

Red Sand Sunrise

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Prologue

Eve

Sunrise promised a new day, and Eve Wilson hoped it would ease the weight of impossible grief in her shoulders as she followed her feet to the Brisbane Botanic Gardens. This was her sanctuary. Among the trees and the wildlife and surrounded by the flowing waters of the Brisbane River. Here she could let some of the anguish wash away with the tide, and find peace when things went bad.

At moments like this she wished she had her family to lean on. As if aware of her need, the iridescent green coolness soothed her as she backed up against the knobby bark of the nearest trunk and allowed her tears to well and sting and drip in time with the nearby fountain.

Just yesterday, in the ward, vibrant and excited, Roslyn had spoken to Eve of her plans. Family dreams mulled over while Eve checked Roslyn's observations, gave her medications, and encouraged her away from boredom. They spoke about how the blood clot in her groin had made her leave her job earlier than planned. How Jason worried they wouldn't be able to buy the expensive pram they wanted. Little anxieties, tiny concerns, none of which registered in the scheme of tragedy now that Roslyn was irrevocably gone.

Words from the midwifery textbook rang in Eve's head: 'If the mother's heartbeat cannot be restarted within four minutes of cardiac arrest dramatic action must occur to save the woman.'

Well, an emergency caesarean section on the ward had been dramatic, complete with curtains between patients and blood on the floor, but it hadn't saved the mother. Incredibly it *had* saved the baby, yet as Eve had walked away from the scene she knew the image of the heartbroken father would be imprinted on her mind forever.

Why? Why did tragedies have to happen? What good could possibly come of this ghastly event? She just wanted to go home and sleep for a week, but tomorrow she would have to forget today's shift in high dependency and front up to the birthing centre, go back to being holistic.

Trust in the body. Trust in the women. Trust in herself.

The irony was that work was the place she most trusted herself. To her late mother and high-achieving sister she'd always been 'Poor Eve', the one who couldn't get her life in order. No matter that she had her friends, her flat, her love of music and nature – heaven forbid she call that happy. She just wasn't successful enough, high-flying enough, in their eyes. And now she was almost thirty.

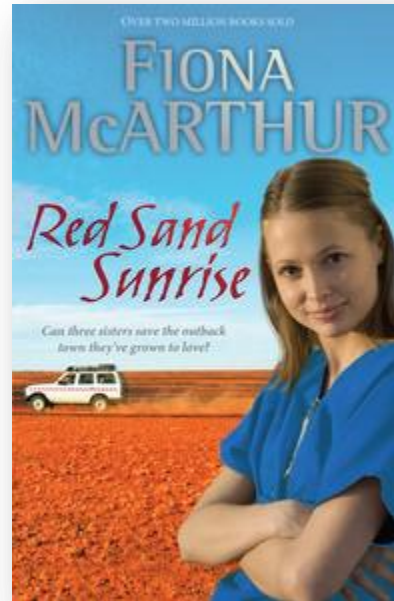
She patted the gnarled tree at her back with open hands like she would tap the bottom of an unsettled baby. Obviously none of that mattered when you compared it to this, she thought as she lightly knocked the back of her head once against the hard trunk.

Could she have done anything differently? If there was a next time, would she be able to help save the mother? How?

If only there was something she could learn from this.

Callie

More than 800 kilometres away, sitting in her smart office in Sydney's Double Bay, Dr Callie Piper glanced from her computer screen to her patient.



'The test came back positive. Congratulations! You're pregnant.' Callie smiled at the ecstatic woman and subdued the tiny ache inside her own chest. This was great news for the couple after their traumatic miscarriage last year.

The young husband patted his wife's hand as if he didn't know what to do first. 'Thank you so much.'

All Callie had done was read out a result. 'You two are the clever ones. I'm very happy for you.'

He leaned towards Callie. A new, serious responsibility rested on his youthful shoulders. 'We've talked about what we'd do if the test was positive. We'd like to come to you for our antenatal care instead of an obstetrician.'

Crikey, no. What if something went wrong? Like it had for her. 'I'm so sorry. I leave babies to the specialists who deal with them all the time. But I'll give you a referral to an obstetrician. Or there is the hospital if you want to go through the midwifery clinic. They have visiting specialists every week if anything crops up.'

