

Chapter Eight

Sam took the road leading towards the village, and then turned off to follow a gravel track that wound up a hill. He pointed out the house. It was set amongst a stand of tall trees. As we neared, I could see the front was perched on long poles. The house looked as if it was suspended in the air.

“It’s fantastic,” I told him.

“Wait till you see the view,” Sam promised and parked the car, leaving it on the driveway. He came around to open my door and held out his hand for me. I smiled. His thoughtful courtesies reminded me of my father’s old-world manners.

I got out and looked back towards the coast. I could make out the towns of Marrickville to the south and Cape Moore to the north, and the entire stretch of Ten Mile Beach in between.

“Wow,” I said.

“It gets better,” and he led the way to the stairs. He took them two at a time, then waited for me at the top. The stairs opened onto a wide veranda that ran the full length of the house.

“Oh, I see what you mean!” I exclaimed and walked to the rail to take in the view. “It’s amazing, Sam,” I said, turning to him.

“Come inside,” he invited.

The entire front wall of the house was glass, floor to ceiling. Well, there were certainly no privacy issues, I thought. A large galley kitchen dominated one end and the rest of the huge room was divided into dining and living areas, with large rugs on the polished floorboards.

An area at the far end, held an array of stringed instruments, resting in individual stands. There was a guitar, a cello and a violin. I also recognised an Indian sitar and a lute but did not know the names of the other instruments. I looked at Sam curiously.

“Are you a musician?”

He smiled. “A collector. I play the guitar a little.”

“Perhaps you would play something for me?” I asked a little shyly.

“Absolutely! But not before breakfast. I’m starving,” he complained and I laughed.

“May I use your bathroom, please?”

Sam showed me to a small hall that ran off the other side of the house. “Second door on your right,” he said.

I freshened up, splashing cool water on my face and rinsing my hands. I looked in the mirror. My hazel eyes were bright and there were no signs from my sleepless night. Nor was there any sign of the surprise that my surfer, and the person who'd dominated my thoughts since meeting him the night before, were the same person.

There was not a lot I could do with my windswept hair. I settled for finger combing the fringe and twisting the length into a loose knot at the base of my neck.

On my way to find Sam, I paused to admire a framed photo on the long wall of the central living area. I immediately recognised the style from the one in my bedroom, and the gallery in town, too. The embossed symbol in the corner confirmed it.

The photo was intriguing. Taken from the edge of a steep cliff, the full moon sat high in the sky, and the sun just above the horizon. The sunset was spectacular, radiating golden orange beams into the blue sky. The moon was brilliant white.

Sam came out of a room further down the hall. He'd pulled on a white sweatshirt and swapped the orange board shorts for denim. I realised I was staring again.

“This is amazing,” I murmured turning back to the photo. “I’ve never seen a moment so perfectly captured. I have a photo by the same photographer in my house, sunbeams shining through storm clouds.”

Sam smiled and took my hand, heading for the kitchen. He was definitely more interested in food.

“What can I do?” I asked, as he started unloading ingredients from the fridge.

“Would you mind pouring the juice and making the toast?” He pointed to where everything I needed was located. I was happy to work alongside him. He made me laugh cracking the eggs with far more flair than was warranted.

“Show off,” I told him when he poured the whisked eggs into a pan and he grinned at me.

“She’s already figured you out, Brother,” a serene voice surprised me and I spun around to face the beautiful girl from the gallery. She was sitting on one of the bar stools at the counter. I had not heard her in the house.

More importantly, what had she said? *Brother?* I felt relief rush through me. Thank you, thank you, thank you! I had no idea who I was thanking. The girl smiled at me and I felt embarrassed, realising my relief

had shown on my face and she'd guessed the reason for it.

Sam shook his pan to settle the eggs before glancing back at her. "Tessa, this is my twin sister, Leiana. Leiana, this is Tessa," Sam introduced us.

Of course! I should have guessed! Their eyes were the give-away, though Sam's were more intensely blue.

