



New Beginnings

Iris Blobel

Beginnings – Book 1

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NEW BEGINNINGS

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BLURB

The chance to start life all over with the help of a stranger.

Twenty-two-year-old Sophie Levesque has been guardian to her eight-year-old sister Mia since their mother's death a few years ago, and it hasn't been easy. Luck comes their way when they inherit a small house in Hobart. Problem is, though, they don't know and have never heard of Clara Bellinger, the testator. Settling into their new life, Sophie is still afraid it's all a mistake.

Mark O'Connor, attorney in Hobart and the bearer of the good news for Sophie and Mia, curses himself for the lack of information about the testator. However, researching the questions gives him an opportunity to see Sophie again, and the more time he spends with the two, the more he realises that his life is missing something. And it's not his casual lover Linda.

But then there's Zach, Sophie's sexy neighbour from across the road... and a very good friend of Clara's.

Will unravelling the mystery unravel Sophie and Mark's promise of a future?

CHAPTER ONE



Sophie Levesque stared at the attorney in front of her, waiting for some answers. She and her little sister, Mia, had been quietly sitting in Mr. O'Connor's office for more than half an hour, learning about the details of their inheritance.

Once he was finished, silence hung in the air before she asked with raised eyebrows. "Who?"

"Clara Catherine Bellinger."

Mia leaned closer to her elder sister and gave a soft tug on Sophie's shirt. "Who is she?"

Sophie shrugged. "I wouldn't have a clue." Then turned her attention back on Mr. O'Connor and asked the same thing. "Who is she?"

The handsome attorney on the other side of the massive desk leaned forward and rested his elbows on it before he started to repeat his earlier speech. Although hearing his words, Sophie still found it all very hard to comprehend. Here she was in this old office, furnished with heavy antique oak furniture, the curtains in a pretty shade of aubergine, and the carpet beneath her shoes thick and warm in a matching shade, hearing about an inheritance from someone she'd never even heard of.

Startled by the subtle sound of the clock chiming across the road, Sophie's gaze turned to the window, where she saw the post office building across the road. It looked impressive and old. It'd been only a few hours since they'd arrived in Hobart, the most southern capital in Australia, but she already liked it. A lot more than Sydney, the place she'd lived all her life.

Hauled back from her thoughts, she heard Mr. O'Connor say, "I believe she was a distant relative of yours. I'm afraid I don't have any further details."

Sophie arched an eyebrow in disbelief, doubting the accuracy of it all. Not only did she try not to question his competence as a lawyer, but she also hoped it wasn't a dreadful misunderstanding.

With a slight shrug of her shoulder, she asked, "Why not?"

He met her gaze steadily. "Pardon me?"

Sitting up straight, she repeated, "Why not? Why aren't there any further details?"

He rubbed his chin with his fingers, his unease now obvious, and although she almost felt sorry for him, she tried not to care. She needed to know more. And not just the what, but why and who as well.

Only a week earlier, Sophie had received the call from Mr. O'Connor telling her about an inheritance. Initially, she'd thought it had been a horrible joke when he'd given her details on where to pick up airplane tickets to Hobart. It was important for her to come, he'd explained. Some legality she hadn't understood. Something about her having to sign documents for the transfer of ownership of some assets. It'd sounded too farfetched at the start, but after some research on the firm with the help of a friend, it sounded valid, and she'd hoped her life was finally turning around for the better.

Mr. O'Connor let out a long sigh. "Ms. Bellinger was one of the partner's clients. I was only given the details shortly after the client's death."

Sophie drew in her lips, as her gaze drifted past him to the window. She took a few deep breaths, inwardly calming herself. Nothing had ever been easy in her life.

"Why isn't the partner here?"

"Retired."

As she pondered on his reply for a moment, she began to imagine what life could be like with this inheritance.

Different. And better.

Another sigh escaped as she returned her gaze to the man behind the desk. "You can't leave your assets to just anybody, can you?"

“Miss Lever—”

“Levesque,” she helped him.

Their eyes met.

“Are you refusing the bequest?” he asked hesitantly, and she clearly noticed how one of his eyebrows arched upward.

Staring blankly with her mouth open, panic rushed through her veins with every thump of her erratic heartbeat. An uncomfortable silence fell over them before she spoke with a rushed voice, “No. No, of course not. We’re accepting.”

She turned to look at her younger sister. “We’re actually looking forward to seeing it, aren’t we?”

He stood with one swift movement and went to a little cupboard near the window to retrieve a bunch of keys. “Would you like me to take you there?”

Still feeling a rush of excitement as well as caution within her, Sophie took Mia’s hand and inclined her head when she asked, “Is it far?”

Her voice sounded tired even to her. It had been a long day already. She stood and placed her arm around Mia assuming that, considering how tired she was, her little sister was most likely exhausted.

“No, not at all. Five to ten minute drive, I’d say,” the attorney replied.

“I still don’t understand. Why us?” Sophie asked quietly, meeting his gaze and, for the first time, actually taking in his icy blue eyes. He was very attractive, with a face tanned by wind and sun, and there always seemed to be a hint of a smile on his lips.

