

## Chapter Nineteen

“Sam? How much trouble are you in because of me?”

Sam turned his head and opened one eye to look at me, then opened the other, when he saw the worry on my face. We were sitting on the loungers on the deck, in the fading light.

We’d walked home, wet through. Neither of us cared. We were together, that’s all that mattered. Sam had waited while I quickly showered and changed into dry clothes, then together, we drove to his place so he could do the same.

Leiana was home when we got there and she’d looked between us, a satisfied smile on her face. “Brother,” she’d said and embraced him, uncaring he made her clothes damp. She turned to me and embraced me, too, kissing me on the forehead, as she had done to Sam. “Sister,” she’d said and goose bumps ran down my arms at her formality.

“I’ll hurry,” Sam had murmured against my hair and walked down the hall, stripping off his wet shirt. Natalie had been at work and would be until late. I’d suggested going back to my place when Sam returned

in jeans and a white cotton pullover. He'd agreed. We weren't ready to share our happiness yet.

"My uncle was summonsed to Council. Davan will warn me in advance of their thinking," Sam answered my question.

I swung my legs over the side of the lounge.

"Summonsed? Where?"

"To my ancestral home," he said. "In the mountains, above the Valley of Flowers."

"It looked like he was swept off the rocks!"

Sam reached across the gap between us, taking my hand as if to kiss it but with a grin pulled me towards him, catching me as I sprawled on top of him. I didn't complain as I settled myself full length against his body. We fit together very nicely.

"I doubt very much he was swept off the rocks, Tessa. And, if he was, the sea is Davan's domain," he explained. "He just doesn't like arguing in public."

I looked questioningly up at him and he moved so he could see my face.

"Sometimes the elders of my family don't control their tempers very well. The storm covered the shouting."

I laughed a little shakily. "Silly me! There I was thinking Thor was pure mythology."

“Definitely *not* pure,” Sam chuckled.

“What was the argument about?” I asked nestling a little closer, my head fitted perfectly into his shoulder.

“Sam?” I said when he didn’t answer.

“Me,” he sighed.

I stiffened against him, suddenly worried. “So you’re in big trouble?”

“I bent a few rules, Tessa,” he said lightly, as if it was no big deal.

“You broke *sacred laws*. Leiana told me, Sam!”

“Leiana shouldn’t have filled your head with that,” he muttered. “Everything will be okay, Tessa.”

“Can you promise me that?”

Instead of answering, he pulled me back on top of him. “Three hundred and fifty-one,” he murmured against my lips before kissing me.

We walked down to the beach to watch the full moon rise on the horizon. It was spectacular, glowing orange, and then bright white as it quickly climbed into the sky.

“What made you realise you could love me?” Sam asked. I was sitting between his legs, leaning back against his chest, his arms around me.

“A fish.”

He became very still and then burst out laughing. I twisted around to look at him. “A fish?” he repeated.

“It was a very nice fish,” I told him. “You’ll have to ask Davan what type it was. He caught it. “It was struggling, fighting against being pulled from the sea, when he pulled it in. When Davan threw it back, at first it looked like it was lost, just tumbling, out of control. Then, it was as if it suddenly knew it was free, it didn’t waste a moment to dive into the water.

“It made me realise that all I had to do was choose to be happy, choose to leave behind all the fear and uncertainty of what might, or might not, be. I’ve always loved you, Sam. I was just too afraid to believe you could be my sea, where I belong,” I told him.

“And being afraid, struggling with my doubts, has taken away precious time. I’m sorry for that, Sam,” I added.

Sam shifted, lifting me until I lay in his arms. I was captured in his deep blue gaze. He was about to tell me something but I pulled his head down to mine, instead. I’d already wasted enough time. Besides, I had my own kiss-tally to work on, so far it was much lower than his three hundred and sixty-five. I had some catching up to do!

Back at the house we realised we were starving and we cooked up a feast, working in the kitchen together. We laughed a lot. We kissed more. The chicken burnt in the pan. We didn't really care. The moment reminded me of the love my parents shared. Sam noticed my sudden sadness.

"I still miss them," I told him and he pulled me into his arms.

"Of course," he said. "You were brought up in a home full of love, Tessa. I am grateful to your parents. Your wonderful ability to love comes from their love for you, and each other." He was right.

