

Finding Mia

Dianne J. Wilson

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Dedication

To my family, my very own 'mines', thank you for sharing me with my laptop and the people in my head.

Praise

"Finding Mia is a satisfying read with an inspiring message. Wilson has crafted a vivid cast of memorable characters and woven their lives together with just the right proportions of mystery, suspense, romance, humor, heartache and divine intervention to keep readers entertained until the final sentence. I particularly enjoyed her distinctive imagery laced throughout the story that enhances the hopeful message that there is no brokenness beyond being made whole where divine love is concerned."

~Wendy Koll

"Reading the first draft of Finding Mia, I was enchanted firstly by the style of writing which was descriptive and exciting and then the story line... I was captivated from the opening paragraph to the final page. A gripping read."

~Arlene Thomas

"I was drawn into the story from the first line, compelled and intrigued to read and read until the very last word! A person missing this book is doing themselves an injustice."

~Barbi van Rooyen

1

Isobel bit her paintbrush in frustration. The sea before her sparkled in shades of turquoise as it stretched up to kiss the rays of the sun. The beach was deserted. A slight breeze tiptoed across the tops of the waves and threaded through stately palm fronds. The entire scene screamed, *paint me*.

She put down her paintbrush, knuckling the small of her back. This place was perfect. If there were any inspiration left in the world for her, surely it would be here. But her canvas remained stubbornly blank. It mocked her in its sheer whiteness. If it were a kid, it would be sticking out its tongue and blowing raspberries.

She glared back at it for a moment. “Fine. Whatever.” Ten years of this had taken its toll on her. A decade of jammed-up talent. She reached up to tie back her brown hair. It was just that—brown. Not russet or tan or chocolate. Just brown. She caught sight of a stain on her shorts. What on earth? She picked at it with her nail and ran it across her tongue. Ice cream. Isobel frowned; it was from that kid in the park. Now she was doomed to be sticky all day. There were a few reasons she wasn’t keen on kids—sticky stains joined the list.

“This is all your fault, you daft canvas. If you’d

just stop sulking and let me paint something, I wouldn't have been in that park. Aaar—" Her frustrated growl was cut short by soft whimpering.

Isobel froze, listening.

Nothing.

She waited, hardly breathing.

There it was again, the faintest moan. It was coming from up the beach to the right.

Not stopping to think, she followed the sound.

Across a blinding expanse of white sand, a man-size piece of landlocked driftwood sat brooding, vulture-like. The noise came from the other side. She could hear it clearly now. It grew fainter as she got closer. Instinct kicked in. Isobel stepped out of her shoes and ran. The driftwood snagged her shorts as she climbed between two branches and she pulled hard, ripping a hole in the fabric and sending her headfirst into the sand on the other side. She spat grains out of her mouth and looked around.

There! Baking in the scorching sun, a little bundle in pink. What kind of flotsam comes in pink? She rubbed her eyes to make sure she was seeing right.

It was a child, no more than two years old, a girl with wispy blonde hair. She lay still on the burning sand, no hint that she was alive.

Time turned to treacle as Isobel rushed closer, fearing the worst.

The child was tied to the wood with a scarlet silk scarf. Isobel slipped the knot free and gingerly picked up the toddler who hung limp in her arms. Her skin was hot against Isobel's. She was a mess of tearstains and angry sunburn. "Oh, you poor baby. How long have you been out here? Where's your mum?"

Isobel scanned the beach. No one. Just a pair of

sandals midway to the water and her own farther from the water line. The little girl in her arms drew a shuddery breath, sending twin jolts of hope and fear through Isobel. No time to look for family. She needed help now.

Isobel struggled through the soft sand, though her burden was feather-light. Hers was the only car in the parking lot. She placed her charge on the back seat and drove the unfamiliar streets, fighting rising panic. An old man was waiting by a postbox for his collie to finish sniffing. She skidded to a stop.

“Excuse me. I need a doctor. Can you help?”

“Sorry, what?” He leaned in close.

Her heart sank. “A doctor! I need a doctor.”

“Aaah. Turn left at the end of this road. Make your way to the t-junction and head right. Can’t miss it.”

Left, then right. She drove off, scared to go too fast and scared to go too slow.

Nothing. She must have gone wrong.

No, wait. There was the sign. She swung into the parking lot and stopped. Gently scooping up her small charge, she half-walked, half-ran through the sliding doors. The little girl had been so quiet in the car. Isobel shied away from the thoughts that hounded her. *Too late. You are too late.* A ragged breath—she was still alive. “Stay with me, OK? Life is not done with you yet, little Flotsam.”

Professionalism vaguely masked the disapproval on the receptionist’s face. “Can we help you?”

