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# Fiona PALMER

## *Sisters and Brothers*

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Brothers*

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*To family, in any shape or form*



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## *Emma*

‘COME ON, KIDS, MOVE YOUR BACKSIDES. I NEED TO BE AT work yesterday!’ screamed Emma Noble as she put her phone into the pocket on her blue nurse’s uniform. The only reply she got was the echo of her voice. Just when she was about to do her crazy banshee stalk through the house – that’s what her oldest kid, Josh, called it – one child, her eldest daughter, appeared in the kitchen.

Maddison, dressed in her white school shirt, a big red R for Rockingham Senior High School written on her chest, moved slower than a turtle. She walked past the scattered clothes by the dining table, which doubled as the clean unfolded laundry pile, her feet shifting fluff and dog hair across the vinyl floor. Emma could almost hear her vacuum cleaner groan as it sat in the corner of the room, its contents well past emptying limit. Maddie’s plain dark shorts looked as if she’d slept in them; no doubt they’d fallen off the bed where Emma had left her clean, folded clothes. And Emma would bet her left leg that

Maddie hadn't run a brush through her hair in days, though it looked passable now scraped up into a loose bun on top of her head. Her fifteen-year-old daughter was a sloth in every sense. She made a little effort on school days but at home she lived in her socks and Nike sliders and whatever clothes she picked up from the floor in her messy room. Emma had told her on many occasions that there could be white-tailed spiders breeding among the clothes on her floor, but it didn't seem to faze the teenager.

Maddie slowly picked up two slices of toast and headed towards the door without so much as a smile. It was quite possible that Maddie was still half-asleep. The only proof she was actually alive, besides the fact she was walking and breathing, was that her phone was in her hand, earphones wedged in her ears and the tinny sound of music so loud Emma could hear it. Maddie would need a hearing aid before her thirtieth birthday. The hand that held her phone had the top loop of her school bag hooked between spare fingers, and Emma wanted to tell her to stop dragging it across the floor, especially because her red school jumper was about to fall out, but she knew better than to waste her breath when Maddie wouldn't hear her.

Right, that was two kids accounted for, because ten-year-old Max was already waiting in the car. It would be a sad day when he too joined the moody teenagers that inhabited her house. Emma found an elastic band on the table and quickly scooped her brown wavy hair up into a ponytail and then pulled her lip balm from her pocket and coated her lips. They always got dry at work because she never had time to drink. Being a nurse, there never seemed to be any time for

anything, let alone eating or toilet breaks and especially not for proper hydration.

‘I’ll drive,’ said Josh as he swept in, grabbed the last slice of toast and snatched the car keys off the table.

Emma looked up at her son. He was the giant in the family, towering over her and his father John. He’d make a great basketballer if he could be bothered, but life at the moment was all about girls and cars.

Emma searched under all the mail, school work, breakfast leftovers, a shoe and one of Josh’s stinky T-shirts for her hospital lanyard. Finally she found it in the fruit bowl – a receptacle that never seemed to hold what it was made for – at the end of the breakfast bar.

Emma picked up Josh’s forgotten bag from the floor, hoping to Christ that the dog hadn’t got to his lunch again, and headed to the door. She bent to pick up some of Max’s artwork that had fallen off the fridge and stuck it back on, holding it in place with a big magnet of an XF Ford Falcon. The knife lay on the chopping board still covered with butter and Vegemite. Emma threw it in the sink, already full of last night’s dishes, and cursed because it was Maddie’s job to stack the dishwasher and it hadn’t been done.

It was hard having John away with his fly-in-fly-out job in the mines up north. Two weeks home, two weeks away. It was a tough lifestyle to live, especially when she worked full-time. The house during those two weeks looked like a *shit hole*, to use John’s words when he’d come home from his last shift.

Emma grabbed the large black faux-leather bag she got on sale at Kmart for five dollars and flicked off lights on her way to the door. ‘Ah,’ she said as she spotted their Staffy curled up

on the couch. 'Snake, you cheeky boy. Outside now.' His brown eyes shot her evil glances he must have learned from the kids but he reluctantly slid off the couch and headed for the back door, his brown tail between his legs. Once he'd gone through Emma locked the doggie door and ran back to the front.

'Jesus Christ, why can't I ever have a simple morning?' When she got to the white Prado, Josh was already in the driver's seat with his plates up. He smiled a cheesy grin and nodded to the passenger side.

'No speeding,' she demanded as she climbed in.

Josh was a good boy; lean and sinewy, and he was the man of the house while John was away. He'd pick up the kids from school and then come and fetch Emma from work, or if she had a late shift he'd get takeaway and feed them all. Some days he hated it, but she tried to even it up by making sure he had nights off to go out with his friends.

He raked his hand over his long dark fringe, and the little black earring in his ear glinted as he turned to check his mirrors. On his inner arm, just above where his school shirt stopped, was a tattoo he'd got a few months ago on a family holiday to Bali. It was a small anchor and chain with the word 'Family' along its length.

