed the previous winter.

Marianne skipped ahead of them, blissfully unaware that she had been the topic of discussion but happily contented with her life, although she missed her cousin Paul who was spending his first year away from Prior Park. She did not think it entirely fair that he had to be sent away to school, but the workings of the minds of adults were a complete mystery to her as yet.

As Alice and William's only child revelled in her secure and happy childhood, another child, not much older than her, was having to face the harsh and totally unexpected realities of life.

Pippa Jensen's life had changed forever, that much she knew. However kindly they said it, however much they tried to soften the blow, she knew that her beloved mother Anne was dead along with her father Harry.

It had all happened in a split second on a lonely country road, they said. Her father had swerved to miss a kangaroo and lost control of the car. The car had rolled many times and eventually hit a tree. They were both dead before help arrived. Her parents had been heading home from a neighbouring property on a back road, the policeman said, when he collected her from the local school.

Now, sitting on a hard high backed chair in the solicitor's office where her father had been the most important client, she tried to act like an adult for the first time in her life but the sobbing would not stop. Tears cascaded out of her blue eyes and down her cheeks, running unchecked. She knew that all that was familiar to her had been snatched away in a single awful moment. She knew she was alone. At thirteen it was a terrifying and mystifying thought.

She tried to understand what the pompous man across the desk was telling her but it was all too confusing. He seemed to repeat himself again and again, slowing his speech as if by speaking slowly he could make her understand what was happening.

She could take no comfort at all from the woman beside her. It

was all she could manage to endure, spending the school week with Mrs Hampson, who ran a boarding house for country children attending the local high school. She had told her mother this every weekend. Her mother's reply had been gentle and soothing, reminding her it was just for the school days and the school term. The week would fly by, she had been told countless times. What would there be at home for her now, she wondered? Who would take care of her? The thought crossed her mind fleetingly that she might have to stay with Mrs Hampson for a very long time and she shuddered.

'Your uncle and cousin are organising the funerals for Friday. You will stay with Mrs Hampson and after the funerals are over, we will talk about your future,' the solicitor said, with a note of finality.

With that, he nodded to the stout woman who occupied the other chair and she held out her hand to Pippa, who looked at it briefly but did not grasp it. Instead she ran out of the room and into the street, her tears uncontrollable. She did not know then that worse news was to come. News that would make her future much less certain; news that would rip the very ground from under her feet.

Half a world away, Lady Marina Cavendish stood at the library window watching her four year old grandson playing alongside Joseph, Haldon Hall's elderly gardener, who had provided the boy with a cut down set of tools that were now a constant source of boyish delight. He dug with enthusiasm such that garden soil scattered everywhere but Joseph, patient and unflappable, scraped the soil back into the garden bed, praising the boy all the while for his invaluable help.

Satisfied that her grandson was in good hands, Lady Marina turned away from the window and walked across to the sofa. She sat down with the deliberate air of someone with something important to say. Her daughter Catherine sat in the armchair opposite, flicking through the latest issue of *Tatler* magazine. She looked up when her mother spoke.

'Do you want to tell me what's going on, Catherine, or do I have to play a guessing game?'

It was an opening gambit designed to get her daughter's attention.

This time it succeeded. Catherine discarded the magazine, none of which she had really read, and looked across at her mother.

‘Guessing game, Mother? I’m not sure what you mean?’ she responded, as if she was more than prepared to play a guessing game with her mother.

‘Well, you don’t exactly look like a woman desperate to return home to her husband. Or to her child, if it comes to that. Is everything all right between you and Richard?’

Lady Marina, in typical fashion, did not imagine for one moment that this was really none of her business. She sat impassively waiting for her daughter’s response.

Catherine stood up and walked the short distance to the window where her mother had been standing just moments before. It was clear she was thinking carefully about her response. What should she tell her mother? Did she know how she really felt? How could she answer her mother’s question when she wasn’t sure of the answer herself? Or was she sure now?

She turned away from the window but did not move closer to her mother, as if it was safer to speak at a distance.

‘If you want the truth, Mother, I’m bored with my life in Australia,’ she said finally. ‘You know we live mostly at Prior Park with his mother and his brother and his brother’s wife. It isn’t our home exclusively. I think that’s part of the problem. There isn’t really much for me to do there. The men, of course, are always occupied with the farm or with business matters.’

She could not bring herself to call Prior Park an estate because it lacked, in her eyes, the prettiness and orderliness of the English countryside. It lacked too the social hierarchy she understood implicitly from her upbringing. Such social hierarchies, if they had ever existed in Australia, had long since disappeared. But to articulate her restlessness in such terms seemed mean and petty.

She started to pace the room restlessly. Her mother said nothing but waited for her to continue.

‘Richard is away on business quite a lot,’ she said. ‘I go with him sometimes but mostly if I travel I stay in Sydney while he goes on to some god-forsaken provincial town. I enjoy being in Sydney but

Richard does not. He's a country boy at heart, it seems. I thought he might enjoy Sydney. To his credit, he did try.'

Her mother nodded, as if to acknowledge that she already understood all that her daughter was telling her.

'You were in rather a rush to marry him, Catherine, as I recall,' Lady Marina said.

'A necessary rush, as you'll recall,' Catherine retorted.

Her mother ignored her response, as if rekindling the memory of Catherine's ill-considered match was a painful episode best forgotten.

'You would have made a good marriage if you had stayed here,' was all her mother could find to say, ignoring completely the reason for her hasty marriage.

'With an illegitimate baby in tow? I don't think so, Mother.'

Neither woman would now say the obvious: that the baby could have been given up for adoption. The eleven year old Paul Belleville had captured both his mother's and his grandmother's heart so completely that to even speak the thought, or think it, was contemptuous, as if it was a betrayal of the child, as if a child could be discarded and forgotten without remorse.

'Is that all that is wrong?' asked Lady Marina, as if she was expecting some unsavoury revelation from her daughter.

'I think it's enough to be going on with,' Catherine said, sure now that she did not want to burden her mother with her deepest concerns.

'So that's why you haven't booked your passage home yet?'

Only my mother, Catherine thought, could impose a special meaning on the word 'home' that mixed contempt with expectation.

'I'm planning to go down to London tomorrow,' Catherine said. 'I plan to do it then. I'll be meeting John Bertram for lunch. He'll be in London for a few days, as it turns out. The air crew has several days rest before they fly the London-Sydney route again.'

Lady Marina remembered John Bertram's prediction clearly that the skies would soon be filling with aircraft flying in from all corners of the globe. She had scoffed at his prediction then and even now, would have been reluctant to admit that he had been right.

‘I suppose you will fly back to Australia?’ she asked her daughter, although she already knew the answer.

‘Yes, of course I will. I can’t stand being cooped up on a ship for six weeks when I could get there so much quicker,’ she snapped.

Immediately she regretted the small display of petulance.

‘It’s very safe now, you know. With any luck, I will be on an aircraft with John in the aircrew. That should make you feel reassured. He’s very capable, you know.’

‘I’m sure he is,’ Lady Marina said. ‘I’m sure he is. But it seems an unnatural way for people to travel, in my opinion.’

With that, Catherine said no more. She decided it was time to relieve the gardener of the responsibility of entertaining her lively four-year-old son.

It seemed to Catherine that her cousin John Bertram had changed little in the decade or more since he had helped arrange the service at the small lonely church that had opened its doors just long enough for her and Richard to be joined in holy matrimony.

Despite the distances that regularly separated them, they had met quite frequently over the years, his friendship undimmed by the years. It was more than the ties of relationship that made him her confidante; he was Richard’s best friend too with the shared experience of air crew in Bomber Command binding them in a friendship nothing could break.

It was unexpectedly chilly for London in mid April, as if the early promise of warm weather had been but a tease to lull Londoners into a false expectation of an early and hot summer.