Her gaze fixed back on his mouth. Blushing, she quickly looked away.

He turned to them, raking a hand through his short, curling blond hair. “Ma’am, what I know is that both of you are in the will. What I know is that I was supposed to fly you down here to officially read you the will. What I know is that I’m supposed to hand over the keys to you, and to let you know that your expenses are covered for the next twenty-four months. I did not know Ms. Bellinger, as one of the

retired partners wrote up the will. I do not know who she was or in what way she was connected to you. I assumed she was a distant relative of yours.”

Sophie took her sister’s hand as she thought about his last comment. She wasn’t aware of any distant relatives. Dead or alive. Her mother would have at least mentioned her once. Letting out a soft sigh, she made a mental note to table the question for a later moment with the resolve to find out the answers. And soon.

“Okay, let’s go then.”

He pinched his nose with his thumb and index finger and took a deep breath. “Look, Miss Lever—”

“Levesque,” Sophie helped him again, this time somewhat more firmly.

Running his thumb over his eyebrow, he stepped closer, but not so close as to be intimidating. “I’m sorry. It’s been one extraordinary week,” he said with his voice just above a whisper. “Once I get back I’ll check with the partners here to see whether anybody knows more about it.”

Did he say he’d had one extraordinary week? Annoyance crept in. His remark irked her to the very core. Holding Mia even closer to her side, she lifted her finger and pointed at him. “No offence, Mr. O’Connor, but it has been quite a week for us as well, and I was prepared to answer all *your* questions. I have one simple question, and you don’t know the answer. Wouldn’t there be *something* in the file?”

Sophie considered herself a kind person. Kindness could’ve been her middle name, but she met his surprised frown dead-on.

He seemed taken aback by her words. “No offence taken.” And then he let out a deep breath. “You’re right. I apologise. As I said, I’ll find out details and let you know.”

“Thank you, Mr. O’Connor,” she replied and then blew out a breath.

Tugging on Sophie’s shirt, Mia asked, “What about our stuff?”

Sophie shifted and looked down at her sister, but before she had a chance to say anything, Mr. O’Connor beat her to it.

“What stuff?” he asked as he opened the door.

“Considering what we inherited here, we brought all our things,” Sophie explained without looking at him.

Mr. O’Connor stopped in his tracks. “All, as in all your clothes?”

The underlying opinion in his words didn’t go past her. They were actually hurtful. Yet, it’d been like it most of her life. People judged her on what they saw. In Sophie’s case, it was a little girl about fifteen years her junior by her side. They were dressed well, but nearly everything was second hand. Sometimes people’s preconception hurt, but often she was able to take it in her stride.

Today, she wasn’t sure. There was something about Mr. O’Connor that she was drawn to.

Sophie’s eyes met his, and she squared her jaw as she tried to keep her composure and stood straight as she corrected him. “All, as in all our belongings.”

He simply nodded. They made their way to the front door and stepped outside the building, following Mr. O’Connor with their suitcases. Two teenage boys walked past them, eager to capture the interest of some girls across the road. Aware of the attention, the girls covered their mouths with their hands and broke into giggles.

Sophie’s stomach churned. So many things she had missed out on in life. The little things most took for granted. But it was going to be better from now on, she reminded herself. Better for both of them. She didn’t want Mia to miss out on so many things like she had, and the thought gave her some joy.

The drive through Hobart was mostly quiet as Sophie and Mia took in the scenery. It was certainly a hilly place, and Mt. Wellington with its 1270 meters in height, seemed to overlook every little part of this waterfront capital. It was definitely a different atmosphere from Sydney. They drove along the busy streets and, considering how small the town was, the car ride seemed to last forever.

Mr. O’Connor cleared his throat. “So what are the suitcases all about?”

Taken by surprise by the sudden start of a conversation, Sophie looked up and gazed back at him through the mirror. She wondered how old he might be. Even though Mr. O'Connor was dressed up neatly in a grey suit with a matching tie, his tousled blond hair gave him a casual look. But then her gaze drifted down to Mia's hand clasping hers and resting in the younger girl's lap.

"Just making conversation," he clarified with a shrug of his right shoulder as if he knew what she was thinking.

He checked the traffic as he moved into another lane, but their gaze met again in the mirror. His expression told her that he was still waiting for an answer.

"I've already told you. Considering what we've inherited, we brought along everything."

There was this churning in her stomach, and she wasn't sure what it was all about. It was hard to pinpoint. Anxiousness probably. At least a little. It was a strange city to her, and here she was in a stranger's car, being driven to an unknown location.

And nervousness.

Yes, he most certainly made her nervous. At least a bit, because Sophie found him very attractive and his sudden need to talk surprised her.

"Parents?"

She shook her head without looking at him. It was increasingly apparent to her that either there had been no details on them in the file, or he had been too busy to read it as well.

"You're Mia's guardian?"

"Yes," she replied and gently placed a kiss on her sister's forehead.

