

## Chapter Four

I woke just before six to the early morning sun streaming through the French doors. I kicked off the sheet, the warmth of the sun caressing my legs as I waited for the sunbeam to light the photo on the opposite wall, magnifying the effect of the sunbeams bursting through the storm clouds.

I had been awed the first time I saw the spectacle, hardly daring to breathe. It had become a ritual to wait and watch until the photo fell back into shadow.

When the sunbeam shifted, I swung my legs off the bed and went out to the deck. It was a glorious morning, not a cloud in sight and the sea was full of little white caps that rushed to the beach.

I made myself take a few deep breaths of the salty air to settle my nerves. It was my first day at school. The thought was daunting. Was I ready to face the world again? I hoped so. I was in serious danger of becoming a hermit.

I can do this, I assured myself. I had an appointment with the Principal at nine o'clock. A woman from the school had called to make the time for the meeting. I glanced at the bedside clock, 6:10. I had

plenty of time to go see my surfer catch his morning wave. I changed into shorts and a lycra tank top before tying on joggers.

It was something else that had become a ritual. The surfer was always there, out from the rocky outcrop, ever since that day when I'd thought he'd been lost to the sea.

I smiled at the peculiar quirks that had crept into my daily routine. They helped distract me on the not so good days, gave my life points of reference. If the old fisherman was not on his rock, I was concerned for his health and relieved when he was there the next day. If the sky was full of clouds, blocking the early morning sunbeam from the photo on my wall, I looked forward to it even more the next morning. If the surfer was not on the waves... but that had never happened. He was always there, regardless of the surf conditions.

I knew he waited for me as much as I watched for him. Knowing that had helped when Natalie went back to the city. I hadn't felt quite so alone.

Natalie had stayed much longer than the few days she'd intended. I suspected Uncle Clive had a hand in that. I missed her even though I'd spent so little time with her, preferring to walk on the beach, sit for hours on the rocks, or just stay in bed when the hurting was

too much. Natalie had not complained. Maybe she knew just being there was all I needed. I was lucky to have her as my friend.

I turned north, settling into a steady jog, heading towards the rocky outcrop. As I ran, I thought of the final goodbye to my parents. I'd finally given in to Uncle Clive's persistence and set a date.

The sky had been heavily overcast, the cloud blowing in from the south, the wind fresh and gusty. I'd been pleased. A beautiful day on the beach would have reminded me how much my Mum would have loved to be there, and couldn't be. Ever.

Uncle Clive and Natalie had arrived late the afternoon before, bringing the twin silver caskets. I had been devastated that my parents, larger than life in my mind, could fit into such small confines.

Uncle Clive had suggested going out for a meal but I had encouraged him to take Natalie with him. I had wanted to sit quietly in my room to say my last private goodbye. He had gone along with my suggestion. It had only been a few days since I'd apologised for being angry with him for organising the funeral. Like me, he was pleased the rift between us was healed.

I'd asked Natalie about the service. She'd told me over a hundred people had attended, including fellow teachers, my parents' students and their families, friends and acquaintances. From what she told me it had been an extremely emotional ceremony, especially as my parents had been so well respected in their school community. Just listening to Natalie talk about it had overwhelmed me. Perhaps it was just as well I hadn't been there.

I'd picked the spot to scatter the ashes, a little cove just further north of the rocky outcrop where the water was calm. It had been my parents' wish their ashes be scattered to the sea. I couldn't think of a better place for them to start that journey.

Uncle Clive drove us to a small car park at the top of the dunes and the gusty wind had whipped at us as we walked down to the beach. There was no one to witness our sad little party.

I'd carried the caskets, clutching them to my breast, silently repeating the goodbyes I'd said the night before. I'd set them down at the water's edge but my hands had been shaking so badly Uncle Clive had to open them. Natalie had put her arm about my shoulders.

The sun had broken through, a high wind ripping away the blanket of grey, exposing a slice of perfect blue sky above the cove. I'd raised my face to the sun, breathing deeply, strengthening my brittle control. Then, as I looked towards the horizon, to picture them on their journey, I'd seen my surfer sitting on his board. It felt right that he should be there.