"And your family? Was it the same?"

Sam shrugged. "My family is complicated and not just because of the obvious!"

"Tell me about them," I invited.

Sam was thoughtful for a moment. "My mother died when Leiana and I were seven. My father remarried shortly after but my stepmother was ever jealous of my father's attentions. Leiana and I learnt at an early age to look out for each other. Davan looked after us mostly, when he wasn't indulging his lust for

life. Now, he just fishes a lot. He's mellowed with age," Sam told me.

"Oh Sam!" I hadn't missed the twist of pain on his face at the loss of his mother. "You still miss her?"

Sam shrugged. "I was young. I keep the memory of her close. She was a talented musician and very beautiful. She gave me my amulet." He pulled his medallion out from under his shirt and looked at it fondly for a moment.

"I also have an array of cousins, aunts and uncles," he said, as I served the food. We carried the laden plates through to the dining table.

"Do they all live... like you and Leiana? I mean have jobs and just ... live somewhere?" I asked, unsure how to ask the question.

Sam pulled out a chair for me, waiting until I sat down before taking his own. "Most of my cousins do. My Aunts and Uncles, the elders, stay close to our ancestral home. They lost interest in the affairs of the world a very long time ago. Except for Davan, he spends his time between both."

When Sam polished off a second plate, I couldn't help asking, "Being immortal means you have to eat? A lot?"

He smiled. “Well, I wouldn’t die but we need to eat to stay healthy. We have eternity to suffer the consequences otherwise!”

“Is it the same with sleeping?” I asked curiously.

Sam nodded. “Yes, we don’t need to sleep, but function much better with it.”

We cleared the table and Sam stacked the dishwasher with amazing skill. He fitted in every dish and cooking pot.

“You’ve done that before,” I said jokingly as he hit the start button.

“You don’t want to know how many times exactly!” he retorted.

“Sam, where did you go?”

We were sitting on the sofa in soft lamp light, just the rhythmic rush of the waves on the beach and the crickets in the pandanus palms for background noise.

“To the Valley of Flowers. It was the closest I could be to you, without being near you,” Sam said quietly.

I remembered how I couldn’t find the valley in my dreams. “I tried to find you there, but couldn’t. For the first time since the accident, I didn’t dream of the valley.”

“No. I closed my mind to you, Tessa, broke the connection. You had to want me in this world, not mine,” he told me.

“My greatest failing has always been my arrogance. I believed from the first moment I saw you that our destinies were tied together. I could not believe I was wrong. For all my conceit, I wouldn’t *make* you fall in love with me, just to prove my conviction. Your unconditional love, without influence, without persuasion, was the only way we could know our true destiny. When I went away, I thought perhaps after all, I was wrong. I was trying to be fair to you.”

“I love you, Sam,” and I kissed him.

Natalie found us tangled together on the sofa when she got in. “Sorry, guys!” she said, looking between Sam and me when we sat up.

“You know, Tessa, I never thought I would ever see the day where I would say ‘Get a room!’” I blushed bright red but Natalie didn’t bat an eyelid at my embarrassment.

She looked at Sam, holding his gaze. “Nice to see you again, Sam. Can I give you a heads up on something?” she asked.

He nodded. “Of course, Natalie.”

“You hurt her and you will have to answer to me!”



“Deal,” Sam said urbanely.

Natalie seemed satisfied she had him running scared. “Looks like we’re gonna need some new house rules, Tessa Howard,” she said amicably, walking back towards the kitchen. “No romance in communal areas!”

“Maybe I should go,” Sam murmured against my ear, his hand smoothing the hair from my face.

“No! Stay. Please?”

We retreated to my bedroom. I clicked on a bedside lamp. Sam kicked off his shoes and laid full stretch on the bed, arms behind his head, studying his photo.

“I remember taking that,” he said. He held out his arm for me to join him. “I watched that cloud bank build all morning, knowing the sun would make its appearance. I waited nearly three hours.”

I lay next to him, my head on his shoulder. “What made you take up photography?” I thought of the painting on his easel, the painting of our daughter. I was too shy to mention it just yet.

“I needed the distraction, the challenge. It takes a lot of time to find locations where scenes like that are born. Then being able to take the shot in the absolute second it exists, before it’s gone, is very satisfying.”