He nodded, and by the way he stared ahead, Sophie knew he was pondering her answers.

"I'm Mark."

"Pardon me?"

Through the mirror, she saw his eyes focussed on them. "My name is Mark. Nobody actually calls me Mr. O'Connor. It feels like my dad is around when I hear that term."

A smile twitched at the corner of Sophie's mouth, but she remained silent.

"Ever been to Hobart before?"

She shook her head.

Mark concentrated on the traffic again. He did a couple of turns, and Sophie's excitement grew stronger. Deep inside she hoped for the house to be close by. It was a beautiful area. So much green around. So many beautiful and colourful gardens.

With a pounding heart, she was glued to the window, her palms moist with sweat.

And then he stopped in front of number sixty-four.

CHAPTER TWO



SOPHIE stared at the house. With tears stinging behind her eyelids, she slowly turned around and helped Mia out of the car. The little girl looked delicate and breakable in the unfamiliar environment, even though she wasn't anywhere near fragile.

Very clever for her age, Mia had seen and gone through a lot, but handled most situations with trust and belief. Sophie wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or not. Her younger sister undoubtedly had their mother's looks, with the long, straight blond hair, her bright grey-green eyes, and pale skin. But deep inside, there was a survivor instinct as well. Something she sometimes thought their mother might have lacked.

"Is this our new home, Sophie?" her sister asked quietly.

Hesitantly, she nodded. "Yes, sweetie, I hope so."

Mark took the suitcase from the boot of his car and walked towards the house, opened the gate, and placed the girls' belongings next to the fence. He turned, and Sophie made no effort at hiding the struggle with emotions.

"That's it. This is Forty-Six Chestnut Avenue," he told them.

It was all too much for her. She sat down onto her suitcase and took everything in. In front of her stood an old-fashioned English cottage. A narrow path ahead of her led to two worn out steps and up to the arched entrance. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, she shifted her gaze over the little house. Multi-pane windows with shutters and flower boxes in front. Beautiful. Though the flowers seemed long dead, Sophie recognised a lot of potential. The garden was true to the cottage in style but looked wild and unattended. It was in need of a lot of work. She looked up and saw a

chimney and instantly thought about cold winter evenings in front of the open fire. She'd heard that Hobart was very cold during winter.

And then she noticed the first tears on her cheeks. Emotions that had bottled up over the years surfaced, and she wasn't able to hold back any longer. The cautious thought that life could improve from now on was too overwhelming. Tears fell down her cheeks, but she wasn't embarrassed.

"Don't cry, Sophie," Mia said tenderly to her. "It'll be all okay."

Mark came closer and kneeled in front of her. Carefully he wiped away a tear from her cheek. "How about we go inside?" he asked quietly with a gentle smile that made her yearn for a man's touch. That special touch which had been missing from her life for so long. She gazed at him and wondered how it would be to have someone else in her life. A man who shared a gentle touch or a kiss, a kind word or a well needed hug. Sophie had dated less than a handful of young men, because looking after her eight-year-old sister on her own made it difficult to have a social life. But she'd never even consider complaining. She and Mia loved each other as much as they needed each other. Even more so since their mother had passed away. Sophie hoped this would be their chance, a chance of a better life. And glancing at Mia, staring wide-eyed at the cottage, Sophie knew she felt the same way.

The quiet mention of her name brought her back from her thoughts. She nodded, but hesitated when he reached for her hand. "Are you really sure this belongs to us now?"

"Yes, I am."

"It's just... it's..." She shrugged and gazed at the house again. "But I honestly don't know anybody who would leave us a house."

As he scooped Mia into his arms, he replied, "I'm pretty sure."

She frowned, and her heart contracted unbearably for a moment to weigh up the words he had just spoken. *Pretty sure?*

Mark took her hand. His was warm and soft. It gave her a sense of security, though she knew that after today she probably wouldn't see him again. As she

followed him to the door, she imagined having a man at her side. A man watching out and caring for her. Someone to brighten her day. Someone to wake up to in the morning after having touched her all night.

Her gaze wandered over to little Mia. Even though her sister was mature past her eight years, she still needed her. Not only in regard to the simple things in life like cooking, washing, or helping her with school work, but the love a little child needed to feel secure, and someone she could trust. As the only person in the girl's life, Sophie had become a kind of security blanket for her sister, and Mia needed her more than Sophie needed a man. That meant there was no place for a man right now or in the near future. And she knew all too well that men didn't stay around to help. They came to have fun and then left. Her own father had. Mia's father had. And Tyler had done so as well.

Still in thought, she nearly bumped into Mark as he suddenly stopped and let go of her hand. Watching him with curious eyes, she realised he was searching for the keys. Once he had found them, he handed them over to her.

One corner of his mouth was pulled into a slight smile. "Go ahead. It's yours now."

Taking a deep breath, she took the keys and opened the front door. Feeling like Alice in Wonderland, she took a small step over the threshold. The smell of a closed-up building engulfed her straight away, but there was no disgust, only pride and joy welling up in her. The jaded odour of mothballs still lingered in the air, mixed with a mouldy smell, as well as a slight scent of plants. Sophie turned to Mia, who was still holding on to Mark.