John Bertram was his usual cheerful self as he perused the menu at Claridge’s but he sensed Catherine’s low spirits almost immediately and put the menu aside.

‘You don’t seem your usual bubbly self, if I may be so bold,’ he said, studying her serious face and sad eyes.

‘Is there something amiss?’ he asked, unerringly.

‘You could say that,’ she said, but she did not elaborate.

After a few moments of silence, he ventured again.

‘So let me guess? An argument with your mother? A sick child? A

sick husband? None of the above?’

It was John’s light-hearted banter that brought a smile to her face.

‘None of the above, I assure you,’ she said finally, with a half attempt at a smile. ‘I’m just feeling a bit down, well a bit more than down really.’

John smiled encouragement at her, careful not to jump too quickly to obvious and possibly inaccurate conclusions.

‘I’m not looking forward to going home. I’ve written to Richard to tell him,’ she said.

She pulled a face at the word ‘home’ as if John really needed the emphasis. He did not.

‘Ah, finding life in provincial Australia a little dull are we?’

As usual, he was straight to the point, but his words were so disarmingly honest that Catherine did not mind. She smiled at him, privately relieved that he had arrived at the heart of the matter so quickly and effortlessly, as if he had expected the problem and might even have a solution to offer.

‘You understand, don’t you? It’s about as far from my life in England as you could imagine,’ she said, warming to her theme.

‘I share almost no interests at all with any of the women I meet. Their worlds are very narrow, it seems to me, and totally dictated by the overbearing demands of their husbands and children.’

As if to apologise for the slight that none of them would hear, she tried to temper the frankness of her outburst.

‘Don’t misunderstand me,’ she said, ‘they are thoroughly decent people but there is no intellectual life among them that I can discover. They don’t talk about the latest books or plays; they have never been to an art gallery; they may go to the cinema occasionally, that’s all. They cook and sew and knit, all the things I hate doing.’

She said no more, knowing that she had made her case poorly. It was left to John to add a note of reality.

‘I bet most of those women you speak about don’t have any help at home, so I wouldn’t imagine they would have too much spare time for their own pursuits,’ he said quietly.

‘You must know that yours was a very privileged upbringing, Catherine, and by Australian standards, Prior Park sounds like a

privileged place too,' he said gently but firmly.

'You're right, John, but that doesn't make it any easier to adapt,' she said, eager to defend herself.

'I used to think much of the social round we had in England was pompous and out of date, and of course, much of it didn't survive the war, but it would be nice to be part of it now – or certain parts of it,' she said, her frankness surprising even herself.

'I'd love to be shopping now for something to wear at Royal Ascot. Mother and father always go, but with father getting older, there may not be many more chances,' she added, wistfully.

'I have to say I wouldn't know about the delights of Royal Ascot, never having moved in those circles myself,' John said, suddenly beginning to see a quite different side to his cousin.

'Oh, it is great fun, I'm told. And the more illustrious side of my father's family have always had an important role at the event,' she said. 'In fact I met a distant cousin the other day – Edward Cavendish. He was very charming and lamented the fact that I would be returning to Australia before the event. I don't think I had met him previously but he could instantly rattle off our distant kinship.'

John Bertram smiled knowingly.

'Perhaps he was one of the suitors your mother had in mind for you?'

He didn't expect Catherine to take the suggestion seriously, but she shrugged her shoulders.

'I don't know. We never really got around to talking about my future. I was only eighteen when the war began and it rather became the focus of our attention,' she said, by way of explanation as to the lack of discussion about her future.

'And then you messed it all up by falling in love with an Australian,' he said, hoping at last to make her laugh, which she did, much to his relief.

'John, you're impossible. Let's order lunch.'

With that, they resumed their close study of the menu. He now knew what was troubling her yet he could offer no solution. She, for the first time, had spoken aloud of her disappointments but could see no solution either.

CHAPTER 2: MAY 1957

There were many days when Julia Fitzroy yearned to be Miss Julia Belleville again. She accepted that her life was now settled but even as her rational mind accepted this fact, still she yearned for something else.

There were very few days when she did not think about the baby she had been forced to give up. She tried to imagine her daughter's life, wondering how she had grown and whose looks she had favoured. Was she fair? Was she like me, Julia wondered? Or did she look like Philippe?

It broke her heart afresh every time to think she would never know. And yet so firmly had she been under her mother's influence at the time, it was only later she began to think she might have resisted her mother and kept her child. She was humiliated to remember she had accepted, almost without question, her mother's decision and then, with very little resistance, her mother's plans for her to marry James Fitzroy. In all these things it seemed she had been allowing others to make decisions for her as if she had no will of her own.

It was only a matter of weeks now until they would celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary. To his father, nine year old John Fitzroy was everything he could want in a son; by his mother, he was loved but it was almost at a distance, as if her heart, broken by the events years before, could never quite love a child again with as much passion.

If he found his mother a little distant, he did not notice. It was the

boyish adventures that commanded his attention. It was his desperate need to keep pace with his older cousins, especially Paul, that occupied his mind. His mother, always there in the background, he took for granted as if her presence, permanent and unchanging, did not need to be a matter of concern to him at all, for he expected her to be there whenever he needed her.

Julia had become accustomed to life in the smaller house at Mayfield Downs. She found she did not mind it at all, adopting a less formal routine than her mother had imposed at Prior Park. She was disappointed that her mother almost never visited, preferring instead that Julia visit her on an appointed day each week, usually for lunch.

And so that day of the week had dawned yet again, except on this particular Tuesday, her mother would celebrate her sixtieth birthday. Julia knew the frenzy of preparation at Prior Park for her mother's birthday celebration on the forthcoming Saturday was not sufficient excuse to avoid the obligation.

As she sat down to breakfast opposite James, he raised his head from an intense study of the newspaper.

'Good morning. Are you going to visit your mother today, as usual?' he asked.

Since he rarely asked about her visits to her mother, she wondered why he was interested on this occasion.

'Yes, I am going, even though we will see her on Saturday. It is her actual birthday today, so I can't really avoid it. Was there some reason for your question?' she replied.

He smiled at her.

'No reason, really, I just wondered if everything was all right at Prior Park,' he said, without explanation.

'Why shouldn't everything be all right at Prior Park?' she demanded. 'Is there something I should know?'

'Well,' he said, unsure now whether to share the titbit of gossip, 'I understand from sources, shall we say, that Richard has had a less than friendly letter from his wife. That was what I heard.'

Julia was stunned at this suggestion but outraged too that her husband should be gossiping about her family in such a way.

'Who told you this?' she said sharply. 'I don't believe it for an instant.'

James smiled but did not answer her question directly. Instead he posed his own.

'You may not believe it, but tell me honestly, do you think Catherine has been happy in her life at Prior Park?' he asked. 'Has she joined in the local women's activities or made any strong friendships since she has been here?'

If Julia was surprised that he had given so much consideration to Catherine's situation, she did not say so. Instead she pondered his questions for a few moments before responding.

'Just because she doesn't join in with local organisations and participate in what do you call them, 'women's activities' doesn't mean she's not happy surely?'

He shrugged, not wanting his casual remarks to provoke an argument.

'Well, let's just say I think she was brought up to live a totally different life,' he said diplomatically. 'In marrying Richard, I don't think she thought through the implications of what it really meant.'

But Julia knew, even if he did not, that her brother's hasty marriage had been necessary but she did not want to say so.

'I don't suppose any of us really understand what marriage means,' Julia said quietly, with a quick glance at her husband, whose attention had already drifted back to his newspaper, leaving Julia to ponder how she could raise the question at Prior Park without having to ask Richard directly.

So it was a surprise to Julia when she arrived at Prior Park later in the day to discover that her sister-in-law Catherine had arrived home from England three days earlier, a fact that Julia immediately assumed put paid to the gossip about her elder brother's marriage.