"We spoke at the gallery in town, yesterday," I said and Leiana nodded, she remembered, and she smiled her wonderful serene smile again.

Feeling horribly shabby in my running gear and bare feet, I busied myself buttering the toast. Leiana was beautifully attired in a pale blue dress, her auburn hair piled intricately onto her head, exposing her long neck and the delicate bone structure of her face. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

"Would you like to join us for breakfast?" Sam asked, tossing mushrooms, tomatoes, and cheese into his fry pan.

"No, thank you. I'm heading over to the gallery. I am very pleased to finally meet you, Tessa," she said and slid gracefully off the stool.

"Finally?" I repeated. The way she said it implied it had been a very long wait indeed. She glanced at her

brother and I turned automatically to look at him, too. He was holding the frypan off the heat, looking at his sister. I looked back to Leiana. Whatever passed between them did not disrupt her serene demeanour.

“Sam talks about you a lot when he gets home from surfing,” she said easily. “Stop by the gallery any time,” she invited and Sam hastened her departure with a firm farewell.

He started serving the food. “Shall we eat outside?” he asked.

I nodded and we picked up cutlery, plates, and glasses of juice, heading onto the veranda, and the morning sunshine.

The omelette was as good as he promised. “But let’s face it, if the toast wasn’t this good, the omelette would definitely be average,” I told him, surprising myself by teasing him.

Sam paused chewing for a moment. His lips twitched. “You know, I was just about to say this is the best toast I have ever eaten...,” and he raised his eyebrow waiting for the compliment. I laughed and gave it to him and he forked more egg into his mouth.

We finished eating in silence. Not a strained silence, or even a silence waiting to be filled, just a comfortable silence of togetherness. I found it difficult

not to look at him. Fortunately, he felt the same about me.

“I went into the gallery in town yesterday,” I told him when we pushed our empty plates away. “I guess with Leiana working there, you’ve met the photographer?” and I glanced over my shoulder, indicating the frame on the wall.

“Yes,” and he smiled. “I am the photographer.”

I stared at him. It just didn’t fit my thoughts of him, at all. I thought of him as a surfer, and sometimes, bizarrely, as an angel.

“You don’t like them?” he asked at my stunned silence.

“Oh, I do,” I said. “Is it your gallery, then?”

“Leiana and I own it together. I have a studio above the shop. She likes talking to people, so she runs the gallery. We also sell prints from our website. I look after that side of the business.”

It was all so normal I almost laughed at my crazy, mixed up thoughts.

“Have you lived here long?” I asked him.

“Not really.”

“Oh! Where did you live before?”

“No particular place. I’ve spent a long time travelling.”

“On assignment? Taking photos?”

“Yes.”

“What brought you here?”

His expression became curious at my questions. Well, no, he didn't have to give me his life story. We had just met, after all.

“Fate,” he finally said, surprising me. There was total certainty in his voice.

“Really? I don't believe in fate,” I told him.

Sam studied my face and took one of my hands, measuring the length of his fingers against mine, fitting my palm against his. His fingers were much longer.

“Let me ask you this,” he said, curling his fingers down into mine. “Would you be sitting here having breakfast with me if we'd just met as two strangers on the beach?”

I thought about it. “Yes,” I said honestly.

“Then, whether you believe in fate, or not, doesn't matter. The outcome is the same.”

“I need time to think about that,” I said lamely.

Sam reached over and traced my jaw with his finger, following the curve of the bone. “Don't think too much, Tessa. Sometimes the answer lies in just believing,” and he raised my hand and kissed my fingers.

Sam drove me home and I invited him in, reluctant to be parted from him. Natalie was in the kitchen and she eyed our joined hands, just as Davan had done. Her expression was only marginally improved on his.

“Heya Nat!” I tried very hard not to look like I had done anything wrong. Well, I hadn’t but her expression told me she thought I had.

Natalie barely glanced at me. She was looking at Sam. I understood. Sam’s extreme good looks and the aura that filled the very air around him, made him irresistible.