"Come on, sweetie. Let's go exploring and open these windows," she said as she held her arms open for her sister to reach out.

They both moved from room to room, opening curtains and windows, taking in each room and its interior. The lounge room was to the right of the entrance with the kitchen opposite. They went past them and further back into the house. First room, then another room, a bathroom, and finally what seemed to be the master bedroom

with an ensuite. Two showers! Sophie's tight expression relaxed into a smile. All rooms sparsely yet fully furnished. Beautiful, old-fashioned furniture.

Sophie turned in a full circle to take a second look at everything again. The temptation to let out a scream of delight was almost overwhelming. It was like being in a dream. She swallowed the big lump in her throat, choked back a sob as she touched a lovely mahogany cabinet. The polished wood was cool and smooth beneath her fingertips. Solid. No, it wasn't a dream. They found a single bed in the back room and a double bed in the master. The third room had a roller desk in it.

That was going to be her study room!

"Thank you, Clara Bellinger. Thank you, whoever you are," Sophie said aloud.

All such a far cry from what they were used to in Sydney. All they'd been able to afford had been a single room with the bathroom across the hall — which they'd had to share with other tenants. Another thought popped into her mind, and it was like she suddenly comprehended what she was seeing.

"Mr. O'Connor. There's still some furniture."

Silence.

Sophie looked around the doorframe and down the hall. "Mr. O'Connor?"

"I'm in the kitchen."

Mia appeared from one of the rooms. Sophie took her hand and walked towards the front of the house and into the kitchen. It was equally as beautiful as the rest of the house. It had the same *old* feeling to it. The cupboards had a pine timber look. The table and chairs near the bay window seemed to be made of the same material. There was a dishwasher and a washing machine. The cooking area had a very old-fashioned stove with pots and pans hanging on hooks from the ceiling. She looked over to the window, which had a wonderful view outside to the front yard. After a long moment of taking in every little bit of the kitchen, she turned and spotted Mark.

There he was standing in the middle of *her* kitchen, talking on his mobile. He held his finger up and mouthed something along the lines of "Sorry, just one moment."

When he hung up, their gazes met.

Sophie stood still for a moment. A moment that could have been five seconds or even five minutes. She wasn't sure. With a little mental headshake, she forced herself to focus. "There's still furniture in the house." Her voice almost broke. "And you're still here."

He cocked a brow. "Is that your way of asking me to leave? Furniture and I are here until not needed anymore. And by the way, honestly, I prefer Mark."

A small smile came to his lips and made her blush. She just couldn't figure him out. Good grief, she couldn't figure herself out. He'd annoyed her for not having been prepared earlier that morning. Yet, at the same time, he was so furiously attractive that her mind went all mushy in his presence.

"Mark. Sorry. It's just... I mean... the rooms are... I mean, the beds and the sofa. There's still the telly. Are you *sure*?" Letting out a big sigh, her shoulders sagged. "This fabulous woman wouldn't have left us some teabags as well, by any chance? I think I could do with one right now."

His laughter echoed in the spacious kitchen. "I think there's a little coffee shop down the street. I still have half an hour before my next meeting."

Sophie sat down and gently tugged Mia onto her lap. She kissed her sister's forehead, took a deep breath, and met Mark's eyes. "There's no spare cash in the budget for little luxuries like that," she replied with as much confidence as her voice let her. There was no need to go into details that she'd had to spend most of the money for the rent she'd owed. Mrs. Karovic, her landlady in Sydney, had made sure to squeeze every last little penny out of her, and the next payment from Social Services wasn't due until the end of the week.

"This one is on me," he said. "The will's only covering the bills. Will you be eligible for social assistance?"

She gave a slow nod, remembering the day she'd rung Social Service to inform them of their possible move. It had taken a whole hour to get through to someone. Thankfully, the person had been more than helpful and told her that all she had to do

was to visit the office in Hobart, and her benefits would continue as always. In a naïve way, she hadn't worried so much about receiving the money. For her, the most important aspect was for Mia to have her own bed tonight. A bed and not just a mattress on the floor. And so would she. As well as their own kitchen and their own bathroom, which they didn't have to share.

"Sophie?"

She hauled herself back from her thoughts. "I'm sorry. I was daydreaming."

Choking back a chuckle, he nodded. "Would you be offended if I gave you some money?"

"Why?"

A look of confusion spread over his face. "Why what?"

"Why are you offering me money?"

As he rubbed his fingers over his forehead, he stepped closer. "Okay. Something's just gone wrong here in this conversation." He cleared his throat. "I was merely offering you a bit of cash, as you just said you were short on money."

An awful guilt rushed over her. Even though she considered herself a kind person, it seemed she'd forgotten how it felt to be the recipient of kindness. When had that happened?

It was only a hesitant shake of her head, but it said more than words. "I know you mean well, but I can't accept. Thanks for the offer, though."