“What did you need distracting from?”

Sam turned on his side, his face very close to mine. “You.”

“Me?!”

“You have driven me to all kinds of crazy distractions for years, Tessa,” he said sternly. “Just as well I’m immortal!” he added, his mouth relaxing into a grin.

I laughed with the pure joy of his love.

“Oh, Tessa,” he breathed, pulling me closer into his arms, winding my hair into his hands as he kissed me. Desire coursed through me, my heart beating out of my chest. I pulled him closer still, feeling the hard muscles of his back beneath his shirt, the weight of his leg over mine. Then suddenly I was lying on my back. Sam had moved inches away. I lay there for a few minutes, not moving, wondering what I had done wrong.

“Let’s get some sleep,” he said and clicked off the lamp on the bedside table.

He rolled back towards me, settling me into his arms until my head found his shoulder. The room filled with the silver moonlight.

“I want you to love me, Sam!” I whispered.

“We have forever for that,” he murmured.

“No, we have a lifetime,” I corrected. “And, it will never be enough! I want to give you every moment I have, everything I am,” I told him and he smoothed the hair from my face, brushing his fingers along my cheek.

I watched his face grow very serious. Then, he relaxed as if changing his mind about what he’d been about to say. “Just to watch you sleep in my arms is a dream I have waited a very long time for, Tessa. Will you deny me that?”

No, I wasn’t going to deny him. I wouldn’t deny him anything. I relaxed against him, listening to his heartbeat as it slowly settled back to a steady rhythm.

His immortal heartbeat was in perfect rhythm with mine.

“Sam? Do you remember the day when I scattered my parents’ ashes? You were there, out on the sea. That wasn’t coincidence, was it?”

“No. I came to pay my respects.”

After a while, “Sam?” I murmured.

“Tessa.”

“Can we go to the Valley of Flowers?”

“Yes.”

“Soon?”

“Very soon,” he agreed.

## Chapter Twenty

Every shade of blue surrounded me. The sky above me, the water beneath me. How had I lived without knowing how amazing it was to float on the sea?

We had driven up to Cape Moore for a late breakfast and I discovered Sam had an ulterior motive for choosing the larger beach town. He'd wanted to buy me a surfboard.

I turned my head and looked at him. Like me, he was lying on his board, our hands entwined, rafting us together. He smiled slowly across at me and I fell in love with him again.

"Time for another lesson?" he asked.

"You thinking of entering me into the Olympics?" I answered tartly. "I am sure the top ten swimmers in the world don't swim this much!"

Sam didn't even try to hide his amusement. "Tessa, I promise you, very soon you can call it swimming. At the moment, well, it still looks more like drowning!"

Okay! Yes, he was right. It was a question of style. I had none. I still hadn't got the knack of floating in the

middle. It probably did look like arms and legs flailing about. He didn't need to remind me, though!

I sat up, straddling the board, taking my hand back. He watched me through half closed eyes for a few moments, then closed them with a sigh that sounded suspiciously happy.

I scooped a huge handful of water into his face. He sat bolt upright, shocked, flicking the water off his face with a twist of his head.

"Payback," he said very softly and I felt a thrill of excitement run through me. "Are you sorry?" he asked, giving me the chance.

I squared my jaw and scooped another handful of water at him for reply. Before he had a chance to recover, I lay flat on the board and started paddling for everything I was worth.

It was a race I was never going to win. Sam was so much stronger but he gave me a fair start. I heard him gaining on me and when I glanced back, he was grinning. I doubled my efforts.

Just when I thought of giving in, I saw a sleek shadow beneath the water racing alongside me and a large dolphin surfaced, keeping pace easily with me. She gave a couple of soft clicks and nudged gently against my board, her dorsal fin within easy grasp. I

knew immediately what she was inviting me to do. I glanced back at Sam. He was just metres behind me.

“Tessa! That’s cheating!” he yelled when I grabbed the dolphin’s fin.

She needed no prompting. I hung onto the board with one hand, and the dolphin with the other, and she took me on a wide arcing joy ride across the sea. The speed was exhilarating and I laughed aloud. When we started to turn back, I saw Sam sitting on his board watching us.

After one last burst of speed, the dolphin slowed, stopping just a few metres from Sam. Looking pleased, she raised her head out of the water to bow to him, then issued a series of rapid clicks and whistles. Sam bowed back and she slid in next to his board so he could run his hand along her back.