“You didn’t get to meet Sam last night,” I said, trying for a casual tone. “Sam, this is my best friend, Natalie Shaw.”

“Nice to meet you, Sam,” Natalie replied and she tore her eyes away to look at me. “Tessa, *no-one* got to meet Sam last night,” she said waspishly.

“No. I’m sure Matt, Mandy and Jackson all thought I was very rude ditching them like that,” I said. “I guess we,” and I glanced at Sam for support, “just wanted to get some air. The crowd was crazy in there.”

“My fault, really, Natalie. I finally got up the nerve to ask Tessa for a dance and when she said yes, I wasn’t going to let her go,” Sam said urbanely.

The look of complete disbelief on Natalie’s face said she doubted he’d ever had a problem with his nerves.

“Hey, you’re both adults,” she said. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. Would you like a cup of coffee?” and she pretended indifference as she picked up the kettle.

“May I trouble you for tea?” Sam asked with one of his magnetic smiles and she stared at him. I smiled. He would have Natalie giddy in no time.

We sat on the stools at the kitchen bar while Natalie made the drinks. “I’m going to be out of your space real soon,” she commented, jiggling Sam’s tea bag. “Matt’s coming over to pick me up. He’s going to teach me to surf!” and she laughed with excitement.

I wasn’t sure if the prospect of surfing or spending time with Matt was the cause. “Matt?” I asked surprised.

“Yes, Matt,” and she raised her eyebrows at me, daring me to say anything.

“You’ve never tried surfing before?” Sam asked and Natalie shook her head, her blonde curls bouncing over her shoulders.

“No. Tessa and I always hung out together when we were growing up but as she’s terrified of the sea, we never tried it. Hey, Kiddo?”

“I guess that’s the reason,” I agreed.

Sam looked at me as if he was trying to understand something that had surprised him.

“Tessa nearly drowned when she was seven,” Natalie confided to him, as if I wasn’t there. “Her parents were so freaked out they turned into neurotics whenever she went anywhere near water.”

“So would you, Nat, if that happened to your child!” I shot back hotly, immediately defensive.

“Oh, absolutely! Not saying they were wrong to feel like that. Just that they did,” Natalie agreed heartily.

“I was an only child. I think that had a lot to do with my parents’ protectiveness,” I told Sam, needing to justify my parents’ fear.

“And you have never overcome your apprehension of the sea?” Sam asked, holding my gaze, with deep interest.

I shrugged. "I get to about knee deep and start getting anxious, probably because it used to upset my parents so much. I don't remember it very well, just a huge wave crashing over me, then being rolled under the water. I remember waking up in a hospital."

Sam's eyes held mine. "There is little to compare with swimming in the sea, Tessa, especially when you live right on the beach with the sea inviting you every day. We'll swim together," he promised but I could not get any enthusiasm for the idea. I knew where he liked to swim, in the deep end.

Natalie went to open the door when Matt arrived a few minutes later. He gave her a light kiss on the cheek, putting his arm about her shoulders as they came through to the kitchen. He pulled up short when he saw me, then Sam.

"Hey! I remember you! You ditched me half way through our date," he said. He sounded like he was teasing, but before I could respond, he'd turned to Sam. "We didn't get a chance to be introduced before you spirited Tessa away. No hard feelings mate. I'm Matt Langdon," and he held out his hand to Sam, leaving me unsure if he *was* teasing.

"Sam Archer," Sam introduced himself, looking unperturbed.

As they shook hands, I realised I had not known his surname. I thought of the symbol he used on his art, the ornate bow around the gold disk.

“Something to drink, Matt?” Natalie offered and he opted for coffee.

Matt leaned on the end of the counter. “I work with Tessa, at the local school, teaching, but I guess she told you that?” he said to Sam.

“Sorry, Matt. We’ve been busy talking about other things,” Sam said evenly.

I looked at him and saw his eyes had darkened just a shade. We hadn’t been busy talking about much at all, actually.