It seemed to her, also, that nothing much had changed in the routine of Prior Park, except that more places were now set at the lunch table over which Elizabeth Belleville continued to reign supreme.

'You should have brought James with you today, Julia,' her mother said, 'then our gathering would have been complete.'

'I would have suggested it,' Julia said, 'had I known that we were to be such a full gathering. I didn't know that Catherine was home,

until I arrived here just now.'

She had deliberately meant this to sound like the small rebuke it really was, as if she was being excluded from the intimacies of Prior Park by the fact of living just a couple of miles away. She tried hard not to resent the fact that her niece Marianne now occupied her bedroom. She knew such resentment was unreasonable but still it had felt like her exclusion from Prior Park was now complete.

Her mother, failing to notice the small rebuke, had pointed out that preparations for her birthday party on Saturday were demanding all their attention at present.

It was Richard who, desperate to change the subject, filled the silence that followed the terse exchange between mother and daughter.

'I had a letter yesterday from the manager of the Goulburn Woollen Mill. I've been down there a few times, as everyone knows,' he said.

They waited for him to continue, assuming there was something important he had to tell them.

'He told me some very sad news. One of the big wool suppliers Harry Jensen and his wife were killed in a road accident last month. I went out to their property about ten years ago on my first visit to Goulburn.'

He turned towards his mother.

'You might remember I told you they had an adopted daughter who reminded me so much of Julia. I wonder what is going to happen to the little girl now?'

Long forgotten memories flooded back into Elizabeth Belleville's mind but she was careful not to betray the slightest hint of them on her face. She heard Julia's quick intake of breath but she did not look at her. As this discussion unfolded, she did not once look at her daughter.

'That's very sad,' Elizabeth Belleville said, 'but, if she is an only child as you say, surely she will inherit the property. I hope she has someone to look after her until she is of age.'

Richard shook his head. The rest of the gathering continued with their lunch, only vaguely interested in the conversation.

‘Unfortunately, she won’t inherit the property. Jensen left the property to a nephew, it seems,’ Richard said.

‘Well, no doubt the nephew will look after her,’ his mother said, wanting to draw the conversation to a rapid close.

‘I except so,’ said Richard, unaware of the painful memories he had exposed in both his mother and his sister.

‘It might be time, though, to sell our interests in the venture, I think,’ he said, turning towards William this time. ‘I sense that time is running out for wool and woollen mills.’

William looked up from his plate and nodded.

‘If you think so, Richard, go ahead.’

Richard was surprised at William’s easy agreement but did not stop to wonder what lay behind it.

‘We can talk about it later,’ he said, turning his attention to his own neglected plate of food.

It was Catherine who asked the questions that had not occurred to William.

‘Why do you think time is running out for wool and woollen mills?’ she asked, having been almost silent throughout lunch up until this point.

‘Well, the world has changed since the war and we are seeing new synthetic fabrics emerge that will be cheaper to produce and easier to care for,’ he said. ‘It is the march of progress and it is unstoppable.’

He had rarely discussed business with his wife so her interest now seemed out of character, but he did not say as much. That remark, he thought, was best left to a private moment.

‘If you sell out those interests, what will you invest in then?’ she said, as if it was the next obvious question to ask.

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, ‘but I’m sure something will come up.’

With that, the conversation turned again to the arrangements for Elizabeth Belleville’s sixtieth birthday party, which had been well and truly discussed many times before but which represented safe ground for all of them.

Richard, consumed by his own thoughts, did not initially feel any

unease at William's urgent insistence on a private discussion, when he felt the pressure of William's hand on his arm pulling him aside after breakfast the next morning.

Richard slid easily into the armchair opposite his brother in their father's old study. While it had been their domain for more than a decade, there remained, for both of them, the sense that they were invading their father's private space uninvited, yet it was the one place where the privacy of their conversation was assured.

He could see that William's hands were shaking very slightly. It was the first sign of trouble although what trouble would cause William to react in that way he could not imagine.

'What's up?' Richard said bluntly, reaching for a cigarette from the engraved box that sat on the side table near his elbow.

'What's up, you may well ask?' William said pointedly. 'This is what's up.'

He waved a letter from their solicitors in the air as if, by doing so, Richard would be able to discern the contents without him having to spell it out.

'What's old Dodds writing about this time?' Richard asked, almost impatiently, for he had long since given up reading most of the letters, leaving that task to William.

'I'll tell you what he's writing about,' William said, his voice rising such that Richard suggested he calm down, which of course had the entirely opposite effect.

'Nathaniel Dodds has been approached by a young man by the name of Alistair McGovern, who wants to 'claim his birthright', according to Dodds.'

William began to pace the floor. He was agitated by this unexpected turn of events because both he and Richard had considered it would never be forthcoming, even as they had conceded its possibility in the secret deal they had made with Muriel McGovern following the death of their father.

Yet Richard was more sanguine at this sudden and unexpected demand.

'Well, I'm as surprised as you are but we did agree to those terms, as I recall, when we made the settlement.'

William rounded on his brother.

‘Of course we agreed,’ he said, suddenly irritated by his brother’s calm response.

‘We did that just to get the woman off our backs and settle her claim so that Mother would never find out. I never thought though that it would come to anything. Who in their right mind wants to turn up at a family’s doorstep and announce to the world that ‘I’m your father’s bastard’!’

Richard could see it mattered a great deal to William that the myth of their parents’ happy marriage be preserved.

Their father, they both knew, had, in his lifetime, become the subject of gossip among those who considered him weak and ineffectual; it was important to William that nothing else emerge in their mother’s lifetime to further erode his character or his honour, for he knew it would be a source of great shame to his mother. It was something he knew William could not bear to witness.

‘Hang on there, William, what’s Dodds suggesting or recommending?’ he asked, trying to bring the discussion back to the facts of the letter rather than enter into William’s flights of fancy that seemed so uncharacteristic of his normally level-headed brother.

William scanned the letter again, as if he did not already know it by rote.

‘He says he is writing to warn us, that is all, as he says he had a visit from the young gentleman recently and he ‘expressed a desire to see Prior Park’. He writes that misguidedly ‘it appears your father must have told the young man about Prior Park’. Dodds also says that he urged him to ‘write to us to get permission to visit’ but Dodds says here ‘I have to say I cannot be sure he will follow my advice’.

‘That is the crux of it,’ William said finally. ‘He could turn up on the doorstep at any time and what do we do then?’

They both sat in silence for a minute or two, considering the solicitor’s warning, each wondering what the chances were that Alistair McGovern would have the nerve to walk up to the front door of Prior Park unannounced.

‘Do we know anything about him?’ Richard asked finally. ‘Does

Dodds say anything at all about him?’

William frowned and eventually handed the letter to Richard.

‘He doesn’t say much more really.’

Richard scanned the letter quickly.

‘No, he doesn’t except to say he has finished his studies, although he doesn’t say what he has studied. I wonder if he gave Dodds his address?’

William interjected at this point.

‘It’s possible he still lives with his mother in Brisbane. I think I still have the address somewhere,’ William said, grateful that his brother seemed to be ready to suggest a course of action.

‘You met the mother, didn’t you? I think you told me about the meeting at the time we received the demand for a settlement.’

Richard was testing his memory now. The issue had not been discussed between them for more than ten years, as if their unstated pact of silence would ensure it need never be raised again.

‘Yes, I met her,’ William said, recalling his visit.

‘In her defence, I don’t know that she knew our father was married when she met him. Perhaps he said he was a widower. She didn’t really tell me. All I know is that he spent quite a bit of time with her and the boy when he was away in Brisbane. None of us, especially Mother, knew anything about.’

Richard took a long drag on his cigarette, as if the task of imagining his father in that situation was too painful to contemplate. For both of them, the knowledge of their father’s betrayal of not just their mother, but of all of them, had eroded their own happy memories of the childhood they had spent with him, as they came to the realisation that another boy had shared the same innocent experiences with their father that they presumed had been theirs exclusively.