Isobel was suddenly aware of her bare, sandy feet, mussed-up ponytail, and ripped shorts. “Please. I found this little girl on the beach. She needs urgent medical attention.”

“Where are her parents?”

"I don't know. She was alone. Please—"

The receptionist tapped her pen on the form. "I have to put something here. The liability—"

Isobel's blood boiled. "But she needs help now!"

A cool hand grasped her elbow. It was the doctor. "I'll take it from here, Angie. I'm Doctor Brigham. Come with me."

She followed her rescuer, her knees weak from anger and gratitude. This baby dying in her arms? She swallowed hard. Her insides shook, pleading *no*. It wouldn't have surprised Isobel to see wings sprouting from the doctor's broad shoulders or a hovering halo to appear above his head.

He settled the little girl in a casualty booth. Assessing her vitals, he hooked up a drip and put monitoring equipment in place. Once his small patient was stable, he turned to Isobel. "OK... I think you got her here in time. She is suffering severe dehydration and sunburn. I'm not sure she would have survived another hour out there. We'll be able to assess her condition more accurately once she comes around. I've given her something to ease the pain." He sat on the bench next to Isobel. "What can you tell me?"

For the first time since her find, Isobel slammed back into reality. She cringed. "Not much to tell. I was on the beach and heard a strange moaning. I followed the sound and found her tied to a piece of driftwood like a bit of flotsam." She shrugged, hit by crushing weariness.

"No sign of her parents?"

"Just a pair of sandals halfway between where I found her and the water. I didn't want to waste time looking. I didn't think she had much time to spare."

"Good call. Tied to a piece of driftwood, you say?"

With what?"

"A silk scarf. Bright red." A wave of nausea hit Isobel and she swallowed hard. "I need a bathroom."

Doctor Brigham waved toward the passage and she ran.

For the second time that morning nausea hit. She made it just in time and lost the entire contents of her stomach to the Sunshine Coast sewage system. She knelt, leaning on the wall, feeling hollow inside and out. The sooner she left this all behind, the better. Flotsam—Flo as she'd begun to think of her—was safe. Isobel had done as much as any decent person would. For the sake of conscience, she'd pay the bill, then she'd be out of here. This was not something she was ready to face. Not at all. Taking courage from the thought that it was almost over, she pulled herself up, splashed water on her face and opened the restroom door.

Dr. Brigham was waiting for her in the passage. For the briefest flash, Isobel saw the man—not the doctor, and her heartbeat doubled. She shook her head, and he was back to being the doctor, albeit with her conjured-up wings and halo hovering over his red hair. He looked worried.

"Is everything OK? Is she..."

"She's fine. As good as she can be under the circumstances. I'd like a word with you, if you don't mind."

"I was just going to settle the bill and be on my way. There is nothing more for me to do here."

"Just walk with me first. Please."

Isobel didn't want to. She didn't want to listen or feel. She just wanted to go home and stick her head under a pillow and pretend she was safely on the

moon for a little while. Preferably alone. Yet she found her feet following him down a polished passage so shiny, it felt as if she were walking on the ceiling.

Those broad shoulders—with rapidly shrinking wings, she thought with a frown—nudged open a side door into a consulting room that had been left at the mercy of a colour-blind painter. Everything was green. His red hair blazed against the vivid emerald background. Her stomach was still queasy and the moon was sounding more attractive by the minute.

"I'm sorry, I never caught your name?" He waved her into a chair and sat down opposite her.

"Isobel. Isobel Carter."

"Isobel, I need to ask you—"

There was a brief tap on the door and sour Angie poked her head in. "Doctor, you have a growing queue of patients waiting to see you."

"Thank you, Angie. I'm nearly through."

He shook his head apologetically as the door slammed shut behind her. "She's good at what she does..." He shrugged, closed his mouth, and gave up trying to defend his untoward receptionist.

"You were saying?"

"Ah, yes. I need to ask if you'll do something for me."

No! "Sure." Traitorous mouth. "What is it?" She felt the need to bang her head on the desk. She resisted.

"That little girl you brought in. She needs to be in hospital, at least overnight. I know you said you were keen to get out of here, but will you take her?"

"I really can't. I mus—"

"I'd take her myself, but I've got a waiting room full of people. Please?"

"Can't you call ambulance?"

"None available, I tried. There was a pile-up on the N2."

She wanted to scream. *Hospital*. She could feel the trembling in her hands at the thought. "To hospital and then I'm done. Sure."

He reached across the desk and gently took hold of her wrist. "Stay with her until I do my rounds later. It's important. Please."