With a handful of ashes, one from each casket, I'd mustered the courage to walk knee deep into the water, and opened my hands for an outgoing wave to take them.

Natalie had tears streaming down her face and Uncle Clive's jaw worked hard to control his emotions when I walked back to the sand. It reminded me that my love and loss was not exclusive. Both of them took handfuls of the ashes into the water and released them.

The sliver of blue sky held. While Uncle Clive and Natalie said their goodbyes, I'd watched the surfer. The sun shone down upon him, surrounding him in bright light.

"Forever, my love," I whispered, as I jogged in the early morning light. My parents had used that endearment to each other every day. My eyes burnt with tears but I managed to keep them in check.

The day after scattering the ashes, I talked myself into making the trip back to the house where I'd grown up. I'd known it was going to be tough and Natalie came over to be with me, making it a little easier. Uncle Clive had come, too. He took the opportunity to explain my parents' wills and financial situation.

The house and everything in it was mine to do as I chose. I understood what that meant but had no idea what I should do. Uncle Clive suggested selling the house to pay off the small mortgage and investing the remainder. He'd explained about probate and the depressed real estate market but I hardly took any of it in, grateful when he offered to have his legal firm take care of all the details for me.

Natalie had helped me pack personal items, photos, books and mementos Mum and Dad had collected on various holidays. A piece of faded, painted coral from the Great Barrier Reef, a flattened glass bottle filled with a variety of coloured sands, and, a huge jar filled with shells that Mum had collected off a dozen beaches up and down the Queensland coastline.

I'd opened the jar and let a handful of them trickle through my fingers. It was comforting. Of all her belongings, the shells had been my mother's favourite.

She'd always said they were reminders of her special moments.

Everything else in the house I left in Uncle Clive's capable care to dispose of to charities.

I had lived at the beach house for a month and I couldn't wait to get back. The house I'd lived in my entire life held too many memories. I'd cried the whole time.

I was surprised at how much I'd missed my new routines. I'd missed the smell of the sea, the sound of the waves. I'd missed my surfer, hoping he didn't think I'd deserted him. I couldn't wait to leave.

The drive back to the coast had been harrowing, trying to think about memories I couldn't remember, my imagination filling in the blank with gory detail. I couldn't drive on that fatal stretch of road and took a different route.

I reached the rocky outcrop and shook off my thoughts as I scrambled up the rocks. In less than a minute, I caught a glimpse of the surfer, as always wearing his bright orange shorts, bobbing with the waves, waiting for the swell. Waiting for me, too, I fancied.

'Wish me well,' I thought across the water. I thought I saw him nod, as if he'd heard me, and we

looked across the expanse at each other. I'd been very pleased to see him when I got back from the city. I wondered if one day he would just not be there anymore. The thought upset me. I almost raised my hand to wave to him.

"G'day, stranger," a voice startled me.

I peered over the rocks, looking down into Dr McIntyre's face.

"Hello," I called back.

I looked out to the surfer and bid him a silent goodbye before scrambling down, jumping the last metre onto the sand. The doctor put out his hand to catch me but I landed smoothly.

"Hello," I said again.

He looked different without his formal attire and white coat. The sea breeze had tousled his hair and he wore a pair of dark Raybans.

"How've you been? You look great, Tessa." He pushed the sunglasses onto the top of his head, his dark, intelligent eyes appraising me.

"I'm good, thank you," I replied. "What are you doing here?"

He laughed good-humouredly at my bluntness. "Relax, not a stethoscope in sight. I live up there," he said and pointed along the dunes. "I run whenever I



get the chance, which is not as often as I would like, with my shifts.”

“Oh!” and I felt rude. It was hardly as if he was following me about the beach, checking up on me. That I’d probably spent too much time on my own, and was having an odd relationship with a surfer I’d never met, were perhaps the reason I was oversensitive.

“Sorry! I thought you must live at Marrickville,” I said. “You know, close to the hospital.”

“I did at first but I love the beach too much, so I moved. The drive to Marrickville is only twenty minutes,” he told me. “When I worked in Brisbane, it used to take me that long just to get to the highway.”

I remembered the traffic chaos when I used to head into Uni every day. Something I’d not missed since moving to the coast.