‘So what do we do? Wait nervously every day for a knock on the door? Or do we go to Brisbane and confront him?’ Richard mused aloud.

Richard’s instinct always led him to action. He could not abide inaction. William on the other hand was much more measured yet on this occasion he was easily persuaded.

‘I think you’re right,’ William said finally, as he turned away from the window where his restless pacing had finally ended.

‘I think we announce we are going to Brisbane immediately after Mother’s birthday,’ he said.

‘We can say we are going to organise the sale of all our woollen mill interests. I assume you want to sell them all, not just Goulburn?’ he said, almost as an afterthought.

‘Yes,’ Richard said, keen to act and relieved that William had not challenged his decision.

‘I do want to sell them all. It’s time to move on to a new industry, a new investment.’

‘Well, we should prepare to leave on Monday then,’ William said. ‘Hopefully we can head this other matter off before it becomes an embarrassment.’

‘Amen to that,’ said Richard, who was keen to escape the confines of the house. ‘I think I’ll go for a ride. I need some fresh air and sunshine.’

With that, the brothers parted, having agreed on what seemed to them at the time an entirely sensible course of action.

It had been only a matter of weeks earlier that Alistair McGovern had finally confronted his mother Muriel about his father.

In early adulthood, he had come to resemble William more and more, a fact his mother did not remark, having met William only once. His mother had chosen to say very little about his father, hoping that his memory would be sufficient to satisfy her son’s curiosity. In that small hope, she was completely wrong and now she understood that.

It was a Sunday afternoon and she was sitting in her favourite chair on the small enclosed verandah of her neat suburban home. All her attention was focused on the small almost invisible stitches she was painstakingly sewing around the hem of a pale green satin ball gown.

She had felt that something had been brewing in Alistair for weeks but she did not prompt him by asking if there was anything the matter. She would not encourage him to ask the one big unasked

question that she knew he longed to ask. Whenever he seemed likely to want to discuss the question of his father, she changed the subject. She did not want her son to share the shame of his illegitimacy. It was better, she thought, that he continue to believe that his father had been away at his remote property most of the time as the reason why he had not lived with them.

But she could see, as he framed his questions, that it was a story he was not satisfied to accept now.

He paced the small verandah, hands thrust deep in his pockets, glancing at his mother from time to time until his patience, worn thin by her calm stoic air, finally deserted him.

‘For goodness sakes, Mother, can you stop your sewing for just a moment. That’s all you seem to do is sew!’

Muriel looked up at her son, her fingers poised ready to insert the needle and thread into the fabric to produce the next tiny stitch.

‘Alistair, what on earth has got into you this afternoon,’ she said, her voice rising in irritation to match his.

‘Mother, I want to talk to you and I need to have your attention. I don’t want to talk to the top of your head.’

Reluctantly, she set her sewing aside, careful to make sure the luxurious fabric was not creased. She did not say anything to her son. Instead she sat silently her eyes now fixed on his face.

‘I want you to tell me about my father. I want you to tell me the truth. I found this solicitor’s letter in a drawer. It talks about a settlement and the end of ‘the arrangement, now that your son has reached his majority’. It’s dated two years ago.’

He held the letter aloft in his right hand as if he felt the physical evidence, rather than his words, was needed to convince her that he knew some of the facts.

He could see the colour drain from his mother’s face yet she remained silent.

‘His name wasn’t Francis McGovern, was it? His name was Francis Belleville, wasn’t it? And I can draw the next conclusion very easily - that Francis Belleville already had a family and you in fact were his mistress. Am I right, Mother?’

There was a contemptuous tone to his voice yet he didn’t really

mean to hurt his mother. It was the veil of secrecy that he wanted desperately to smash, not her.

‘I don’t know how you found that letter, Alistair,’ she said at last, ‘but I could see no purpose in telling you. No purpose at all.’

She paused, trying to frame her words carefully.

‘Your father had promised to provide for us in his will but he died before he had the opportunity to do that. That is my belief,’ she said. ‘So I contacted his solicitor and asked, for your sake, not for mine, for something to make our lives a little easier. Grudgingly they gave me an annual settlement that finished when you turned twenty-one. And that is why you find me sewing so much. It is to make ends meet.’

He looked at her closely. He could see that she was tired. More than that, he could see that she had aged in the past few months. Yet in his preoccupation with his own life he had not seen it.

‘Mother, I am not trying to judge you. I just want to know the truth.’

His tone was gentler and she relaxed a little, as if the burden of the secret was being lifted from her shoulders.

‘You are right,’ she said. ‘I was his mistress, as you put it, but when I first met him, I thought he was a widower. He didn’t say as much but I just assumed. It was only when I found out I was pregnant that he told me the truth. I expected then that I would never see him again but in fact I think he found solace in our little family. He bought this house for us and supported us. His family never knew about us. He didn’t talk about them of course but I picked up a few details from time to time.’

When she had finished, Alistair kneeled down beside her chair.

‘I’m sorry, Mother, I didn’t want to accuse you of anything. I know how hard it has been for you at times. But you must understand, I remember my father. It’s natural for me to want to know something about him.’

She nodded. He noticed a tear running down her cheek unchecked.

‘Careful,’ he said, gently, ‘you don’t want to ruin the satin.’

She reached for her handkerchief and mopped at her cheek. In a quiet voice, she told him what she knew of Francis Belleville.

‘So you are telling me that I have three half siblings? And that his wife is still alive? And they live on a property Prior Park near Springfield?’

She looked at him, clear eyed now, pleased finally she had found the courage to tell him the truth.

‘As far as I know, his wife is still alive and that is where they live,’ she said. ‘And, I have to tell you, finally, in the settlement with your father’s estate, I reserved the right for you to meet them, should you wish.’

Alistair, on his feet again, turned towards her.

‘And they agreed to the terms?’ he asked, suddenly excited by this unexpected disclosure.

‘They did,’ she said, ‘although reluctantly I believe. William, the only one I have met, handled the settlement. I don’t think he told his mother. That is my understanding.’

‘So what should I do next?’

He was clearly at a loss as to the next step and looked to his mother for advice.

‘Why don’t you make an appointment with the solicitor and see what he advises. That is the best thing to do, I believe. That would be a starting point for you,’ she said.

‘You’re right, Mother. That’s what I will do, first thing tomorrow. And thank you.’

He kissed her lightly on the cheek and she smiled. Now they did not have to speak about it further and she was glad, very glad. Her grief at the loss of Francis could never be public. It had made the loss doubly difficult to bear. For her, raising her son had given her life purpose but now she could see, as an adult, he must find his own path for she could guide him no further.

CHAPTER 3: MAY 1957

As Julia and James approached Prior Park for her mother's birthday celebrations, Julia was reminded of the time, years before, when it had been her own eighteenth birthday party that had brought the house to life.

As James slowed the car near the front of the house, he glanced across at Julia.

'You do realise we will have been married ten years very soon,' he said. 'It seems such a short time ago that we got married.'

He smiled at her, hoping that she would return his smile but uncertain as to her mood. She did not respond except to nod.

'I was actually thinking of my eighteenth birthday party,' she countered. 'The house looks much as it did on that night.'

He too joined her reminiscences.

'It was the first time I really noticed you,' he said. 'That is, noticed you in the sense that you had grown from a child to a beautiful young woman. You do know from that point I was determined to marry you.'

She turned towards him, smiling this time.

'I'm sorry to disappoint you but I don't think I had any intention of marrying you then,' she said.

In the darkness of the car, he reached across to her, his arm behind her. He had already heard the back door slam as their son John scrambled out of the car and headed straight for the house.

'But you must admit you were attracted to me,' he murmured. 'I could see it in your eyes.'

He kissed her tenderly and she did not resist but pushed him away after a brief moment.