“Of course!” and Matt’s expression said what he thought that meant. “So, do you surf, mate?” he continued without even the slightest hint of regret for my embarrassment.

“Yes. Where’s your favourite spot?” Sam asked which launched Matt into a conversation about places he had surfed around the world.

Natalie caught my eye and inclined her head to the far end of the kitchen bench. I freed my hand from Sam’s and gave him a smile before he obliged Matt with his full attention.

“So what was that about last night?” Natalie whispered. “He,” she indicated Sam with her chin, “walks up to you, asks you to dance, you look like you’ve been hit by lightning or something, and the next thing you’re leaving with him! Mandy was thinking all sorts and I was worried silly! It wasn’t till I got home and saw your bag and keys on the bench that I knew you’d got home safely. I even had to take a peek in your room, hoping like hell he wasn’t in there, which I was sure he wouldn’t be,” she added at my outraged expression, “to make sure you were okay. Man, Tessa, it was so unlike you. It’s something... / would do!” she hissed.

“Don’t get me wrong! He’s absolutely gorgeous and Mister Charming himself *but* he could still have been the axe-murderer for all you knew!”

I almost laughed. I had never known Natalie to have such self-control. Normally she just blurted out her thoughts.

“It just felt right, Nat. I’m sorry you were worried, though,” I said placating my friend.

“Hey, you’re a big girl. Doesn’t hurt to be a little cautious, though!” Natalie glanced over her shoulder to where the guys were still talking. Well, Matt was talking. Sam was listening.

“And what’s with you and Matt?” I whispered back.
“Since when have you ever wanted to learn to *surf*?”

Natalie raised her eyebrows at me with a slow smile. “Since I met Matt!”

“We had better head off soon if we are going to catch some baby waves and get you back in time for work, Nat,” Matt called and we rejoined them at the other end of the counter.

“I’ve got a bikini on under this,” Natalie said indicating her shorts and tank top. “Do I need to bring anything?” I could tell Matt was looking forward to seeing the bikini.

“No, perfect as you are. I’ve got a wet suit that should fit you, if the wind picks up and it gets cold. And I’ve got a stack of towels in the car.”

“Let’s go, then!” Natalie said and Matt shook hands with Sam again.

“We’ll have to catch a wave together sometime,” Matt said and Sam nodded.

“See you at school tomorrow, *Miss Howard*,” Matt mocked me with the name I was about to get very used to and he bent to kiss my cheek.

The house was quiet after their departure, just the sound of the waves and the breeze in the pandanus palms. Sam sat watching me. I had never been looked

at the way he looked at me. I felt self-conscious and empowered at the same time. Sensory overload.

“Shall we sit outside?” I suggested and Sam stood up to follow me.

He paused on the way to look at the photos on the sideboard. The central one was a family portrait taken when I was about seven years old. I sat on my father’s lap, my mother leaning in close over Dad’s shoulder, her arms around us both. There was another taken on my eighteenth birthday, me in the middle, Mum and Dad either side. The last one was the full size version of the photo I had in my car.

“You take after your father,” Sam said referring to my Dad’s dark hair and hazel eyes. My mother had been a natural blonde, with green eyes.

“In looks, yes. I have my mother’s personality,” I told him and touched my fingers to my lips and then to the centre photo, oddly comfortable to share the private gesture in front of him.

“You were such a beautiful child,” Sam said, he was looking at the photo of me when I was seven.

I looked up at him, not understanding the emotion I heard in his voice.

“I think I was pretty precocious. My parents doted on me,” and the sharp loss of them knifed deeply. I

quickly turned away, heading outside, the thin bubble of happiness threatening to burst.

I stood on the lawn, looking across the water for a few minutes, composing myself. When I turned back, Sam had sat on one of the loungers. I went and sat on the lounge next to him. The dune was high enough to block the beach from view, giving the deck privacy. We had the whole scene just to ourselves.

“Matt said you are a teacher,” Sam said and I nodded.

“Yes, I just finished University. It’s my first day of classes tomorrow.”

“What made you want to teach?”