“You must be just about to start your new job?”

I suddenly realised I had lost track of time. I looked at the sports watch on his arm. Twenty five past seven.

“I’m starting today, actually. We have three pupil free days to get prepped before kids start back Monday,” I told him. “I’d better get going, Dr McIntyre. It’s about five kilometres back to my place and I’d hate to be late first day!”

“Sure, Tessa. It was good to see you, again. And, it’s Jackson.”

“Okay. Jackson. That feels a bit odd,” I told him.

“Well, we are neighbours, distant neighbours, admittedly. I like to forget I’m a doctor occasionally and just hang out like everyone else.”

I nodded but was unable to imagine for a moment that he would just ‘hang out’, he was way too serious.

“Then I’ll probably see you again, Jackson,” and I gave him a smile. “See you later.”

“See you,” he responded.

As I started to jog, I saw my surfer out on the waves.

He was watching me.

I dressed in a knee length black skirt and pulled on a white shirt. Looking down to do up the buttons, I saw the faint marks on my chest. I’d first seen them when I was still in the hospital. There was no pain or discomfit, just a discolouration, several shades lighter than the rest of my skin. Dr McIntyre had been baffled by what had caused them. They had not been there before the accident.

I glanced at the bedside clock and quickly finished the buttons before pushing my feet into black court

shoes. I looked very professional. Too professional? It was a small public school in a close-knit beach community. Maybe jeans, t-shirt and sandals would have been a better choice? Better over dressed than under dressed, Mum would have said. I felt the loss of her sharply.

Quickly, before giving in to the sorrow, I went through to the bathroom to finish getting ready. I pulled my long dark hair into a ponytail and finger combed the pieces that fell across my forehead. I looked in the mirror for a few moments longer than usual. My hazel eyes, emphasised by dark eyebrows and lashes, were without a doubt my best feature. My Dad always said so. My skin was smooth and despite all the hours in the sun over the past weeks, I was still very fair.

I had never been overly conscious of my appearance. Probably because I had skipped the ugly-duckling stage of puberty, waiting and praying for the transformation to come, noticing every little change. Nor had I endured the acne phase, either. Not like Natalie. I was sure there must have been times when she really hated my clear complexion.

I kept my makeup simple, a light dusting of translucent powder and a touch of mascara to add a

little more curl to my eyelashes, before a couple of dabs of gloss to my full lips.

I stared at my reflection. Dr McIntyre was right. I looked great. How long until I felt the same on the inside, I wondered.

“Okay, let’s go!” I said loudly, to distract my thoughts. I picked up my keys and a large tote bag I’d stuffed with files from my studies. I thought they might be useful.

I got into my shiny new car and before turning the key, touched my fingers to my lips, then to the small photo I’d stuck to the dashboard. Mum and Dad smiled happily back at me. It was a photo taken when we’d celebrated my last day of University. Having them in the car was comforting.

It was a five minute drive to the village and there were only two cars in the school parking lot when I arrived. I glanced at my watch again, 8:50am. I was early.

“I can do this,” I told my parents and they looked back at me. I could see the pride in their faces. I had to take several deep breaths to get the lump out of my throat.

“Yes, my dear?” a small, grey haired woman in her late fifties asked, looking up from behind her desk when I walked in to the Admin building.

“I’m Tessa Howard. I have a meeting with John Brennan at nine o’clock.” I felt nervous as if I was starting school as the student, not the teacher.

“Oh, yes! Our new teacher! I spoke to you last week. Welcome! I’m Sandy Smith.” She got out of her chair and I saw she was barely taller than the counter.

“I look after the Admin,” she told me and I could see a touch of sympathy in her eyes.

Did she know about the accident? I felt a ripple of panic run through me. I hadn’t thought about having to face people’s sympathy!

“John will be happy you’re on time. He hates lateness,” she added, dropping her voice as if she was letting me in on a secret.

“Nice to meet you, too, Sandy. I’ll remember that,” I responded and managed a smile.

“Have a seat. I’ll let John know you’re here,” and Sandy bustled down the corridor behind a bank of desks.