‘You’ll ruin my makeup and you’ll end up with lipstick on your face,’ she said, secretly pleased to have a plausible excuse to pull back from his embrace. He accepted her small reprimand with good grace.

‘Later, it will wait until later,’ he said pointedly.

With that he slid out of the driver’s seat and walked around the car to help her out. She took his hand, grateful for the steadying arm as she struggled to balance on the high heels of her evening shoes, realising, not for the first time, that there were few opportunities for her to wear the latest fashions.

Tonight, though, she had made a special effort with a strapless chiffon dress. Yet she would have scoffed at suggestions she was in competition with Catherine, who had the advantage of having acquired the latest London fashions on her most recent trip. She would likely outshine us all, Julia thought, with just a touch of envy.

Upstairs, Catherine was still choosing her frock but with less concern than Julia had imagined, eventually deciding on a dark plum coloured cocktail dress that emphasised her small waist.

She discarded the small matching hat with its wisp of fine net in favour of a diamante clip in her hair and matching earrings. After a quick appraisal in the mirror, she headed downstairs to join the early arrivals, not stopping to add her presence to the receiving line at the front door, where her mother-in-law was first in line to greet the guests, followed by Richard, William and Alice.

If the arriving guests noted her absence from Richard’s side, she did not care. Despite the years she had spent at Prior Park, she knew few of them well enough to exchange more than a casual word of greeting. It did not matter to her that they found her aloof and at times unfriendly. She could find no motivation within herself to attempt to change their opinions of her.

And now she found it mattered less and less since her return. She had begun to ask herself frequently which day might be the last she would spend at Prior Park, for her dissatisfaction with her Australian life had only deepened.

It was an hour later that James Fitzroy, exceeding the bounds of kinship, slid his arm around Catherine's waist and kissed her lightly on the cheek. He was slow to release her, his eyes travelling appreciatively over her slim but womanly figure.

Across the crowded room, the warmth of James's greeting did not go unremarked by Richard who had not spoken to his wife all evening. Neither did it go unremarked by Julia who attached no significance to it at all, fully aware of her husband's weakness for a pretty face. She thought no more about it, but it troubled Richard, for no reason he could fathom. But his attention was almost immediately drawn away from the slightly disturbing scene by a firm pressure on his forearm and his brother's low voiced words.

'We have a problem, brother,' William whispered. 'A very big problem. At the front door.'

Richard turned to face his brother, instinctively responding in a whisper.

'What do you mean a very big problem?'

The question hung in the air between them for a few seconds before William answered.

'The problem we were going to solve next week,' he said obliquely.

'Ah, that problem,' said Richard. 'Here? Now? It doesn't make any sense.'

'Sense or not,' William said quietly, 'we have to deal with it now.'

Richard immediately sensed the urgency in William's voice.

'Where is he?' said Richard, looking around the room, alarmed that the unmentionable person might already be mixing among their guests.

'Fortunately, Charles Brockman saw him coming to the front door and, not knowing him, asked what business he was about. He's in the study.'

'Not alone, I hope,' Richard said, certain that the uninvited guest would not be likely to stay put for very long if left alone.

'No, Charles is with him. He managed to attract Mrs Duffy's attention and told her to come and find me.'

Richard nodded, silently relieved at Charles's foresight and quick thinking.

‘Well, that’s something, at least, although that means that Charles probably knows the whole story by now,’ Richard said.

He was already beginning to reassess their chances of keeping the whole sordid episode from their father’s life quiet. He was not unduly surprised by William’s response.

‘It wouldn’t surprise me,’ William said, ‘if Charles already knew about our father’s activities. They spent a lot of time in each other’s company and there was no one else he would have ever confided in.’

Richard scanned the crowd. He was satisfied no one else had become aware of the gatecrasher.

‘Anyway, Charles is loyal. He won’t spread gossip,’ William said, more to convince himself than Richard.

‘I will go and see him,’ William said, finally.

‘We don’t want to both be seen heading to the study together. You come along in a few minutes.’

Richard nodded, happy to let William take the lead, but furious all the same that such an interloper as Alistair McGovern would choose this evening, of all evenings, to present himself at their door unannounced.

Among the throng of guests, it was only Julia who noticed the short, intense conversation between her brothers. She wondered idly what was so important that it must be discussed at her mother’s birthday party. In search of answers, she sought out Catherine, who was standing alone at the back of the room, drink in hand, absorbed in her own thoughts.

‘You look as though you are a million miles away, Catherine,’ Julia said, as she moved to stand beside her and survey the throng of guests.

‘Not a million, Julia, not a million miles. Well a few thousand, perhaps. My father will be seventy-four in a week’s time. I can’t help wishing I was there to help celebrate.’

She took a sip from her glass.

‘Are you worried about his health?’ Julia asked, as if such a question was expected of her.

‘No, not really, he seemed quite well when I was there but then,

looking back, I can't help feeling that my mother was trying to warn me before I left that he was not as well as he appeared, but she didn't say anything specific,' Catherine said.

If it wasn't quite the full explanation, it was at least a reasonable attempt by Catherine to explain her lack of enthusiasm for the evening's festivities.

'You must wish that England wasn't quite so far away. I understand that. You must miss your family dreadfully,' Julia said sympathetically.

Without further prompting, Catherine, sensing that Julia's sympathy was genuine, spoke her thoughts out loud for the first time.

'I do. I miss them very much. You know, I didn't really think about what it would mean when I married Richard,' she said. 'I thought it would be a great adventure, and of course, I was pregnant. But I do miss the old life and my home. More than I thought I would, actually.'

Julia was silent, unsure as to whether she wanted to encourage such confidences from her brother's wife.

'I don't mean to criticise our life here,' Catherine said, warming to her theme, 'but I don't find anything very engaging about living here, and the heat of summer is just, well, unrelenting, I suppose is a good word.'

Almost at once she felt that she had gone too far. She put her hand on Julia's arm, hoping she would understand that it was just her very different upbringing that had created a gulf too wide to cross.

After a few moments, Julia looked at her and for the first time saw the sadness in her eyes.

'I understand completely,' Julia said. 'What do you think turned my mother into a bitter and frustrated woman? She made the best of her life here, but didn't expect to live in the country when she married my father. But he loved it here. And it's easier for the men to travel away with their business matters and the like. We're the ones left at home to get on with it the best way we can without that respite.'

It was quite a speech for Julia and she found herself voicing her own half-formed sense of frustration. It was as if a small light had been switched on in her mind.

Looking around the room and noticing that Richard too was absent, she remembered why she had approached Catherine.

‘On another matter entirely,’ Julia said, suddenly uncomfortable with their shared revelations, ‘what do you think Richard and William were discussing so animatedly but in hushed tones a few minutes ago? I don’t see either of them now.’

Catherine too looked around the room and could not see them.

‘I honestly don’t know,’ she said. ‘They’re often locked away discussing business matters but you wouldn’t think there would be anything so urgent that it had to be discussed tonight.’

‘That was my thought exactly,’ Julia said. ‘I wonder what’s up. They’ll be in the study if they want privacy. I might go and see what they’re up to.’

With that, Julia started to thread her way through the crowd towards the hallway. If there was some urgent family matter, she wanted to know about it. She no longer felt part of the world of Prior Park, but tonight, in particular, it began to feel, once more, like her home.

Despite her determination to find out what was going on between her brothers, Julia was thwarted by the locked door and the warning hand of Charles Brockman on her arm.

‘Charles, are you standing guard over the door? Because that’s what it looks like to me. What’s going on in there?’ she demanded, in a slightly raised voice.

Charles ignored the accusation and responded calmly.

‘It’s just a matter of business that’s suddenly come up,’ he said, in a quiet even voice. ‘Unfortunately it had to be dealt with tonight. It couldn’t wait but they don’t want to be disturbed.’