Leaning against the bench, he crossed one foot over the other, and his face showed a questioning frown. Sophie took in every little bit of him as he appeared tall and big in the kitchen. He was deliciously sexy and had an inherent captivating presence. The tousled blond hair seemed in need of a haircut, curling up around his ear. She stared at him, taking in his icy-blue eyes.

He broke the silence. "It wouldn't make you a less strong person."

Considering his words, she let her gaze move out the window, watching the gentle breeze through the trees. It'd been something she knew many people had difficulty to understand, but she tried anyway. "I know. But it makes me feel better. We've owed

too many people too much of everything. This is a new start. No more relying on others.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed he lowered his head in agreement. “I think I understand.” As he walked past them, he touched Mia’s nose with his finger and winked at her. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

A few seconds later, the sound of the front door told them that he’d left. Relieved and disappointed, Sophie pulled her sister even closer to herself, trying hard not to burst into tears. Over the last few days she’d imagined their new place in all variations, from small to run down. From a dump to all being a bad mistake. But this wasn’t at all what she’d expected. Not even close. This was like a dream come true, and she’d do everything in her power to take advantage of this new opportunity to give her sister the best life she could possibly offer.

“I love it, Mia.”

Her sister turned to look at her. “Is it really ours?”

Sophie nodded. “That’s what Mark says.”

“Our own little castle,” Mia whispered.

CHAPTER THREE



LATER that afternoon Mark returned to his office after a meeting with clients. Exhausted, he threw his jacket onto the single seater by the window and sat down on the seater next to it. Leaning his head back, he closed his eyes for a moment and listened to the outside noises. It was only early afternoon, but he was worn out. After the coffee with the two Sydney girls, he'd quickly rushed off to another appointment. Big bucks. And he'd almost screwed it up because he hadn't been able to stop thinking about Sophie. He rubbed his face, noticing the stubbles of a beard grinding against his hand.

"Kristen? Would you organise coffee for us and join me? Bring your little writing pad as well. I have a few questions regarding the Levers case."

Kristen, his assistant, stepped into his office. "Who?"

Exhaling, he raked his hand through his hair before he replied, "The two girls who were here this morning. The ones who inherited the house in Battery Point."

"Sophie and Mia Levesque."

Pointing his thumb up, he replied. "That's the one."

He heard her pouring the coffee into cups in her office as he watched the world go by outside the window. Levesk. Lefesk.

Sophie.

"What kind of name is that?" he asked when she entered his office again.

Kristen came in with two cups and placed them on the little table before she sat as well. She'd worked for Mark for a few years now. Hobart was a small place though, and being around the same age, they had met through friends in town.

Kristen was in her early thirties, married with two little boys. She had a tall and slender body, with small, auburn curls twisted and crinkled around her forehead. And whenever Mark looked into her jade-green eyes, he thought that her husband was one lucky man.

"It's a beautiful name for two beautiful girls." She took a sip of her coffee and smiled as she watched him pinching the bridge of his nose. He could literally feel her stare. Remembering names wasn't his best trademark. Pronouncing difficult names was beyond him. In his line of business, clearly a disadvantage, but he worked on it.

"I know. I'm sorry. Leveks."

She chuckled. And he knew that chuckle. It was her way of being patient with him. Kristen had figured it out a long time ago that, in life, he liked it simple. With contracts, he liked it complicated, and that was why he was one of the best in town.

"Levesque. It's probably French. And I somehow have a feeling there's a lot of French elegance under that rough surface."

He raised his left eyebrow. "And you got that from them waiting ten minutes in your office?"

Her lips curved into a little smile. "Yes. It's called female intuition," she retorted as she tapped her finger on her nose.

Mark shook his head. What a lot of crap. "Okay. How about you gather all your intuition and tell me more about these two? How are they related to Ms. Clara Bellinger?"

She shrugged. "Don't know. She was Mr. Wheeler's client. Apparently, a charming lady as well."

"French?"

Laughing, she tugged a strand of hair behind her ear. "Don't know. Don't think so." She placed her notepad on her lap and reached for her pen. "What do you need to know?"

"Probably who Ms. Bellinger was, and why she left the house to the girls."

Kristen raised her eyebrows. "And why would you like to know that?"

“Because I told them I would find out,” he replied, scratching the back of his head.

“She’s plain, but pretty.”

“Who?”

“The older Levesque girl.”

Mark avoided her green eyes. Yes, Sophie was attractive indeed. In her own kind of way. Briefly closing his eyes, he tried to picture her again. And pictured touching her delicate face that radiated such strength. It seemed life hadn’t been easy on her. He’d read her date of birth somewhere in the file, but wasn’t able to remember. Early twenties, if he had to guess.

“Didn’t notice,” he finally said nonchalantly. But, oh yes, he had. As soon as she’d stepped into the kitchen that morning, he’d soaked in every detail of her body like he’d rarely had the urge to do. He’d wanted to make sure she was okay, but more so, he didn’t want to leave. The whole time he’d been around her, he couldn’t think of anything else, but sliding his hand through her ash-blond hair and gaze into her liquid brown eyes, which were ringed with long lashes.