The new mother-to-be chewed her lip, and Callie stifled the guilt. She used to do antenatal clinics, years ago.

'Can't we just come back here?'

Callie printed out the referral and smiled apologetically as she handed it over. 'You can still come for anything that's not pregnancy related. Make sure you all come visit me as soon as you're settled at home after the birth. I can't wait to meet your baby.' And she did look forward to that. She couldn't meet enough healthy, bouncing babies.

The father understood. Saw her concern, probably. 'We will.'

Callie stood, and felt propelled around the desk to give her young patient a brief hug, though it wasn't her usual practice. 'I'm so pleased for you.'

As the couple walked out, hands clasped, whispering to each other, Callie waved with a smile on her face – until she saw her husband, a dark shadow of impatience, moving aside to let them past as they made their way to reception.

'Did you want me, Kurt?'

'Why else would I be here?' Kurt said, striding towards her office.

Callie felt her stomach drop. She hated it when Kurt had that look on his face. The whole ambience of the room changed with the downward turn of his mouth, like someone had just blown a cold wind right through her body. It hadn't used to be like this, had it?

'Of course. Come in.'

Five minutes later, in some deep part of her brain she wondered what would have happened if she hadn't invited him in. The sounds of the busy street outside faded as Kurt's words stabbed Callie like tiny knives.

'She's *what*?' Callie turned to her husband of almost fifteen years and stared at his patrician profile. He tapped the sole of his Italian leather shoe on the marble tiles. *Tap, tap, tap*. Then repeated his bombshell.

'Pregnant. You know Stella. From next door. I'm sorry, Callie, but I want a divorce.'

Kurt seemed exasperated at her lack of understanding, but then, lately Kurt was often exasperated, at the very least. *Because he didn't enjoy the guilt of adultery*, some detached part of her soul whispered.

He was quite aptly named, really. Kurt. Frequently curt. And it rhymed with hurt.

Callie felt bile rise in her throat and she glanced helplessly at the door through which her last patient had passed not five minutes earlier. Callie was the patient now. Her symptoms – and apparently the diagnosis – were irrevocable because it seemed her marriage had just miscarried.

Suddenly she became that plain, bespectacled girl from outback Queensland again. The one with the publican father who'd had the affair. The nerd who'd left the remote township of Red Sand behind to study medicine, and never felt like she belonged at university even though she'd graduated with honours.

Callie looked back at her husband. Kurt had been the one to suggest firmly that they settle in an exclusive part of Sydney, when she would have so much preferred a country setting. Maybe she should have fought for somewhere halfway. Somewhere away from other women?

'Stella? Pregnant?' She shook her head. This wasn't happening. This had not been factored into her settled life, her ticking of boxes that should have added up to an untroubled marriage. She thought she'd done everything possible so this *wouldn't* happen to her, as it had to her mother.

Her eyes were drawn with horrible fascination to the shared wall between her office and the coffee shop next door. Stella could be a few metres away, brewing a latte. Pregnant with the child Callie had always wanted.

Was it because Callie had had a Down syndrome daughter who had died at birth? Kurt never spoke of it and had made it clear he didn't wish Callie to either. She blinked and looked away from the wall, wondering bitterly if Stella felt in any way bad that Dr Callie Piper's world had just imploded.

There was a knock, then the door from the waiting room opened and her practice manager's head appeared. Callie focused on her like a lifeline. 'Yes, June?'

'I'm so sorry, but your mother's on the phone. She says it's an emergency.'

'Can't she ring back?' Kurt's dismissive arrogance made Callie frown.

He really was a prick. She blinked again. She never normally used bad language. Even mentally. As she lifted the receiver Callie nodded at her apologetic secretary to hang up so the call could come through.

Before she could say, 'Are you all right, Mum?' her mother's distraught words dealt an even worse blow.

'Oh, Callie, I'm so sorry to be calling like this.'

Callie thought she heard a suppressed sob and her belly coiled in sudden dread.

'It's your dad. He's had a heart attack, my darling. And I'm afraid . . . your father's dead.'

Callie closed her eyes and felt the howl rising in her throat like a wave. *No*. It couldn't be true. Who could have known there was greater agony to suffer? But her mother needed her. She fought through a blanket of pain and focused on the receiver in her hand.

'Hold on, Mum. I'm coming.'