

Chapter Two

“G’day, Kiddo! Let’s bust you out of here!” my best friend, Natalie Shaw, exclaimed as she bounded into my hospital room, unaware that she startled me and probably every other patient in the ward.

“I would have been here ages ago but the traffic was off the chart on the highway, and there I was feeling all clever with myself that I’d managed to get out of bed at eight o’clock so I would be here early to surprise you.” She rolled her chocolate brown eyes with a bright laugh. “Yeah, right! Me early! Ha!”

“You *have* surprised me, Nat,” I told her and she looked pleased.

“Well, I rang yesterday but you were having some tests or something and the nurse said you were going to be discharged today so I thought I’d come and pick you up.” Natalie suddenly stopped and her brow creased.

“You are being discharged? You are okay? The tests yesterday were just routine stuff, right?” Concern clouded her face.

“I’m fine, Nat. I was just about to ring a taxi....”

Natalie threw her hands in the air, cutting me off. “A taxi? To where? The bus station? As if I wouldn’t come get you and drive you home!” Natalie misunderstood my dismay. “You’d do the same for me! You know you would,” she insisted as I shook my head.

“I’m not going home. I’m going to stay, at the beach house.”

Surprise and concern chased across her face. She’d assumed I’d go home. Uncle Clive had expressed his concern too, when I rang to tell him.

Doubt ate at me. “I didn’t know what to do, stay or go home... I’ve been trying to decide for days now... I’m sorry, I should have told you I was thinking of staying, but I didn’t expect you to come...,” I broke off, utterly miserable with myself.

Natalie sat on the edge of the bed, crossing her ankles and flicking her mass of curly blonde hair over her shoulder. She looked at me closely, taking in everything from my dishevelled hair to my choice of clothes. I was relieved when she refrained from commenting. Ever the fashionista, Natalie usually had something to say.

“You *always* know the right thing to do, Tessa,” she said. “The sun and beach will do you the world of

good. And you've got your new job to start at the end of the month. All sounds perfectly sensible to me!"

Natalie's face lit up as an idea jumped into her thoughts. "And, I'll stay with you for a few days! Not that I brought any clothes with me but, hey, good excuse to go shopping! I could do with a break. Andy's been driving me mad and I need some space."

Natalie rolled her eyes with exasperation. "Not sure what he's thinking anymore. Last night he was talking about us living together! As if!"

"No!" I exclaimed. "You don't have to do that. I'm fine, really."

The thought of being in Natalie's gale force enthusiasm was almost too much to bear. I just wanted to wallow in my misery. Alone.

Natalie narrowed her brown eyes meaningfully, her impulsive mind made up. "I *am* going to stay with you, Tessa Howard, because you ain't foolin' me with your, 'I'm fine really' crap. Besides, I didn't drive all this way to be a plank," and she pulled me into a hug.

"I know how you must be feeling, Tessa. I miss them, as well," she whispered. "All I can think of is, what if I'd lost you, too?"

Natalie over-rode my objections of leaving the ward in a wheelchair and I gave in, shrugging indifferently. I didn't have the energy to fight. It was hard to change Natalie's mind at the best of times, she always got what she wanted. I knew she didn't mean to be insensitive; it was just Natalie, being Natalie. Besides, she was having way too much fun playing 'nurse'. At least someone's happy, I thought darkly.

Natalie took the luggage to the car while I went to the nurses' station to sign the discharge paperwork.

"Don't forget the flowers, Nat," I said, dutifully sitting in the wheelchair as she finished checking the drawers in the bedside table. "I'll take them," and I held out my hands for her to pass them to me.

"Did you ever figure out who sent them? Was it Uncle Clive?"

"No."

"That's really weird! Who sends flowers without a card?" Natalie wondered.

The rain had not eased when we reached the main entrance of the hospital, falling in big fat drops. Natalie silenced my objections that I could walk to the car park with a withering roll of her eyes.

“Wait right here,” she instructed firmly, “In the chair! I’ll be two minutes.” She braced herself for another dousing before dashing off.

I sighed. All the activity was making my head spin. Absently I watched an ambulance with its lights flashing pull into the emergency area and the patient lifted out. Every person in the vicinity stopped to watch, drawn to the drama of the moment.

I saw Dr McIntyre come through the emergency room doors, flanked by nurses. I watched as he listened attentively to the paramedics, his face serious. He nodded occasionally, his calm authority apparent. Is that how he’d looked when I’d been brought in, same scene, different patient?

Had more miracles been performed?

Would they be more grateful than me?

As if sensing my gaze, Dr McIntyre glanced over and gave me his easy, warm smile, before raising his hand in farewell.

“Tessa?” Natalie made me jump. I had not heard her pull up.

“Sorry, miles away,” I mumbled.

Natalie looked across at the emergency scene. Jackson McIntyre was still looking our way. “He was your doctor,” she murmured, recognising him. “Very

yummy.” She flashed her devastating smile at him and he stared for a moment then quickly turned his attention to his new patient. I almost felt sorry for him. Natalie was very hard to ignore.