Kristen’s gentle laugh rippled through the air. “I will get the details Monday, hopefully. Now I have to go, though, and pick up my two boys. I don’t want to be late for assembly today. I’ve told you I need to take the rest of the day off. And by the way, I don’t live far from those girls, so please let them know if they need help with the school to contact me.”

His head shot up. “Excuse me? What makes you think I will talk to them again?”

“Who else is going to tell them the result of my research?” she replied with some cheekiness in her voice. She tapped her nose with her finger. “Call it female intuition.”

Without giving him a chance to reply, she stood and left.

He stared after her, yet his thoughts were with Sophie, trying to figure out what it was that attracted him so much to her. He couldn’t even remember her last name, not to mention how to pronounce it.

French. French fries, okay. French cuisine, okay as well. But a French name like... what was it again?

With a shake of his head, he slapped his knees and stood.

The clouds outside had turned dark. The weather in Hobart was unpredictable, and it could mean a good thunderstorm was approaching or a cold front. With a look over his desk, he took a deep breath and decided to call it a day as well.

Should he make another house call?

Or even go and see Linda? He hadn't heard from her all week, which was unusual for her.

He shoved his hand through his hair and decided it was something completely different that he needed.

Two hours later, Mark tossed a bottle of water to Jared. They were both exhausted and sweaty, having just finished a game of squash. Mark's old school buddy had won easily, with his thin and athletic body and his long legs effortlessly covering the court. They sat down at a table in the centre's café. Mark's hair was damp, and he rubbed a towel over his head, breathing hard. He'd known Jared since they were kids, and they'd kept in contact throughout the years, mainly playing squash or having the occasional beer together. Nonetheless, Jared was the brother Mark had never had.

Nowadays a gardener, Jared owned his own small landscaping business. Big bucks, but hard work. Jared was his usual joyful self, and Mark was irritated, realising his friend had recovered from their workout much quicker.

"What's up, OC? You seem tense."

Since Mark could remember, Jared had called him OC. Nobody really remembered why, but somehow it had stuck.

"Work. The usual."

Jared leaned back and smiled. "Told ya, office work kills."

Mark chuckled before he gulped down some more water. "Took over a case. Thought it was straight forward, but this client just kept asking questions. I felt like a complete idiot."

Jared let out a hearty laugh. "Good looking?"

"What?"

"I take that as a yes? 'Bout time you met someone. That Linda of yours is like poison."

Mark laughed to cover his annoyance. Not many of friends knew about Linda. Their relationship wasn't a relationship, more friends with benefits. Sometimes he even wondered about the friends part.

"I didn't say it was a woman," he finally replied tersely, but his friend knew him too well. When he saw Jared's grin plastered all over his face, he stood.

"Bugger off."

He walked to the changing room, Jared right on his heels.

"Will ya see her again?"

"I can't clock anybody for the hours, so Kristen has taken over the task of staying in contact regarding a few issues."

"Oh, c'mon, OC. Good old-fashioned, free follow-up client service, righteo?"

Mark grabbed his towel from the locker and headed for the shower. All the while, the follow-up idea grew on him.

As the water poured over him, he called out over the noise of the water, "Jay, you're one clever gardener."

OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

[MORE BEGINNINGS](#)

Zach Taylor, an escort in Sydney, living in Hobart, enlists the help of Natasha Peterson when his teenage friend, Mia, runs away and finds out that the 'dragon' is really more of a kitten. And although Natasha, Mia's teacher, is attracted to him as well, she has her own problems to deal with, not to mention her initial reaction to Zach's occupation.

Will Zach's job keep him from a chance to be with Natasha?

Life is good for the new teenaged Mia Levesque. But when Darren Schuster shows up in Hobart, she knows something is up once Sophie and Mark cut their weekend away short and rush home in the middle of the night. When Sophie won't answer Mia's questions, emotions run high, and Zach confirms Darren's identity to Mia. Disappointed, angry, and feeling alone, Mia runs away.

Will life settle back into a routine for Mia once she finds out about the stranger in her life?

Chapter One

Zach Taylor's young neighbour, Mia, let out a long sigh as she joined him on his front porch and sat next to him on the swing. Enjoying a cool lemonade, he invited her to grab a soft drink from the fridge as well. It was a warm summer day, and the air showed no sign of cooling down. A lot of people in Hobart were weary of the unusual hot spell for the very southern Australian city.

With another hefty sigh, Mia raked through her long, blond hair and stared into the distance. "Honestly, Zach, she's a dragon. I'm sure she does it on purpose. She doesn't like me. She thinks I'm spoiled."

The dragon in question was Miss Peterson, Mia's high school English teacher. There was no doubt that Mia liked school, and she enjoyed her classes. And even though English wasn't her worst subject, it certainly was the toughest one, with Miss Peterson piling on homework one after the other.

Zach took a sip of his drink before he replied, "Hey, pumpkin, settle down. What's that supposed to mean you're 'spoiled'?"