The pressure on her arm increased as he attempted to turn her back towards the dining room where the buffet was being served.

‘You should go and see to your mother,’ he said, with a discreet insistence. ‘She won’t show it, of course, but she will feel her widowhood especially this evening.’

It was an unexpected insight from Charles and she was momentarily distracted by it.

‘Do you think so?’ she asked. ‘My father passed on years ago. I think she is beyond mourning him now.’

He smiled and nodded.

‘Yes, I agree,’ he said. ‘To all appearances it would seem that her grieving is over, but it is times like these that you feel the lack of someone close in your life, someone to share the celebration with.’

She had known Charles since she could walk but had never had more than a perfunctory conversation with him. It had never occurred to her, up until this moment, that he had seen them all at very close quarters and there was very little about the Belleville family he did not know.

In a moment of rising panic, she wondered if he knew her deepest secret. She could not ask. How could she ask such a question? There was no way, even by careful subterfuge, to find out how much he knew. With this thought uppermost in her mind, she allowed herself to be led away gently towards the dining room, all thoughts of her brothers and their secret meeting banished from her mind.

Across the crowded room, she could see her mother, momentarily alone, and looking slightly at a loss. She quickly negotiated the groups of gossiping guests to reach her mother’s side.

Charles, for his part, breathed a sigh of relief that he had averted an unfortunate confrontation. He was already in possession of the facts about the young visitor, but he had long known of his existence. He wondered if either Richard or William really knew the depth of his friendship with their father. In the end, he rather hoped not. There were many secrets he had hoped to take to the grave about his late friend and employer.

He did not want to face the family’s questions. He did not want to face the choice of betraying the man he had called a friend for forty years or lying to those he also held dear.

Of this, though, he was sure: in the events of the evening, there had been a callous attempt to expose one of those secrets to the family. He rather hoped that the circle of knowledge could be contained to the brothers who now controlled the family. He could see no end to the upset if the knowledge of Alistair McGovern’s parentage became widely known. Above all, for Elizabeth Belleville’s

sake, he felt this must be prevented at all costs.

Within the locked room, the short heated conversation among the three men had lapsed into an unnatural silence.

Alistair McGovern knew himself to be at a considerable disadvantage, now that he had finally found the courage to seek out his father's family. He had only surmised that his existence had been unknown to them until after Francis Belleville's death. Now he had proof. Now he knew for certain he was a dirty little secret, a bastard son that no one wanted to acknowledge openly. A bastard son not entitled to share in the family's wealth. A bastard son who would never be treated as an equal by Richard or William – or even acknowledged by them. He could see they spoke with one voice on this point.

Finally, Richard broke the silence.

'What did you think, coming here tonight when our mother was celebrating her birthday? What did you think you were doing? That we would welcome you with open arms and introduce you to our mother?'

Alistair couldn't help but notice the iciness and threat in Richard's voice yet he found the courage to respond.

'It was coincidence, really,' he said. 'I heard about the birthday celebrations in town and I thought perhaps I could get lost in the crowd. Foolish, I know now, but I wanted to see Prior Park. My father spoke about it to me when I was a child. He painted such a glowing picture. He loved it here. He didn't mention other family. Until I came to know better very recently, I thought he lived alone here.'

At these last words both Richard and William reacted, but differently. William, having taken up his usual position behind the desk, shifted uneasily in his chair but said nothing. Richard, goaded beyond restraint, pushed the younger man back into the chair from which he had just risen.

'How dare you! How dare you presume such a relationship with our father. Why don't you crawl back into the hole you came out of,' he said, his voice rising with each word.

Richard's irritation was palpable, as if every pent up emotion and

frustration was about to be released in a moment of raw uncontrolled anger. William saw his brother's right hand clench into a fist but did not rise to intervene. He breathed freely again to see it unclench just as quickly. William hated physical violence of any kind.

Yet he was surprised by the intensity of Richard's anger. Was it the insult to their mother that raised Richard's ire to such a level, he wondered? Or was there something deeper that had prompted his brother's white hot anger? He did not know and dare not ask.

Alistair McGovern was shocked by the rage confronting him and he failed miserably as an advocate in his own defence.

After a few minutes, it was William who took charge of the conversation, for fear that the whole encounter would get out of hand again and end in an unseemly brawl.

'Let's all calm down,' he said quietly, acutely aware that he was looking at a young man who still bore a striking resemblance to himself but he did not mention that fact. He wondered if Richard had noticed. He was not about to point it out.

'What is it that you want from us? Money, I suppose?' William said finally, wanting to turn the conversation to a more business-like footing.

Once again, there was silence.

The room was filled with Richard's heavy breathing as if the anger within him could only be contained for a short time.

Alistair shrugged his shoulders, uncertain now what to say. He paused, considering his answer.

'I don't know really,' he stammered. 'Perhaps money was part of it, but it isn't only about money. I wanted to be part of the family. I belong in the Belleville family. I should have the Belleville name, my father's name. And yes, if there is money, I should share in it.'

Later on, he reflected how he should have stopped there but it was what he said next that set the real tone of the enmity that was to mark their future dealings.

'After all, my father – your father – had some of the happiest times of his life with my mother and I. She adored him. We didn't see him all that much but we had fun when we did. He was relaxed and happy with us, just our little family of three.'

It was beyond any possibility that either Richard or William could sit through this account of a different family life their father had participated in, and even enjoyed, without responding, for he described a family life in which they and their mother and their sister had played no part, as if they were the outsiders.

Richard moved first. In two strides he crossed the room and stood before the young man, who was still seated. He pulled him up by the lapels of his jacket. He came awkwardly to his feet, and would have fallen, had Richard's grip not been so strong.

'If you ever repeat that story,' he said, anger now enveloping him completely, 'if you ever repeat that story, I will kill you. Do you understand me? Do you understand me?'

Richard repeated the threat in a slow deliberate voice.

Alistair was shaking now, aware that his naivety had been exposed and his faint hopes of a proper relationship with his half brothers was at an end. He saw now that he had been stupid to arrive at Prior Park on such an important evening. Far better, he knew now, to have met them both on neutral ground.

But Richard wasn't finished with him yet.

'Now listen to me, and listen good.'

Each word Richard spoke was deliberate. There could be no mistaking his meaning.

'You will be escorted back to your car, you will drive out of here and not stop driving until you are back in your miserable little life and never darken our door again. Do you understand me?'

William sat quite still, not intervening, but watching the young man carefully. Watching his brother too for fear that he would go too far.

'I just wanted to be friends,' Alistair mumbled.

'We cannot be friends,' Richard spat back. 'Don't you understand. My father betrayed my mother and he betrayed us. There is no way we can get beyond that. No way.'

He had already half pushed, half escorted the young man to the door. He opened it, relieved to see Charles Brockman still standing outside.

'Charles, make sure this young man gets on his way straight away.'

He isn't welcome here.'

It was a curt command. Charles nodded but said nothing, for there was nothing to say.

He ushered Alistair, now ashen faced, down the front steps and into the darkness. He stood feet astride as the young man eased himself into the driver's seat of his borrowed car and headed back down the driveway of Prior Park.

He saw him turn his head taking one last backward glance at the house which glowed bright with light against the darkness beyond.

Charles Brockman did not move until he could no longer see the tail lights of the retreating vehicle. Only then did he head back into the house, getting a cursory nod from Richard as they passed one another in the hallway.

CHAPTER 4: MAY 1957

‘What do you think he will do?’

It was the following day late in the morning before Richard and William had the opportunity to discuss the previous night’s events privately. It was the question that had occupied William’s mind throughout a sleepless night.

‘I don’t honestly know,’ said Richard, who was standing motionless looking out of the window of the study.

‘All I know is I had Julia asking me what was going on and when I said it was nothing of interest to her, she seemed very unconvinced,’ Richard said, turning to face his brother.