Natalie opened the passenger door for me, then wedged the vase of flowers on the floor of the back seat so they would not topple.

“Be right back,” she called over her shoulder and pushed the wheelchair back through the automatic doors.

I took several deep breaths. It was as if I had entered an alien world. Everything had changed, forever. My life would never be the same.

The rain eased on the windscreen and I saw the clouds were pulling apart like wispy candyfloss. Soon the sun would shine.

Natalie slid her long legs into the car and reached for her seat belt. “Ready to go, Kiddo?”

Kiddo. Natalie had been calling me that since we were sixteen. Her birthday was the day before mine and she thought it amusing to adopt the attitude of being wiser because of it. It was the opposite in fact and we both knew it. I was the reliable, conclusive one in our friendship, and had been since we were ten year olds wearing matching ribbons in our pigtails.

Natalie pulled her Nissan out onto the road, waving to the guy who slowed to let her into the lane. She bedazzled him with her bright, white smile and laughed when he gawked at her, fully aware of her potency. It was another major difference between Natalie and me. When it came to the opposite sex, she was an outrageous flirt. I was reserved, bordering on shy.

“Hope you know how to get to the beach house. You know me with directions.” She glanced at me hopefully.

“Just follow the signs north. We should see the turnoff to Lannoch once we get onto the highway,” I told her.

Natalie steered the car through the light traffic of downtown Marrickville and soon found the signs to the highway. Once she hit the onramp, she let the car find its cruising speed.

I struggled to keep up with Natalie’s chatter and she glanced across at me. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I lied. Everything was moving so quickly it was making me dizzy. The fastest thing I’d seen move in the past few weeks was the woman who’d mopped the floor in my room every day.

When an overtaking truck buffeted Natalie's little car in the jet stream, the cruel memory of those last few seconds before the car crash flashed through my mind. I shuddered.

Natalie must have seen because she braked, slowing the car. "I'm so sorry, Tessa! This is the first time you've been in a car since the... since it happened. Want me to pull over for a minute?"

I shook my head. There was something I wanted to do, though. "Nat, I want to find where the accident happened. I remember it was just after we took the turnoff. Can we stop there for a few minutes?"

Natalie looked unsure but then nodded.

She kept the speed down.

We had no difficulty finding the spot. Even after three weeks, the scars of the accident still showed on the road, long black skid marks burnt into the bitumen. Natalie pulled over and parked on the grassy verge. We sat in silence while I found the courage to get out. My hands were shaking and I clenched them tightly.

I walked a little way, following the bend. I'd hoped I might remember something. I stared at the twisting tyre marks. The truck's trailer coming out of nowhere, racing towards us, directly in our path, was very clear. I closed my eyes, concentrating. Blank. My next

memory was being in the hospital and the shock of knowing my parents were dead. Nausea hit me and I squatted down, concentrating on breathing until it passed.

“You okay, Tessa?” Natalie bent to put her arm about my shoulders.

“I just can’t remember, Nat!” I exclaimed. “Just a few seconds, sounds of brakes screeching, Mum crying out... Then nothing. Absolutely nothing!”

“Like amnesia?” Natalie asked.

I shrugged. “The doctor thinks it’s from the shock. My brain doesn’t want to remember and because I can’t, it’s so easy to tell myself it didn’t happen! Then, I remember Mum and Dad are dead...,” the hateful truth tumbled out and I snapped my teeth shut to cut it off.

“I should have died, Nat,” I told her fiercely. “Even the police know I should have died! They just keep calling it a miracle! Like that explains everything,” I said bitterly. “Do *you* believe in miracles, Nat?”

She pulled me to my feet. “If you being alive and unhurt is a miracle, then, yes, I believe in miracles.”

“Why would a miracle happen to me?” I demanded. “Why not Mum and Dad, too? It’s not fair, Natalie!”

I broke free from her, taking a few steps away, glaring at the rubber burns on the road as if they stubbornly held the answers.

Natalie put her arm around my shoulders again.

“I know it must feel terribly wrong, Tessa, but you survived and there must be a very good reason for that,” and she steered me back towards her car.

I suddenly thought of the wild flowers. I opened the back door and lifted them out of the vase. I would leave them in this sad place.

As I scattered them, a fleeting memory flashed into my mind. I stopped, trying to make sense of it, trying to hang on to it, but it was gone as quickly as it came. I still had a few flowers in my hand, the blue ones, and I stared at them.

Natalie came over. “Tessa? You okay?”

I looked at her. Her face was pinched with worry.

“I just remembered something. Something really weird... an angel was holding me in his arms,” I told her slowly.

Natalie’s eyes narrowed. “An angel?”

I nodded.

There was a long silence between us.

Finally, she shrugged. “Well, we were just talking about miracles. I guess angels are the usual

suspects.” She took my arm more firmly and headed back to the car.

“Maybe,” I conceded. I needed to tell her what else I’d remembered. “Nat, I know this sounds... well... it’s like he’s waiting for me.”

Natalie’s face tightened with shock, she went white then her cheeks flushed. “Well, he can bloody-well wait, Tessa!” she exploded. “You are not going anywhere for a very long time!”