John had a whole arm sleeve, and Emma had the kids' names on her wrists, a heart with each one. And on her foot near her ankle she also had the word 'Family' written between an electrocardiogram pattern. A mix of her two great loves: work and family.

Josh dropped Max off first at the local primary school.

'Bye, darling, have a good day,' said Emma getting out to hug and kiss him. Max had her dark chocolate eyes but John's

blond hair, which made for a very cute combination. He flicked his head to the side to shift his hair from his eyes. He'd been asked out by two girls this week.

'See ya, Mum.'

The next stop was the local high school where the other two kids piled out and Emma hugged them all before getting behind the wheel. She couldn't complain, really; they were hard work at times, but her kids still let her hug them – even Josh – and they waved goodbye as they walked off down the school path.

Before she could put the car in gear her phone rang. 'Hey Mum, I'm in the car, just dropped off the kids.'

'Darling, your dad's in Emergency,' came her mum's rushed voice through the car speakers. 'Don't panic, he's okay.'

Her mum Tammy sounded like she should take her own advice, her voice high pitched and breathless.

'What the heck happened?' Emma pulled out into the traffic and floored it in the direction of the hospital.

'He was pruning that damn passionfruit vine, and the ladder tipped and he fell. Landed on his collection of junk . . . Ugh, there was blood everywhere. I couldn't move him, so I called the ambo.'

Her mum made a gurgling sound of repulsion. She wasn't so good with blood, so growing up Emma had to tend to those situations from a young age. Probably why she became a nurse.

'But he's okay?' Emma's pulse began to relax. 'Are *you* okay, Mum?'

'He needs some stitches and a needle. And I'm fine, now. Almost passed out. I think I'm getting better at dealing with it.'

Emma stifled a chuckle; she'd been trying for sixty-eight years. 'I'll be there in five, Mum. See you soon.'

After parking at the hospital Emma went straight to her ward to tell her boss that she needed ten minutes to check on her dad, and then headed to Emergency. The hospital was where she felt comfortable, its chaos not far off that in her own home. Sometimes the hospital was much quieter. Especially when her three kids went down with gastro.

It wasn't hard to find her dad: she just looked for her mum pacing outside the powder-blue curtain. Her once-brown hair had greyed and was now worn short. Her body was still fit and her beauty hadn't faded over the years. Her posture was poised, shoulders straight. Emma wished she had her mum's natural elegance. In that respect she was more like her dad with his easygoing nature and the bird tattoos on his arms and hands that had fascinated her growing up.

'Oh good, you're here. They should be nearly done stitching him up,' said Tammy.

'It's okay,' said Emma, hugging her. Lavender engulfed her, the familiar scent of her mum. Tammy was shaking slightly but towards the end of the hug Emma could feel her mum relax a bit. Touching her hand, Emma stepped behind the curtain.

Her dad, Steve, was propped up on the bed, looking up at the ceiling, his face pale beneath his grey beard. Those blue inked tattoos of his, faded over the years so the outside line seemed blurry, stood out on his hands. His colour would come back soon.

'There you go, Mr Noble, all set.' The doctor leaning over his leg did a final trim of the stitches and stood up straight with a satisfied look on his face. 'Ah, Emma, I wondered how long until you'd be here.'

‘Thanks. Nice job,’ she said to the doctor after having a quick look at his work. He left as she hugged her dad, drinking in his scent of wood chips and aftershave, and then reached for his chart on impulse. ‘How’re you feeling, Dad?’

‘Oh, I’m okay. Feeling stupid more than anything.’ His voice was soft and a little uneven.

He wouldn’t admit it but Emma knew just how much it had shaken him. She saw it in the eyes of the older folk in here, a feeling that as they got older they didn’t bounce back like they used to, and the fear that the hospital was one step closer to the grave. He reached out his hand and she took it as her mum appeared.

Steve started speaking further about his fall, the nervous edge lingering in his voice. Emma nodded as she scanned his chart, gently squeezing his hand in support, until suddenly she cocked her head to the side and then looked up at her mum. ‘Dad’s blood? Says he’s an O.’

Tammy just blinked.

Her dad cleared his throat. ‘Yes, I am.’ Colour was starting to flood back into his cheeks.

‘But you’re O as well.’ Emma shot the words at her mum.

Tammy shrugged her thin shoulders, her soft pink blouse moving slightly.

‘You can’t be.’ Emma could tell they didn’t see what she was getting at.

‘I am, last I checked,’ said Tammy. She frowned and moved closer to hold Steve’s hand.

‘But I’m AB! You can’t get AB from two O parents.’ Emma suddenly felt faint as her words registered. But she wasn’t the only one who suddenly put two and two together. Her parents’

heads snapped as they looked at each other, sharing something like fear that made her stomach churn. She swallowed hard. Surely not! A shiver cascaded down her body, disbelief and shock as she tried to put words to her thoughts.