She lifted her shoulder in a slight shrug. "You know!"

Raising his brows, he replied, "Actually I don't know! Isn't she Sophie's good friend?"

Another shrug. "Kind of, I suppose. They used to do the boxing stuff together, and since Soph's carrying a baby, they go and enjoy coffee and cake instead every once in a while."

Ignoring his chuckle, she went inside and helped herself to cold lemonade. She opened the can with a simple click as she returned outside and took a long sip. "Man, it's hot."

Zach pondered on that thought just like Mia, when she suddenly said, "You need to cut the grass, Zach."

He almost spilled the drink. "Good grief, thanks, honey."

There wasn't much yard in front of Zach's house. A flagstone path crossed the patch of lawn, and he'd kept the rest of the garden as low maintenance as possible. But he loved sitting on the front porch, watching the world go by.

He placed his arm around her and drew her in a bit closer. "Have you talked to Soph about your teacher?"

She nodded. "Yes. Her reply was that for most fourteen-year-old girls teachers seem like dragons. She still remembers her science teacher who gave her a hard time." She paused for a moment. "She blames it on my hormones because she

thinks," Mia snorted and then continued with an exaggerated voice, "Miss Peterson is a really nice person."

He chuckled, which earned him a momentary glare from Mia.

With a shrug of his left shoulder, he commented, "I s'pose she has a point."

Rolling her eyes, she moved away from him again. "Too hot for sentiments like that."

A smile tugged at his lips. She had come a long way from when he had first met her. That'd been six years earlier, and she'd been only eight. Eight years old with already enough character for three teenagers combined. But he'd liked her from the moment he'd met her. He had been helping the girls find some stuff in their attic when he had mistaken her for Sophie's daughter. With hands on hips, she'd said to him, "Do I look like her daughter? I mean, seriously."

She had the genes to become a pretty girl and she was heading that way with big steps. The stylish haircut, a slight touch of make-up to emphasise her grey-green eyes, and always dressed in the latest fashion to compliment her slim figure. And she did have her heart in the right place.

"You'll meet her tomorrow when you drop me off at the school sports."

Eyes wide, he turned to look at her. "I will?"

"Oh man, didn't Sophie tell you?"

"Apparently not. Or she might have." He scratched the back of his head. "I guess she probably left a note on my calendar."

"You'll take me, won't you?"

He gave a small nod. "Yup."

Zach lived across the road from Sophie and Mia Levesque. The sisters had moved into Sixty-Four Chestnut Avenue six years earlier. He'd shared a hot kiss with Sophie in the early days, but in the end, it was Mark she'd fallen in love with.

"Will what's-his-name be there?"

Mia did the eye-rolling thing again. "Josh. Yes he will. Remember, he's in my class."

Shaking his head with amusement, Zach replied, "Pumpkin, just because what's-his-name is in your class ain't meanin' he's participating in a sports day."

"Doesn't mean."

"Beg yours?"

She took a deep breath. "It's *doesn't mean* and not *ain't meaning*. You know it drives Soph mad when you use the American lingo."

He turned to look at her. "I honestly have no idea how I've survived the last few years with you girls across the road."

Checking the time, she stood. "Thanks for the drink." She leaned forward to place a kiss on his cheek. "Eight o'clock tomorrow morning?"

Zach nodded. "Does your dragon spit fire?"

With hands on hips, she retorted, "You're not taking me seriously, are you?"

"I am!"

She tilted her head slightly. "Let me see," she paused for effect. "With your green eyes, athletic body, husky voice, blond hair, which, by the way, is in serious need of a trim... hmm... she might like you. But then again, your job as an escort might disturb her."

Shaking his head again, he stood and took her empty can of lemonade. "Instead of giving me a hard time with my lingo, Sophie should keep an eye on the books you read. All that romance stuff is making you silly in the head. *Husky voice.*"

He laughed and went into the house.

"At eight?" she screamed after him.

"Yeah, I'll be there."

FRESH BEGINNINGS

(coming soon)

Jared Fraser, a landscape business owner in Hobart, Australia, sets out for a holiday to the USA to travel along the Route 66 in a motorhome. Looking forward to his first holiday overseas, he's excited as he prepares himself for the journey. But little could've prepared him when he crosses paths with a beautiful hitchhiker. Furthermore, the arrival of family friend Mia Levesque and her boyfriend, Josh, turns Jared's holidays upside-down when he's forced to play arbitrator between the two teenagers.

Will he be able to put his past aside and grab onto happiness?

Ivy Bennett thought leaving her boyfriend would be the hard part. It doesn't take long to figure out how wrong she was. As she struggles with making a new start in her life, the last person she expects to lead her to happiness is a laid-back Australian on holiday.

But she will have to say goodbye again. And not only to Jared.

LITTLE BEGINNINGS

A blind date that doesn't happen might lead to love.

After her divorce, Jeri Belmont moved to Hobart and now runs a successful art gallery. When her niece sets her up with a neighbour, Jeri expects a blind date like all the others. But she never expected her date wouldn't even show up because of her age. Despite feeling unjustly judged, when she unexpectedly runs into him again, she finds it hard to ignore Ely's charm.