If he hadn't been so kind, she would have told him to get lost. But his hand on her wrist was warm, he asked so sincerely, and he looked her straight in the eye as he said it. Snookered. "OK. I'll take her and I'll wait for you. You had better not be late." His halo had slipped and she was tempted to strangle him with it.

"Good girl. I'll send someone to help you get her into your car. Oh, take this," he scribbled a note on a pad, tore it off, and handed it to her. "They won't give you trouble admitting her. I'm footing the bill on this one." He grinned at her, winked, and jogged off down the passage to fetch his next patient and appease the wrath of Angie.

Isobel leaned back on the chair and let her head drop. This could not be happening. *Pull yourself together, girl. It's just one afternoon. You can do this.* She wasn't really on speaking terms with God, but she looked up anyway.

Just don't let her die on me. Anything but that.

Liam Brigham shut the door to his consulting room, picked up the phone, and dialled.

"Detective Nass speaking."

"We've got another one."

Dianne J. Wilson

“Missing?”

“No, intercepted. She’s en route to hospital as we speak. We’ve got to talk.”

2

Dr. Brigham must have phoned ahead. An elderly porter opened the door as Isobel pulled into the hospital parking lot. He moved with the telltale efficiency of one who'd spent many years handling broken bodies. He shifted Flo onto a stretcher and set up a mobile drip. He led on into the labyrinth of dim passages that reeked of strong disinfectant.

Something about that smell made Isobel glad she wasn't a malevolent micro-organism. Her mind took in random details as they walked. Generic pastel watercolours dotted the walls at regular intervals, the kind of pictures her art mentor from school would have used to line his parrot cage. The porter picked up the pace, giving her no time to think. She all but ran to keep up. They steered past the general ward and stopped in a private room.

With deft gentleness, he shifted Flo onto the bed and hung the drip. "Cover her with that sheet, will you?"

The sheet was soft and cool. Isobel pulled it over Flo and gingerly tucked it close under the little girl's chin. Like a doll in a giant's house, her damaged body barely took up any room, and Isobel felt her heart pull in a familiar ache. With the ache came another wave of nausea. She found a chair and doubled over, head between her knees, willing it to pass.

"Are you OK, Ma'am?"

Nodding as convincingly as she could, Isobel managed to look up long enough to squeeze out a vague smile.

“All right, then. All the best with your little mite. She’s a fighter, she is. Just like her mom.” He gave her shoulder an encouraging pat.

Isobel cringed, but the thought of explaining the situation meant opening her mouth, and that meant she may well throw up on the porter’s worn sneakers. She forced another grin which must have come out as a grimace.

He took one look and left.

Alone with Flo, Isobel breathed to stay calm. The sun was surrendering to night, and the light through the window took on a magical pink-orange glow that made her think of flamingos. She couldn’t bring herself to look at Flo; her fierce redness made Isobel’s skin crawl. How could one little girl stir up so much emotion?

Isobel got up and sought the coolness of the window with her aching forehead. So many unanswered questions—a riddle waiting to be untangled like a ball of thread. But with that unravelling, memories would shake loose, she knew it. Memories she’d do anything to avoid. Memories that threatened to swallow her up and spit out her bones.

The room looked out over the town’s main road, lined with dolphin-peddling curio shops and fast-food outlets. Life happened at a mellow pace in Scottburgh, South Africa. Off-season was particularly laidback, a quality that drew in many visitors from the busier centres over holiday season.

Bel had heard locals joke about spotting outsiders on the beaches by their pale, office-bound skin or the

sunburn that they inevitably wore after two days on holiday.

The wind picked up, no longer teasing the palm trees, but determined to shred them. Riding the tails of the wind were thick, black storm clouds. In minutes, the flamingo light had fled from an onslaught of pelting rain.

Isobel cringed. Her canvas was still on the beach. Easel, paints...her shoes. In this rain? It would all be ruined. Perfect. Just perfect.

The door swung open and a nurse came in to check Flo's vitals.

Time turned sticky as Isobel stared at the open door. She could leave. Right now. Flo was in good hands. Isobel owed Dr. Brigham nothing.

Blood rushed to her face as she stood up and walked. Every slow step was a pounding heartbeat. *I told him I'd stay, but I can't.* Her pace quickened as she got closer to the door. Fighting the urge to run, Isobel fled the hospital like an ant fleeing a kid with a magnifying glass on a sunny day.

Taxis lined the street. Rush-hour in this holiday town was a non-event. She slid into one, and two stops later she arrived at her rented cottage with her ruined canvas and a steaming packet of Chinese food that was her best attempt at supper. She settled in the lounge with her noodles and tea, determined to shift-delete today from her memory banks.