‘Oh my god! Am I adopted?’ It was the only explanation, unless the chart was wrong. But her parents were being weird. No one was jumping up to contradict her.

‘Oh my god, I am.’ She dropped the chart to the bed and staggered back, her hand pulling away from her dad’s. Was he even her dad? His hand reached out for her, pleading, but no words came to his moving lips. Emma stopped when her back pressed against the wall. She was cornered like a scared animal and she couldn’t escape the fear and dread that was settling in her bones. What had she stumbled upon? Her brain couldn’t think straight, bombarded with so many options and possibilities, all of which made her feel sick. Her stomach was tight, her breathing shallow as her hands fisted at her side.

It was Tammy who finally spoke. ‘No, honey, you’re not adopted. You are my child, and Steve is your dad in every way that matters.’

Tammy’s last words echoed through Emma’s head, leaving a feeling of time standing still. Suddenly her body demanded she breathe, and she gasped in a breath. She looked at her parents. Her mum with her deep hazel eyes and a long nose and round face that Emma had inherited, so everyone said, and even she could see the resemblance. But her dad? She had dark hair like him, but his eyes were a greeny brown; but facially there was nothing she could say she had inherited, though they did have the same sense of humour.

‘What are you not saying, Mum?’ she croaked out. Her heart raced as she waited for a reply that never came. Pushing again, she said, ‘Is Dad not my dad?’ Her gaze darted between the two, looking for any indication that she was right or wrong.

‘Did you have an affair? What . . . how?’ she stuttered, growing frustrated at their silence.

Her parents had been married for years before she’d been born, so it wasn’t like her mum was pregnant with another man’s child before they wed. Emma dropped her head into her hand for a moment while the thoughts churned, then quickly lifted it as she realised the two people opposite her had all the answers. She focused the *Don’t mess with me* look that her kids saw regularly.

Tammy looked at Steve, tears now noticeable on her lower lashes. Steve reached for both her hands and squeezed them. Emma wanted to scream at them. *Answer me!*

‘It’s okay, Tammy. She needs to know the truth.’ Steve turned to Emma and spoke so softly she frowned as she tried to listen. ‘I’m sorry, honey. We’d been trying for years to have a child, then I got tested and found the problem was with me.’ He paused for a moment while Tammy rubbed his shoulder. ‘We didn’t have a lot of money and we thought of adopting but it was too hard and we weren’t getting any younger. Then we came up with the idea of a donor.’

‘A donor?’ Emma frowned. Where the heck was this story going?

‘We found a nice guy, and your mum became pregnant straightaway, and the rest is history. We had what we wanted most in the world – you.’ He smiled at her as if she were the baby Jesus in the flesh.

Emma was surprised to feel the wet heat of a tear slide down her cheek, followed by another one. 'So, you're not my biological father? Is that what you're saying?'

Tammy was crying too and pulled out a tissue from her bag to mop her face.

Steve sighed heavily. 'No, honey, I'm not. But that doesn't mean anything to me. You're my daughter in every sense of the word. I'm sorry you had to find out like this. It will never affect how I feel about you. Just understand how much your mum and I wanted a family.' His voice cracked, and Tammy passed him a tissue.

Emma felt her heart about to burst. She hated to see him upset. The man who had carried her when she was tired, patched up her wounds while her mum tried not to look, read her stories every night and walked with her down the aisle. And yet she couldn't shake the anger burning inside her, anger at the secret they'd kept from her, anger that she'd had to find out like this. It hurt so badly, like nothing she'd experienced before. Worse than the time she'd lost Max for an hour at the beach. It was like her life was being sucked out of her, vanishing before her eyes as everything she thought she knew was thrown upside down. Who was Emma Noble? Who was she really?

She saw his pain but couldn't voice her thoughts. *You will always be my dad*, she wanted to say but the words stuck in her throat. The shock made it impossible for her to comfort him; not yet, it hurt too much. Emma wanted to storm out of the hospital, she wanted them to feel as bad as she did, but she couldn't move. Stuck to the wall like glue. There was more she needed to know.

One question was burning a hole in her chest. 'So, who *is* my biological father?'

Tammy sucked in a deep breath, swayed a little and fixed her eyes on Emma.

Her words were said with no hint of regret. 'His name was Bill. He was the piano tuner.'

# Sisters and Brothers

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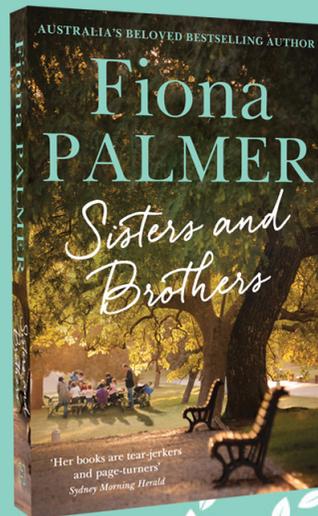
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