The rest of the pod raced in, leaping and diving as they came. The smallest came directly to me, clicking excitedly when I ran my hand over the pliant, rubbery skin.

I grinned at Sam. He grinned back at me.

“Revenge is best served cold,” he called over to me but there was nothing menacing in his eyes.

“You’ve got to catch me first,” I called back and before I blinked, he was on the board behind me. I was

so shocked, I tipped the board over and we both ended up in the water. The small dolphin angled quickly away but rose to the surface right next to me. I wrapped my arm around its dorsal.

“How did you do that?” I demanded.

“I think, therefore I am,” he said with a shrug and pulled me into his arms to kiss me. The dolphins exploded into whistling and clicking.

“Shall we get a lift back to the shore?” Sam asked. I saw we were a long way out. Sam boosted me onto my board, then with an easy freestyle, swam to his own that had drifted some distance away.

My joy-riding dolphin abandoned me in preference to Sam. He put his hand on its dorsal just as another dolphin nudged my board, clicking to get my attention. I patted its head then reached for its fin and we were off, heading to shore.

It was a race between the dolphins.

Sam’s won.

Leaving us to drift shoreward on the swell, the dolphins skimmed through the waves, racing backwards and forwards, before a final burst of whistles. Then, they were gone.

Sam raised his eyebrow at me. “Enjoy that?” he asked.

I grinned at him. “It was amaz...” and I copped a face full of seawater.

Later in my bedroom, I sat on my bed to open my mother’s collection jar. I’d found a shell on the beach and decided to keep it, to remind me of the perfect day. Sam was leaning on the frame of the French doors watching me. I scooped a handful of the shells from the jar, letting them trickle through my fingers before taking another handful, and doing the same.

“My mother’s collection,” I told him. “Each one held a special memory for her. She collected them from beaches all along the coast. Only one at a time.” I swallowed hard and blinked the tears away.

“May I?” Sam asked, coming to sit next to me. I poured some of the shells into his palm. He looked at them for a few minutes before closing his fingers over them. Then he smiled at me.

“Give me your hand,” and he put the shells into my palm. He closed his hands around mine, one on top, the other underneath. “Listen,” he told me.

At first, I heard nothing but as the warmth of Sam’s hands grew around mine, I was startled to hear my mother’s voice. Well, it was more like I heard her



thoughts. I stared at Sam, my heart pounding. He smiled calmly back at me.

“Listen,” he murmured.

My mother’s voice whispered softly. ‘So pretty! Just like my baby girl; a perfect shell for a perfect day; this one will remind me of Tessa’s ninth birthday; she’ll be such a wonderful woman; such a funny little girl; Keith, my darling husband; this one’s not pretty but it’s beautiful anyway.’

Tears streamed down my face. “Oh, Sam,” I sobbed and he pulled me into his arms.

Leiana invited us for dinner. I suspected she was missing her brother and I felt guilty. “I’m sorry, I’ve been monopolising Sam since he came home,” I apologised when we had a few minutes alone.

Leiana smiled, serenely. “That is how it should be,” she assured me. “My brother’s happiness is everything to me.”

“You don’t have a boyfriend?” I asked a little awkwardly and she laughed, a beautiful tinkling sound.

“No. Once many, many years ago, I fell in love. I am content as I am,” she added, touching the gold band she always wore on her wrist. “Besides, I am still

bound to him, even if now it is just to his memory.” She held out her arm so I could look at the gold band. It fit snugly against her skin, a continuous band of gold. I could not see a catch or a clasp.

“Bound? Like getting married?” I asked.

“While the intent is the same, in the world of mankind, marriage has lost its significance. In my world, we bind ourselves to the one we love. A binding can be just an individual’s wish, though most often it is mutual. Most importantly, a binding is an eternal pledge. The gold band signifies that. It cannot be removed.”

Leiana had tried her hand at cooking Asian. It was fabulous.

“Where do you buy the ingredients locally?” I asked. The look Leiana and Sam shared made me realise it was a stupid question. “So, you shop *absolutely* locally?” I clarified and they both laughed.

“So, you do this time travel thing, too, Leiana?”