I looked at the small plastic chairs, designed for children by their size. I decided to stand. To take my mind of the nerves churning my stomach, I studied the

plaques on the walls and the sports trophies in a glass cabinet. It was ridiculous to feel so nervous, I told myself.

“Are you being looked after?” a voice asked behind me.

I jumped, spinning around, almost colliding with a man who’d come into the small reception.

He took a step backwards, not bothering to hide his slow assessment over me before his eyes settled on my face. Judging by his expression, he was accustomed to knocking the girls sideways. He was good looking, with broad shoulders and strong muscled arms. His sun-bleached hair was just a little too long for convention and he had a wide smile that balanced his tanned face. I saw he must wear sunglasses a lot as the skin around his blue eyes was lighter than the rest of his face.

“Yes, thank you,” I said evenly. “I’m just waiting to see the Principal.”

“You must be the new teacher,” he guessed. “I’m Matt Langdon. I’m a teacher here, too,” and he held out his hand. There was not a hint of sympathy or pity about him. Automatically, I shook hands with him. He was wearing jeans with a white t-shirt and joggers.

“Nice to meet you, Matt. I’m Tessa Howard.” I tried for a casual tone, which was difficult under his very warm appraisal.

Sandy came bustling back, her arms full of files.

“Oh, good. You’ve met Matt, our resident rogue,” she said cheerfully, and gave Matt a smile which was close to adoration. He returned the smile in full force.

“Now, now, Sandy,” he chided teasingly. “Don’t go filling Tessa’s head with bad thoughts about me because you’re jealous. You know you’re my favourite girl, always will be.”

She laughed, shaking her head at the banter.

“Tessa, John will be right with you. He just got caught up on a phone call,” Sandy told me. “You can wait here or would you like Matt to show you around?”

“I’ll wait. Thank you.” I ignored his amused expression that implied I was a coward.

“Matt, what can I do for you?” Sandy asked and I stepped sideways to give him room to lean on the counter next to me. He was tall, even leaning on the counter he was still at least a head taller than me.

So close to him, he smelt of the sea, a clean salty tang.

“You’re not going to believe this, Sandy,” he began with what sounded like his best wheedling tone and

the older woman burst out laughing and wagged her finger at him.

“You’ve lost your timetable already?” she said trying for sternness and failing miserably.

“How did you know that?!” He tried to look just a little shame-faced.

“Because you always lose your timetable,” Sandy said. “I’ll print you off a new one. John has yours, Tessa,” and she went behind her desk to tap at the keyboard.

“You’re an angel, Sandy, my bestest girl!” Matt gave her a wink before turning to me, resting his weight on one elbow on the counter.

“We’re pretty casual around here,” he told me. Whether he was referring to my clothes, or his casual manner with Sandy, I was not sure. His proximity was adding to my nervousness.

“Tessa?” John Brennan called as he came into the reception, saving me from having to respond.

“Good morning,” I replied and gave Matt a long look when he did not move to let me pass. Matt smiled and mouthed “good luck” then stepped back so I could walk to the half swing door where the Principal waited.

“John Brennan,” he introduced himself. He was a self-assured looking man in his mid forties, with just a



little grey appearing at the sides of his dark hair. His handshake was firm.

“Sandy, remember we are trying to go green this year. We’ll fail if Matt keeps losing his paperwork!” he called over his shoulder as he led the way down the corridor.

“And, Matt, don’t be late for the staff meeting. Ten thirty, sharp!” he said before indicating me to enter his office.

“Please sit down,” John invited after closing the door and I took one of the chairs opposite his desk. John shuffled a pile of papers to one side and put a folder in front of him, folding his hands over the top.

“I am very pleased you are here, Tessa. I hope you are not going to give me bad news, though,” he said, without preamble.

I frowned. “Bad news?”

“I would understand in the circumstances if you felt it was too soon to start work,” he told me. “Though finding a relief teacher can be very difficult first week of school.” He leaned back in his chair as if resigned to his suspicion.

“You mean because of the accident?” I gripped the arms of the chair to stop myself bolting out the door.

He nodded, his face full of sympathy. “Lannoch is a very small community and our school is the heart of the town. Being our new teacher, the accident, and especially the death of your parents, touched us all, and of course we were all relieved by your miraculous escape.”