‘Just imagine if he starts talking in town. We won’t be able to keep it quiet if gossip starts up.’

William said nothing at first, for he could think of nothing useful to say, but, as ever, his approach was the practical one.

‘I think we should still go to Brisbane and see the solicitor. I think we should see what he has to say about it all. And I think we should look over the terms of the agreement with Muriel McGovern.’

Richard considered his brother’s suggestion for a few moments.

‘Well, I think we should go, yes, but I don’t think looking at the agreement with Muriel McGovern will help much. I can’t imagine she suggested he visit us on the night of our mother’s birthday party. From what you tell me of her, that doesn’t sound like her at all.’

William nodded. He shared his brother’s assessment of the situation.

‘I agree. I don’t think she put him up to it. I think he did this all by

himself. And, by the way, we should both think about how to settle our affairs. Old Nathaniel Dodds suggested it last time I saw him. He said we should both make wills. It didn't seem so urgent then, but perhaps it is now.'

With that, the matter was settled for now between them but each of them wondered privately what havoc Alistair McGovern would wreak on the family. Silently they both cursed him. The fact that he was their half brother meant nothing to them at all.

In the guest lounge of the Criterion Hotel, Violet Cunningham, her hair no longer a deep red in her only concession to her advancing years, listened, at first inattentively, to the ramblings of a young man who seemed intent on getting drunk, despite her best efforts to slow the pace of fresh drinks being set before him.

For her, Sunday was usually a quiet day with the public bars shut and only the few hotel guests to wait on. For once she wished for more customers to give her an excuse to escape from the troubled young man's increasingly garbled story.

He grabbed her by the wrist as she attempted to walk past his table. She could see that he was determined to find an audience for his misery.

'Hey there, Mister,' she said, quickly pulling her arm back from his weak grip. 'Don't do that again or I'll call the manager.'

He did not know that Violet had never 'called the manager' in her entire working life, such was her confidence in her ability to handle any situation with the hotel patrons, so he apologised profusely.

'I'm sorry,' Alistair said, his words only slightly slurred. 'It's just that I've been rejected by my father's family and I have no one to help me or listen to me.'

'Well, I'm sorry for you,' Violet said. 'I am sorry to hear that you have problems, but we all have problems and we just have to make the best of it.'

But this sudden interest in his story only acted as an encouragement rather than as the discouragement Violet had intended.

'You probably know the family; they're local,' he said, looking up at Violet, trying to gauge her interest. 'I bet the sons come in here to

drink when they're in town.'

Such an invitation to gossip had never failed to engage Violet's attention in the past and it did not do so this time.

'And what family would that be that you're talking about?' she said in reply, certain that the revelations would turn out to be of no particular interest but she decided to play along anyway.

'The high and mighty Belleville family of Prior Park. That's who the family is. They are the ones who don't want to know me.'

There was a hint of vicious pleasure on Alistair McGovern's face as he observed the sudden spark of interest in Violet's normally impassive countenance. She could not resist asking the next question, despite a vague feeling of annoyance that this nondescript young man possessed inside knowledge of the most influential family in the area that she did not.

'So what have you got to do with the Bellevilles of Prior Park?' she asked, still unconvinced that he would really have any news that would surprise her.

He did not bother with a long explanation.

'As it turns out, I'm the father's bastard son, in the true sense of the word if you'll excuse the language, and they don't like it. I tell you they don't like it one little bit. Not one little bit.'

He repeated the words again but Violet was used to the repetition of drunks as if their words held particular fascination for their audiences. So she waited until he was silent before asking the obvious question.

'So you're saying that you are Francis Belleville's natural son, if I'm to understand you correctly?'

He nodded, his head moving up and down in an exaggerated fashion.

'That's right,' he said. 'Francis Belleville seduced my mother and I am the result. All the while he had a wife and three children at home. And I thought he just went away to work on his cattle property for six months and then came home to us. I thought his name was McGovern. I thought he and my mother were married. They acted married. We were a family. But it was all a lie.'

Again he emphasised the words, as if he could still not quite

believe that the little family he remembered was a sham.

‘And now they don’t want to know. They don’t want to hear about their father’s other life. They threw me out,’ he said, bitterness and bile rising in his voice.

‘They threw me out of my father’s house like some mangy dog. Told me not to ever come back. They made sure that I left too. The estate manager stood in the driveway and watched me drive away to make sure. He had a grip like a vice on my arm. He was very strong. An old man, but very strong. I’m sure I have bruises I can show you to prove it.’

Violet held up a restraining hand.

‘There’s no need for that,’ she said, alarmed that he might at any moment strip of his shirt to prove his point.

For her part, she could visualise the scene readily for it was played out repeatedly on any particularly rowdy night in any bar in the town. It was the idea that he had actually been to Prior Park, walked up to the front door and asked to see who? Mrs Belleville? one of the sons? that most intrigued Violet.

‘Do you mean you’ve been to see them at Prior Park? Who did you see?’ she said, no longer holding herself back from the story but now keen for any detail, however insignificant, because she knew for certain she would be the only person to know about it, or at least, the only person outside the small group of people already involved. She knew with absolute certainty that none of the Belleville family would ever mention it.

‘I saw the two brothers – William and Richard. I was intercepted, so to speak. It was just last evening, on the night of Mrs Belleville’s sixtieth birthday party. I went, thinking I could just blend in with the crowd to see what the place was like. I’d heard people in this very lounge talking about it and I asked them where it was. The house is very grand you know. They must be rich.’

For a few minutes, Violet was silent trying to imagine the scene at Prior Park which she had never visited but had heard much about.

‘Had you ever met them before?’ asked Violet, incredulous that this unremarkable young man could devise such a daring plan all by himself.

‘No, I’d never met them. My mother dealt through their solicitors when my father died. There was some small grudging settlement then to help us – I was only ten at the time – but there was never any direct contact with the family, except once.’

He paused, sipping at his beer which had sat unnoticed on the table before him for some time.

Violet had been turning over the story in her mind.

‘So, do you think anybody ever told Mrs Belleville about you?’ she asked. ‘As I understand it from local gossip, William and Richard inherited everything although Mrs Belleville continues to live at Prior Park.’

He nodded.

‘Yes, William and Richard got everything and they do all the business work. My mother had met William. She told me that, but only the once she said. All other contact was via the solicitor. I only found out about all of this very recently,’ he said finally.

Violet could see that the young man was totally spent at the effort of telling her the story, which she did not doubt for one minute. Having seen William Belleville on several occasions, it was the likeness between them that she now noticed for the first time that persuaded her the story was true.

‘So what are you going to do now?’ she asked, for it seemed a perfectly straightforward and reasonable question.

‘You may well ask what I’m going to do now,’ Alistair said, a strange look coming over his face.

‘You may well ask that question. I don’t yet know,’ he said, emphasising the word ‘yet’, ‘but they will be sorry one day. They will be very, very sorry.’

With that, he rose from the table and pushed his chair back.

‘I need some fresh air,’ he said, already half way to the door.

‘I think that’s a very good idea, Mister,’ Violet said out loud to his retreating back.

His words had unsettled her. There was a malevolence in the tone that worried her. With any luck, he would be gone from the hotel by the time she arrived for her shift tomorrow because she was sure now that she did not want to encounter him again.

She cleared the empty glasses from the table and headed towards the bar. What he had told her was, she now realised, a secret the Belleville family would do almost anything to keep, especially from Mrs Belleville. She wondered idly how this information could be used to her benefit but she could not immediately see a course of action. For the time being, it would remain her secret, she decided, even though it was the most delicious piece of gossip she had heard in years.

Elizabeth Belleville would have remained entirely unaware of the unwelcome visitor to her birthday party had it not been for her daughter Julia, who decided to ask her brother William what had kept him and her brother in deep conversation in the study for so long during the party.