“My parents were teachers, and my grandparents, on both sides, too. Bit of a family tradition. I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

“And you wanted to teach here?”

I thought about it for a moment. It had been such a long shot to get the posting. “It was more like here chose me,” I told him. “I applied for schools in the city but I thought it would be really good to teach in a small seaside town. My mum loved the beach.” Tears prickled the back of my eyes. “I thought it would be great if I got a position where my parents could holiday with me, whenever they wanted. I just picked a spot off

the map and put an application in. I never thought I'd get it. Two weeks later, I received the offer."

I remembered how very lucky I'd felt when I'd opened that letter. The price of luck had been excessively high, though. It had cost me my parents. Tears welled in my eyes and I took a slow breath to get them under control. I felt foolish.

"I'm sorry, Sam," I apologised, my voice husky. "Do you know about me? Did you read in the local paper that I was in a car accident? That my parents were killed? That I walked away without a scratch." I still couldn't summon any gratitude for that mercy.

Tears ran down my cheeks and I looked away, embarrassed that I couldn't keep my emotions under control. I stared out at the horizon trying very hard to hold the sadness at bay. I could feel Sam watching me. What must he be thinking?

"My parents were two of the best people in this world," I said when I'd mustered some control back. "They were planning early retirement. They wanted to go and teach kids to read and write in third world countries, give them a chance at a better life. Kind, caring people that everyone loved."

I finally looked back at him. "And just like that," I snapped my fingers, "they were gone."

I saw his eyes had darkened to almost black. His jaw was tight and a muscle ticked with tension at the side of his throat.

“I am so sorry, Tessa,” he said very softly and swung his legs over the lounge. He took my hands in his.

We sat in silence for a while and an odd coincidence occurred to me. I frowned as I thought it through.

“Sam, I saw a photo yesterday in your gallery. The Valley of Flowers, Leiana told me. She said it’s in the Himalayas. Did you take that photo?”

“I did. It’s one of my favourite places.”

My brain reeled as I thought of the dream with all the photos strewn on the ground, the photo of Sam in the valley. I’d thought my subconscious had somehow bizarrely connected meeting him at The Shack with seeing the photo of the valley. But he was the photographer, he’d been there!

“Sam, I was in a coma for a week after the accident. I have no memory of the accident, or even anything much that first week after I woke up. The doctor thinks it’s from the shock of the accident.” I saw his expression change and hurried on. I didn’t want his sympathy!

“It wasn’t till I saw the photo in the gallery that I remembered a bit of a dream I’d had. Seeing the photo made me remember it. What’s really weird, though, is in the dream I was standing in exactly that spot in the photo. Then I meet you, the person who took the photo! How coincidental is that?”

Sam’s face became enigmatic.

“There’s no such thing as coincidence, Tessa. Everything happens for a reason,” he said softly.

“What reason, Sam?”

“Fate joining our paths,” he answered and an eerie shiver ran through me.

“Do you *really* believe in fate, Sam?”

“Yes.” There was no hesitation or uncertainty in his voice.

“And everything that happens is because of fate?”

He nodded.

“I don’t agree,” I told him. “I believe things happen because of the decisions we make.”

Sam nodded, again. “Yes, our decisions influence the paths we take,” he granted.

Guilt raced through me. I took my hands out of his and stood up, walking to the edge of the deck, then turning back to him. “Like me putting in an application

to teach here! If I hadn't, I would never have come here and my parents would be alive!"

"You had no control over that, Tessa. Your coming here was meant to be. Your parents' deaths are not your fault," Sam said firmly.

Anger, despair, and guilt warred inside me.

"Yes, it is my fault, Sam!" I cried.

The minutes ticked past very slowly. Grief clenched its cold fist about my heart.

I went back and sat on the edge of the lounge. "I'm sorry, Sam," I told him. "I don't know what you think fate has in store for us but..."

"Tessa," he said, his voice low and urgent, cutting off the rush of words.

I stared into his intense gaze. "I need some time," I said.