My mouth went dry.

“There was a stack of news print about the accident, probably more than normal because you were coming to be a part of our community. It must have been very difficult losing both your parents like that. I am very sorry for your loss, Tessa,” he added. His warm sincerity made me flush with embarrassment. I bit my lip hard to keep myself under control.

“News print?” I croaked.

John shrugged. “Small local paper.”

I had two choices. Run away or stick with the reasons that had made me stay when I was discharged from hospital. I took a steadying breath. “I think getting busy and having something to focus on will help me... adjust,” I told him.

John Brennan weighed me up for another moment before sitting forward in his chair. “Good. I agree. Our grade sixers need a dedicated teacher,

they will definitely keep you busy. Then I had better give you this,” and he slid the folder over to me. I glanced inside. It was full of forms and documents.

“The top pages need to be filled out and returned to Sandy, personal details, contacts, and the like. You will also find class and admin timetables,” John explained and turned the pages, one by one, walking me through them.

He then launched into his philosophy of educating young minds, the standards he expected his teaching staff to strive for and his thoughts on running a progressive, yet disciplined, classroom and school. When he was done, John stood up, glancing at the huge clock on the wall.

“Just enough time to show you around the grounds, introduce you to your classroom and give you a few minutes to catch your breath before our staff meeting,” he said.

He headed out of his office and I picked up my bag, tucking the folder into it, before following him.

It was a small school, the tour did not take long. The corridor in the Admin building led to a large airy staff room, kitchen, and lounge area. A side door led out into a central quad where school assemblies were held. On the far side of the quad were the junior

classrooms and another building accommodated the older classes. The buildings were connected by covered verandas.

My classroom was located in the middle. John opened the door before handing me a key. "Please make sure it's locked at the end of each day," he told me.

The room had banks of windows looking out over the playground on one side and the quad on the other.

"It's your classroom, Tessa. Set it up anyway you want and I'll leave that to your discretion." He pointed at the far wall of the room. It was impossible to ignore. "It's probably time they came down. I can make some funds available for a project. Just let me know your thoughts."

"I'm sure you can find your way back to the staff room. Staff meeting is in," and he glanced at his watch, "twenty minutes. Please don't be late." He turned to leave, then paused.

"Tessa, there was one more thing. I've asked Matt Langdon, our grade seven teacher, and Mandy Clarke who teaches our composite four/five class, to be your mentors till you get your feet under you. Both are excellent teachers. My door is always open, too. Anything you need, just ask."

I nodded.

“My advice is to spend the first few weeks getting to know your kids. The learning part is easy if you build relationships with them first. Get to know their strengths, weaknesses, and what makes them shine, and so will you. You’ll be great, Tessa. The kids are going to love you.”

Finally, he left.

I sat at the large desk. John had talked non-stop for well over an hour and my head swam with information overload. I had 18 students, all but one had been at the school since grade one. The other student, Zac Moreton, had started the year before. From what John said, he’d become a bit of a problem child towards the end of the previous year. John hoped Zac was just going through a phase and it had been resolved over the Christmas holidays.

I took a deep breath. ‘This is exactly what you trained for,’ I told myself and looked around the classroom with its neat rows of desks and chairs. There was a long whiteboard on one wall and a huge clock. It reminded me of the one in my hospital room. I remembered how much I’d hated that clock!

The far wall of the classroom was my only sticking point. It was covered floor to ceiling with surfing

posters, of all things. I couldn't figure out why. I walked over to take a closer look.

"Great collection isn't it?" a sardonic voice asked from the doorway, startling me.

That was the second time Matt Langdon had made me jump. I looked at him leaning nonchalantly on the doorjamb, he had a stack of folders under one arm.

"If you are into surfing," I agreed. "Was last year's teacher a surf-nut? Or are surfing lessons part of the curriculum?"

"No. Wow, that's a great idea, though!"

"You are welcome to the posters. I think I'm going to take them down," I said.

Matt looked like he was going to say something but then shrugged. "I'll come and do that for you," he offered.

"Thanks! I'll give you a hand. So you enjoy surfing?"