“It’s not time travel, Tessa. We can’t go backwards and forwards in time. Just to a chosen place,” Sam replied.

“How?”

“If we have been to a place, we can draw it to mind from the last time we were there. The memory is our

connection,” Leiana explained. “The more times we visit, the stronger the memory is.”

“That’s an amazing ability. Just imagine how that would ease peak hour traffic!”

“Without time pressures, we use transportation like everyone else, it just feels incredibly slow to fly somewhere,” Sam told me.

“So you don’t just think of a place in general and... arrive?”

Sam shook his head. “We have to be discreet. One of the laws of living in mankind’s world.”

I thought of Davan. He’d gone to the Council. I hadn’t seen him on the beach earlier in the day. “Is Davan back?”

Sam and Leiana exchanged a look. “No,” Sam said quietly.

“Is that good or bad?” I couldn’t help the little ball of worry expand in my chest. Sam took my hand and raised it to kiss my fingers. He didn’t answer.

After dinner, Leiana told us she was going to look for her uncle. She made it sound very casual, like she was just going down to the local shop to pick up some milk or something, but I felt the tension between her and Sam. I tried not thinking about how she was ‘going’.

“Come, let me show you something,” Sam said. He led me out on the veranda. The sky was very dark, the moon had not yet risen. “Watch the sky about there,” he told me, pointing. A falling star shot a wide arc towards the dark horizon. I looked at him in wonder.

“How could you know that was going to happen?”

Sam smiled at me. “When we travel at night, we leave a trail.”

“Leiana?” I gasped and he nodded.

“So falling stars are not meteorites and space junk?!”

“Sometimes. Sometimes not.”

Sam put some music on his system and turned the lamps down low. We curled up on his sofa. “Are you happy living this life, Sam? I mean, living here, running the gallery?” I asked.

“The gallery gives us a reason to live here,” he said. “We have learnt that people become curious if you live somewhere and don’t have a purpose. Besides, Leiana really enjoys talking with people. They can’t help telling her all about themselves, and their families, she enjoys hearing their stories.”

That was Leiana’s special ability. Compassion.

“She really dislikes when we have to move,” Sam told me. “We don’t age like mortals, Tessa, after about ten years it becomes apparent we aren’t growing older,” he explained.

A cold chill ran through me. I looked at his handsome, *young* immortal face. How long did we have together? Moreover, it would be me doing the leaving. Or would he one day look at me and see an old woman... I couldn’t finish the thought.

“Tessa?” Sam said sharply, sitting and pulling me up with him so he could look into my face. “What is it? What’s the matter?”

I couldn’t tell him. I wouldn’t shatter our precious happiness. “What alternative could you and Leiana have chosen?” I managed, instead.

Sam knew I was avoiding telling him my worry but he did not press me. Perhaps like me he was afraid to bring reality into our landscape.

“We could have stayed at our ancestral home in the mountains, like the Ancients chose to. Eternity is a very long time, Tessa, without a purpose or interests to pursue. The Ancients fill their days with petty squabbles and reminiscing of another time too far back for even *me* to imagine.”

“The Youngers, as the Ancients call us, the sons and daughters, we couldn’t help being drawn to the affairs of mankind. At first, it was just to observe and satisfy our curiosity but then we started to get involved in people’s lives. We formed attachments. We saw wrong and wanted to right it. That’s when the Ancients imposed laws. We were meddling, without understanding the consequences.”

I thought about what he said, pictured immortals falling in love with mortals. I thought again of losing him, through the frailty of my mortality.

“Tessa, tell me what’s troubling you,” Sam asked. His eyes had darkened with concern.

I took his hands in mine. “Leiana told me she fell in love a long time ago. Was he a mortal?”

Sam nodded slowly. “Yes.”

“And he died?”

“Yes.”

“She loved him very much, didn’t she?”

Sam nodded. “She still does even though it was a very long time ago.” Sam lifted one of my hands to his lips. His face was very grave. He was equally reluctant to talk about it. It seemed wrong to talk about our parting when we had just begun.

He was braver than I was, though, because he said, “Tessa, we need to discuss this. Our path is different...”

“I know,” I cut him off, thinking to save him, and me, from the pain. I thought of the painting in the studio. Our daughter. We would have children. Sam would never completely lose me. There would always be a part of me in our descendants.