I made the right decision. There was nothing more I could do for that baby. I wouldn't survive anything more.

Not hungry, Isobel forced herself to keep lifting the plastic fork from the greasy cardboard to her mouth. Somewhere between the warm liquid and the sweet and sour tang of the noodles, the clutch let up in

her mind and tension dissolved from her shoulders. Her gaze fell on the canvas—watermarked from the rain, beach sand embedded along the edges. Her stomach twisted and she set the half-eaten noodles aside. Maybe bed would be best.

She lay in her bed in the dark and listened to the wind. The storm had vented its fury for an hour solid then left as quickly as it had come. It took half an hour of turning this way and that, re-fluffing her pillow, to realise that she was fooling herself. Her good friend sleep was off visiting in another part of the town and had no intention of coming back anytime soon.

Throwing on a silk gown, Isobel wandered downstairs. The wind had blown away the last lingering remnants of rain clouds and tucked itself in for the night.

Moonlight poured through the ceiling-length windows, creating a pool of living light on the lounge floor. Driven by some nameless emotion, Isobel picked up the ruined canvas and a pencil. She stood for a moment outside the circle of dancing moonlight, feeling suspended between the life that is and the life that will be.

She stepped into the glow and sank to the floor. Without really intending to, she slowly began to sketch. No thoughts dictated where the lines went or the shading grew. The pencil tip traced and dipped, at times light—barely touching—then bold and dark. Time flowed over her under the caress of soft moonlight as she gave in to the whim of her overwhelming feelings. Feelings she dare not look at in the harsh light of day. She worked tirelessly, pouring her heart out through her finger tips, redeeming the damaged canvas with exquisite beauty.

Hours later, needle-sharp pricks of sunlight woke her up. She struggled upright, feeling every vertebra in her spine mumbling complaints.

Oh, hush up already, body. What are you doing on the floor anyway?

Rubbing thick sleep from her eyes, she forced them open—first one then the other. Then she saw the canvas.

Ten years of nothing. Ten long years of bashing her head on empty canvas after empty canvas and now this.

A tremor of shock shot through her from the tip of her head to the deepest secret places of her heart. It was suddenly hard to swallow. The form, the lines, the shading and contrast—it was, without doubt, the best piece she'd ever done.

And...it was Flo.

3

She stowed the damaged canvas next to the dustbin—the picture facing towards the wall—and was on her second cup of tea when she heard the crash.

Someone screamed. Then silence.

Running to the window, she moved the lace curtain aside just enough to peep into the neighbour's yard without being seen.

A bike, a boy, a gate that hung precariously on one hinge, and a battered daisy bush told the tale of a crash.

Her neighbour's front door swung open. The boy's mom ran and bent down over him. With her hair scraped back into a spiky ponytail and something pink messed down the back of her track pants, she was an overworked mom through and through.

The boy cried and clutched his arm.

Isobel let the curtain drop. *Not my problem.*

Popping two slices of seed bread into the toaster, she opened the top drawer before remembering the cutlery was in the next one down. *You'd think I'd be used to this place after a month.* A whole month of living in Scottburgh and she'd managed to avoid meeting her neighbours. Waving the butter knife in midair, she said aloud, "I'm not here to make friends, after all. I'm just here to hunt down my missing muse. Nothing more, nothing less."

The toaster popped loudly, the only applause she

was going to get for her soliloquy.

She spread a thick layer of marmalade across her toast and was about to bite when the doorbell rang. She rolled her eyes. *Perfect*. She put the toast down on the bookshelf in the hall, brushed crumbs from her hands, and peered through the spy-hole.

A spiky blonde ponytail told her it was the next-door mom. The soft crying told her bike-boy was there too. It would be so easy to slip quietly into the lounge and lay low until they gave up and left. So tempting.

She opened the door.

"I need your help. He's broken his arm. My hubby's away. My car won't start. I—"

This can't be happening. "Give me a mo'. I need my keys." She slipped into her shoes, found her keys, and left with a last wistful glance at her toast. Then it hit her.

"Oh, crumbs. My car isn't here. How can I be so dim?"

Blonde mom blinked, uncomprehending.

The boy buried his head in his mom's leg and whimpered.

Isobel sighed. "You know what? It doesn't matter. I'll call a taxi."

Minutes later, they were trading names as they piled into the back of the yellow vehicle. The boy's name was Ben, and he apparently had ongoing issues with staying on his bike.

"Oh, Ben, how many times have I told you to use your brakes *before* you hit the gate? You really need to stop falling off that bike. You've only got so many limbs to break, you know." Ben's mom kept up a nonstop stream of chatter, chiding and consoling, interjected with the odd comment to Isobel. "So kind of