Matt straightened up and came into the room. "I'm a self-confessed surf freak. I teach because it gives me plenty of time to surf, before school, after school and of course all day in the extended holidays."

I looked at him a little more closely. Did he wear orange board shorts? I couldn't bring myself to ask. I'd just met him. I thought of all the private conversations

I'd had in my head with my surfer over the past weeks. If Matt recognised me from the rocky outcrop, he gave no sign of it. I glanced at the clock, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

"Shoot!" I exclaimed and grabbed my bag. It was ten twenty-five. "We're going to be late."

Matt smiled and cocked his eyebrow at me. "Wow, you're impressionable. You've been here an hour and John's already drummed his 'don't be late' mantra into you."

His smile turned into a grin. "How about we rebel?"  
Was he teasing?

"John said you were one of my mentors. I thought a mentor was supposed to keep me out of trouble?" I countered.

"Well, I guess there are mentors and mentors!"  
Matt laughed easily and handed me the folders he'd brought.

"Here. Some old lesson plans I dug out when I used to teach grade six years ago. They might be useful," he said. "And, just this once, we'll be boring and be on time," he told me, mockingly.

The rest of the day was a blur. I met the other teachers at the staff meeting. Mandy Clarke was in her mid twenties. Matt, I guessed, was closer to thirty. The

other three teachers were in their forties or fifties. They all stopped by my classroom to offer advice or support. They were all kind. No one actually came out and asked about the accident, to my absolute relief.

Mandy, who taught the combined grade four/five class, my other mentor, was particularly helpful especially as Matt seemed to have disappeared. Mandy was petite with short dark hair and a happy, friendly manner.

She showed me where to get stationary supplies and a set of textbooks I would need. She even brought back a coffee from the local take-away, delivering it to my classroom.

“It’s probably time those posters came down,” she said echoing the Principal’s earlier comment, looking over her coffee cup at the far wall. “I wonder if Matt will agree.”

I looked at her curiously. “I mentioned that I wanted to get rid of them and Matt offered to do it for me,” I told her.

Mandy looked surprised. “Really? He must be finally ready.”

“Ready? Ready for what?”

“To move on. His wife died about eighteen months ago. She absolutely loved surfing. This was her



classroom,” Mandy told me. “When she died, her class put up the posters as a way to celebrate and remember what she loved doing. Peter Black, the teacher here last year, was cool to leave them.”

I felt terrible.

“He didn’t say anything about his wife. He only told me he loved surfing.”

“Oh yes! His board is a permanent fixture on his roof rack. He’s like a cat on a hot tin roof when the surf’s up during school.” Mandy laughed then realised I hadn’t shared her humour.

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Matt’s pretty black and white. If he offered, it’s because he’s cool with it,” she said. “Anyway, I’ll leave you to it. Let me know if you need anything.”

At the door, she turned back, her face becoming serious. “Tessa, we are like an extended family here. There’s no point pretending we don’t know you’ve had a really tough time and are dealing with your own grief. I know you’ve only just met us but we’re here for you. Just ask, whatever you need.”

I forced a smile. I didn’t trust my voice.

By three o'clock Friday afternoon, I was satisfied I had done everything I could think of to be ready for my students on Monday. I had written a month's worth of lesson plans and prepared handouts and notes. I had also rearranged the classroom, shifting my desk to the side and making clusters out of the student desks, five groups of four, taking away the 'front' and 'back'.

The far wall was bare, just waiting inspiration. I thought I would let my class decide what to do with the space.

Matt had come in on Thursday with a stepladder and I'd flushed before stammering an apology. He'd cut me off. "It's okay, Tessa, really," and he gave me a smile as if to prove it.

"The posters weren't for me. I carry my memories inside. The posters helped the kids and I guess it became a bit of a habit. Grief can do that, you know," he'd added. "If you're not careful it becomes a habit. You live with it for so long you don't know how to live without it. Maybe fate is being kinder to you than me," he'd suggested and I'd raised an eyebrow at him.

I didn't believe in fate. If I did, it definitely had not been kind to me.

“Maybe we were meant to meet so I can help you avoid the traps I fell into,” and he’d got busy setting up the ladder to reach the posters at the top.