Ely Lennox knows he shouldn't have skipped the blind date because of the lady's age. After all, it had only been a date, not a lifetime commitment. When his carpentry business takes him right to the woman he bailed out on, his guilt turns into regret when he finds out she's everything a man could hope for. How can he convince Jeri he made a big mistake?

Will she forgive him? Or is she hiding behind something else?

JOURNEY TO HER DREAMS

Would you travel around the world to uncover the reason for your dreams?

Hollie Anderson, a young woman from Tasmania, lives on a farm outside Launceston, Australia. She has good looks, likes her job, and loves to hang out with her friends. But it's a recurrent dream that throws her daily life into chaos and takes her on a journey to Ireland.

Sam Shaughnessy enjoys the success as Head of Advertising for a popular magazine in the Irish capital Dublin. Married to Padraic, she thinks she loves her husband, but when she meets Hollie under unusual circumstances, she needs to face the truth, and not just about her marriage.

When both women, so different in many ways, find out they have one thing in common, it changes their lives forever.

INNOCENT TEARS

Becoming a parent can be daunting at the best of times, but for Flynn, a business lawyer in Melbourne, it almost pulls the feet from right underneath him. He's become a father to six-year-old Nadine literally overnight! He had no idea about her existence, and the news throws him into chaos, even more so when he is asked to take over custody.

With the help of Emma, an employee at the hotel where Nadine and her grandparents are staying, and his parents, Flynn tries to do the right thing. Yet, the right thing in his eyes differs from his parents', and Emma is voicing her opinion as well. And right in the middle is little Nadine, still grieving the loss of her mother and finding a wonderful friend in Emma. There's no doubt she's afraid where and with whom she will settle.

But in the end, it's a letter Flynn receives that helps him figuring out what to do.

LOVE WILL FIND YOU

Can their new love survive the scrutiny of the public eye?

After his father's heart attack, Australian Football League player Tyson Gaspaldi takes his parents on holiday to a small place at the New South Wales coast.

One morning, following a surfing session, he comes across a crying woman on the beach. Everything about her intrigues him, and he can't walk away. She's not only sexy and humble, but, as he soon finds out, vulnerable as well.

It's only been a few months since Katie Cassidy lost her sister in a car accident.

Still overwhelmed by the loss, a chance encounter on the beach with an attractive stranger awakens unexpected emotions inside her. She's instantly drawn to his caring nature, but also his looks.

However, Tyson's past quickly catches up with them, causing Katie's childhood demons to return, and the road to romance becomes anything but smooth

LET ME LOVE YOU

Oliver Dempsey, pitcher for a Melbourne baseball club, loves the women, and they love him...

But he keeps them at an arm's length, and when he meets Tamara, he's unprepared for the attraction he feels for her. Told by his coach that she's off limits, only draws him in more.

Tamara Amis moved to Melbourne to find some distance between her past and herself...

With the help of her uncle, the coach of a Melbourne baseball club, she quickly finds a job, and a place to live. Yet, one meeting with the handsome pitcher stirs unexpected emotions that threaten to overwhelm her.

It's Oliver's injury that brings them together, but as they find out about each other's pasts, how can they be ready to share a future?

I THINK I LOVE YOU

Markus DeLeon and Sarah Winter's lives couldn't be more different...

After three years away as the goalkeeper for an English soccer club, Markus has been happy to be back in Australia. He'd missed his family and friends, including Sarah. He's known her since childhood, and often protected her from the teasing of other children and the troubling consequences of a broken home.

When they attend their friends' wedding, a new light is cast on their friendship...

Sarah is fresh out of a bad relationship, and Markus has always been the one she can confide in. Maybe it's the magic of the wedding—or how stunning he looks in a tux—but the attraction between them intensifies in ways they'd never imagined.

But sometimes when risking what you have, you might lose everything...

Following a passionate encounter, Markus isn't sure how to handle this new aspect of his relationship with Sarah, and literally flees the scene for the coast. Sarah is unsure how to react to his sudden departure, but is soon knocked off course by misunderstandings and a frightening family emergency.

Markus realises his mistake and wants to make things right, but he also faces obstacles. He's been offered an exciting new job, and an attractive newcomer to the neighbourhood is eager to claim his attention, though the last thing Markus needs is another confusing relationship.

Can Sarah and Markus face the fear and doubt—and the potential loss of their lifelong friendship—to give their love a chance?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Iris Blobel was born and raised in Germany and immigrated to Australia in the late 1990s. Having had the travel bug most of her life, Iris spent quite some time living in Scotland and London, as well as Canada, where she met her husband.

Her love for putting her stories onto paper emerged only recently, but now her laptop is a constant companion.

Iris resides west of Melbourne with her husband and her beautiful two daughters as well as her dog. Next to her job at a private school, she also presents a German Program at the local Community Radio.

Questions or comments? Find Iris on the following social networks:

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