William was too late to issue a warning to his sister, whose direct question to him was overheard by her mother who was at that very moment coming down the stairs to supervise the clean up, an unnecessary task as it turned out, for the house had already been returned to its usual neat and tidy state.

‘Hello, Julia, I didn’t expect to see you today and what’s this you are asking your brother about? I didn’t see any unexpected guests last night,’ she said, as she neared the bottom of the stairs.

‘Good morning, Mother,’ Julia said in response. ‘I hope you enjoyed your party.’

It was said without much enthusiasm, merely as a matter of form.

‘Yes, I enjoyed it,’ Elizabeth said, ‘but at sixty, one finds these events a little tiring. So what have you been asking your brother about? A gatecrasher at my party, by the sound of it.’

William, desperate to head off any probing questions, took the easy option.

‘Ah, it was just a fellow we met in Brisbane and put a business proposal to. He didn’t realise it was such a bad time to call, so we said we’d see him next time we’re down in the city,’ he said.

It was the extent of William’s capacity to embroider an explanation so he was quick to add.

‘Alice and Marianne are waiting for me. We are going to pick up

her mother and take her back to town,' he said hurriedly.

With that, he was gone, desperate to deny Julia the chance to ask further questions, for he was sure that he would tie himself in a knot of lies from which he would not be able to extricate himself.

Julia, dissatisfied but lacking the opportunity to ask either of her brothers about the incident, went in search of Charles Brockman who, she was sure, would be able to provide some answers.

Elizabeth Belleville, herself hardly satisfied with her son's responses, nevertheless shrugged off the incident as unimportant.

Charles Brockman too was doing his best to avoid Julia on the day following Elizabeth Belleville's birthday party. It was no more than instinct that drove him to avoid her, for he sensed that she would want to know much more about the events of the evening than he was willing to divulge.

The appearance of Alistair McGovern at Prior Park had come as no surprise to him. It was only the timing of the young man's visit that had caught Charles off guard. It seemed a ludicrous idea that anyone should arrive at Prior Park uninvited on the night of a big celebration. Whoever had put that idea into the young man's head he could not imagine.

Charles had kept many secrets over the years – about his friend Francis Belleville, now dead more than 10 years – and about other members of the family. Some of the secrets he had discussed with Mrs Duffy, the Prior Park housekeeper, who had become his friend and confidante over the years, but there were other secrets that he had shared with no one and the existence of Alistair McGovern had been one of them.

He could remember very clearly the conversation with Francis as if it was yesterday. He did not know if Francis, in telling him, had been seeking advice or had felt it a burden too great to shoulder alone. He did not know and did not ask.

Instead he offered his opinion for what it was worth that Francis should at least provide for the mother and the baby. He had never suggested that Francis should become part of their lives, which it now appeared he had done, for William had given him a succinct

précis of the events that had occurred.

But how, possessing so much knowledge, was he to keep it from Julia, if she started to ask probing questions?

Better to avoid her, he thought, and hope that it would soon be forgotten, so it was that he found himself riding in the most remote corner of Prior Park's vast acres, only to encounter, once again, a surreptitious meeting that reminded him so much of his discovery of Julia's secret assignations with an American Army officer years before. He still did not know the full story surrounding her love affair. If asked, he would have said very little, claiming no knowledge at all, but privately he felt he had pieced together the whole sordid story, despite never having discussed it with any member of the family, Francis included.

As he had done before, he reined in his horse and sought cover behind some bushes that grew conveniently in a clump close to the path well worn by the constant movement of cattle. He patted the side of the mare's neck to calm her, for he had been riding at a solid pace for some time.

Just ahead, he could easily make out the familiar figure of Richard, dismounted from this horse, helping Jane Warner remount.

His first thought was that Jane Warner had ridden a long way to be where she was. In fact she had ridden what he thought was an unreasonably long way for a morning's ride. Armoobilla, where she lived with husband Tom and young Tom, the growing boy on whom the father lavished his attention, did not share a boundary with Prior Park although anyone familiar with the country, as Charles was, would ride a shortcut through Mayfield Downs but in doing so, would risk being seen by James Fitzroy or his men. The more he thought about it, the less he was convinced that the meeting was accidental.

Desperate not to be seen, Charles eased his horse quietly out of the bushes and headed back the way he had come, but not before he had seen Jane bend down, balancing herself carefully in the saddle, to kiss Richard, not as a friend might kiss another friend, but as a lover.

Charles wished with his whole being that he had ridden another

track, that he had never witnessed this betrayal. Once seen, he could not forget it. He shook his head sadly for he knew then that Richard's marriage was in serious trouble.

He was too close to them all. It mattered too much to him. For the first time, he wondered if he mattered to them at all.

He shrugged his shoulders glad there was no one else to see this futile gesture. He dug his heels into the mare's flanks and encouraged her into a gallop, desperate for the concentration that hard riding would demand for he could find no pleasure in the knowledge he now possessed.

Pippa Jensen was looking at her bedroom with its deep pink and white wallpaper and luxurious carpet for the very last time. The shelf where she had kept her dolls and teddy bears was already bare, the imprint of the toys outlined in the dust that remained.

'I will not cry,' she thought to herself, 'I will not cry.' But it was a promise to herself she was struggling to keep.

As the tears welled up, she remembered how her mother had often sat on the bed and together they had talked and laughed and shared a bond that was now broken. Her life, as she had known it, was over. Her beloved mother gone, lost to her in a single careless moment. Her father gone too, but she did not mourn him with the same sense of grief. As yet, she did not know why but she knew, instinctively, that it was her mother who had loved her unconditionally, who had loved and cherished her and who was now lying dead under a pile of brown earth. With her had gone the home she cherished and the life that she had known. It was all gone, lost forever.

As she turned to go, she found herself face to face with her cousin Andrew. It was a face in which she could find no sympathy or understanding. He had forced her out of her home. Now he had little to say to her. He would not even make the pretence of a hollow gesture or a kind word, such was his determination to claim the inheritance his uncle had so generously bestowed on him.

Earlier, he had met the solicitor and signed the necessary documents that had given him the right to take over the properties, for they

could not be left unattended. Pippa's future mattered less to him now, for he had been assured there was no legal obligation for him to let her continue to live on at the Essex Downs homestead. He would be the rightful owner. Harry Jensen had left his adopted daughter almost no stake in his considerable wealth, apart from a modest annual income that would end on her marriage.

It mattered little to her now, for there seemed to be almost no one who cared for her welfare. It was only her mother who had cared and she had left her what little private money she possessed. The home she had once known and loved meant nothing without her mother. Now she was leaving it for the last time, to live with her mother's aunt, she had been told. Where she lived no longer mattered to her for no one could replace her mother, who had been the centre of her world and that world no longer existed.

As she turned to walk down the few front steps leading from the verandah for the very last time, Andrew stopped her with a light touch on her arm. She looked up and saw his hand extended towards her. In his right hand, he was clutching a crumpled envelope.

'Here, you should have this. I found it in your father's safe, but it is addressed to you,' he said brusquely.

Across the outer envelope, Harry Jensen had written the words 'For Pippa'. It had not occurred to Andrew Jensen, now that he was in sole charge of his uncle's affairs, to read the letter or to hand it to the solicitors. Instead, like his uncle before him, his first inclination had been to discard the envelope in the wastepaper basket but he paused, smoothed out the envelope, and left it on his desk. He did not know what the envelope contained but decided, without further inspection, that it was likely to be some trivial matter, so he set it aside to give to her later.

At the bottom of the stairs, a car was waiting to take her to the train in Goulburn for the journey to Sydney, where she had been told she would be met by her Aunt Edith, who was expecting her. As far as she could remember, she had met Aunt Edith twice and then only briefly. She carried with her only one bag. The rest of her belongings would follow, they said, by transport.

'What is it?' she said, hardly able to disguise her dislike of her