I locked the classroom door behind me and finally understood the working world’s addiction to TGIF! However, if I was honest it wasn’t the work that was exhausting, it was the strain of being around people again, burying my sadness, smiling, pretending all was well.

I was half way across the quad when I heard Matt call out, “Heya!” I waited for him to catch up with me.

“Sorry I reneged on you this morning,” he said referring to his promise to be available for any questions I had. “The sets were amazing. Gonna be better this afternoon.” He brushed his fingers through his still damp hair and grinned at me.

“That’s okay, Matt. I think I have everything sorted. Thanks for sharing your lesson plans the other day, they helped a lot.” I’d actually been surprised at how good they were. John Brennan had said he was an excellent teacher.

“You don’t really want me to look at yours, do you?” he asked hopefully and I laughed at his expression.

It felt good to laugh.

“No, I think I’ve got it under control,” I assured him.

“I’m going down to the local bar for a few drinks tomorrow night, Mandy’s coming too, a pre-school celebration. Want to come along?” Matt invited.

I hesitated. It felt wrong. It was too soon.

Matt bulldozed through my thoughts. “It will do you good, Tessa. Having fun gives you perspective on what’s important in life.”

“And, what makes you think I don’t have fun?” I retorted.

Matt smiled his easy-going smile. “I think it’s a fair assumption that you have not had a lot of fun for quite a while. Think of it as a re-introduction into the big wide world,” he added.

I felt embarrassed by my outburst. “I’m sorry, Matt. I’m not normally so touchy.”

“It’s okay, right now life sucks. Let me give you some advice, Tessa. Don’t confuse acting brave with being brave,” he told me. “Just be brave. It saves a lot of heartache and soul searching for things you cannot change,” and he smiled. His eyes were warm and caring.

“Can I let you know a little later?”

“Sure. You can ring and tell me yes whenever you like. Since I cannot think of a single reason I will

accept, save yourself the effort of trying to come up with an excuse,” he told me in his best, stern teacher’s voice.

I smiled. “So, who appointed you my fun-meister?”

“Me,” he answered without hesitation. “I just have this strong urge to see you laugh and have some fun. You know, I definitely think it’s my purpose in life, saving you from sadness. Now, you definitely cannot say no, where would that leave me? Useless!”

I laughed again at the nonsense and Matt pressed his advantage.

“So, it’s a deal. Seven o’clock at The Shack. You can’t miss it. It’s right in the middle of the main street. Looks like a dive from the outside but it comes alive at night,” he promised and I nodded, trying to look enthusiastic.

“Put my number in your phone,” he suggested and I fished it out of my bag and keyed the number into the contacts.

“Okay, I gotta go. Surf’s up! I’ll see you at seven tomorrow night!” and he was gone, jogging out to the staff car park.

I just got through the door at home when my cell phone rang. I retrieved it from the bottom of my bag

where it liked to hide and glanced at the screen before hitting the button.

“Hi Nat, everything okay?”

“Hey, I’m good. How was first week at school? As bad I remember it?” Natalie asked and I heard the shudder in her voice. Natalie had hated school, hated the restrictions and routine of it. She was too free-spirited.

“The kids don’t start till next week, have just been prepping. It’s a really nice little school, the teachers are cool,” I told her.

“That’s great, Tessa! I’ve been worried about you all alone down there, which is why I’m ringing,” Natalie said. “Just hear me out before you answer, and if you say no, I’ll understand.”

“Okay.” I prepared myself for one of Natalie’s surprises.

“You know, I really enjoyed the beach scene when I stayed that week, and I was thinking that the house is big enough for two and there’s bound to be plenty of work around, and I’m sure you could do with the company, as well...” Natalie finally paused.

“You want to come live here?” I asked slowly.

“Yeah, that’s the idea. Andy and I had a big fight when I got back and we split up. It’s a real drag here in the city. And I miss you!”

“Are you okay?” Andy was the closest thing to a real relationship that Natalie had ever had, in a long string of boyfriends.

“Yeah, I’m okay. Just feeling a bit fed up and hemmed in. Hey, if you prefer I didn’t, I’ll figure something else out.”

“Uncle Clive didn’t suggest this, did he?” I asked suspiciously.

My Godfather had wanted me to take three months off and move into his inner city apartment with him. I had not even been tempted. First, I did not want to live in Brisbane. I’d made my decision to stay at the coast. I intended to stick with it. Second, I had to do something. Sitting around with my sad thoughts would drive me insane. And the last thing Uncle Clive needed was a nearly twenty-two year old tragic cramping his life style.

He’d heard me out, then insisted. I reminded him he was my Godfather and since I was not religious, that countered his responsibility. In the brief standoff, I thought he was going to tell me it was what my Dad

would have expected me to do. Maybe he'd heard the determination in my voice because he let it drop.

"I haven't spoken to Uncle Clive!" Natalie exclaimed. "And I wouldn't. I know how you felt about him trying to get you to move in with him!"

I made a decision. "I think it's a great idea, Nat. You sure you won't miss all the bright lights of the city, though? I don't know if the village has much of a night life."

"Oh, I don't know, Tessa! I just feel like I need a change."

I heard the frustration in her voice.

"Well, I don't suppose the owner will mind if there are two house-sitters. I'll give Uncle Clive a call and see if he wants to clear it with them first."

"Fantastic! Thanks, Tessa! Can you ring him now? I was thinking of coming down straight away. My flat mate's boyfriend has just moved in and it's getting a little cramped, if you know what I mean."

"Okay, I'll see if I can get him now," I agreed. "But you know how busy he is..."

"Cool, I'll start packing! You're the best, Tessa. Talk soon!" Natalie hung up.

I shook my head hoping I would not regret it. We'd been best of friends for eleven years, grown up



together, been on holidays together, shared all the trials and tribulations of changing from teenagers into young women, but we had never lived together. Fortunately, there were two bathrooms. Natalie's belongings were like the rest of Natalie's life, everywhere.

I dialled Uncle Clive's cell number expecting to leave a message so was surprised when he answered.

"Tessa, sweetheart, everything okay?" and I assured him it was, telling him about the school before posing the question of Natalie coming to stay.

"Can't see any problem at all. I'll send the owner an email to let him know but am sure he will understand, especially in the circumstances. How are you coping?" he asked.

"Pleased to start work," I told him.

"I think it will do you good having Natalie there, she always livens things up. She's a bit of a minx, that girl. Make sure she doesn't get you into trouble, though," he warned but there was humour in his voice. He had watched Natalie grow up, and like my parents, had shaken his head at her impetuosity over the years.

"Tessa, would love to chat longer but I have a meeting with a judge in a few minutes. I'm going to try

and get away for a visit, real soon, but ring me if you need anything, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks, Uncle Clive,” and I rang off.

Knowing Natalie would be agonising over the outcome, I rang her straight back. “Is that my new house-mate?” I asked when she answered in less than half a ring. I had to yank the phone away from my ear as her excited squeal amplified through the speaker.

“I’ll get away from here at seven and should be there by ten,” Natalie said.

“Tonight?!” I gasped.

“Tomorrow morning, silly! Won’t take me long to chuck my stuff in the car.”

“Just drive carefully, Nat. Promise me?” A stab of irrational fear washed over me. What if I lost Natalie, too? It didn’t bear thinking about. “There’s no rush. It doesn’t matter if you are not here until lunchtime, or even in the afternoon. Please,” I pleaded, visualising her driving in a mad rush down the highway.

“Hey, it’s okay, Tessa. I promise I’ll drive carefully,” Natalie said. “How about we go shopping when I get in? And maybe we could go out to dinner and celebrate,” she said, changing the subject.

“Actually, I was invited to join a couple of my new work colleagues for a drink at the local bar, in the

village tomorrow night. I'll give them a call, am sure they'll be cool if we both go," I told her.

"You sure? Don't want to crash the party."

"Yeah, right, since when, Nat? See you when you get here. Drive carefully, please!"

I dialled Matt's number and it wasn't until it went through to a quirky voice message, 'Hey dude, I'm surfing,' that I remembered. I left him a message that since he wasn't taking no for an answer, I was going to have to bring a friend along.

I smiled as I snapped the phone shut. I was taking his advice, being brave.

I felt almost normal.