

## Chapter Twelve

Zac Moreton was being particularly difficult. When he arrived in the morning, he slung his bag across the floor of the classroom. I told him to take it outside and put it on the rack where it belonged. For one long minute, I thought he was going to defy me. He gave in and sullenly kicked the bag all the way out the door. I ignored him when he came back and thumped himself into his chair.

We had a class excursion to the beach after lunch and the class was excited by the change in routine, making the morning lessons difficult. Concentration was definitely missing. That included me, too, though it was not the excursion to the beach distracting me.

I was relieved when the little lunch bell rang and the kids took off out the door. I hoped they'd burn off some energy in the playground! I ducked over to the staff room and made a cup of coffee, looking forward to a few minutes of quiet.

On the way back, Matt waved to get my attention, Zac was a few steps behind him as they came from the playground. I saw Zac's face was flushed and angry.

Matt raised his eyebrows at me. “Your classroom, Miss Howard?” I nodded and led the way. I sent Zac inside so Matt could tell me what had happened.

Zac stood by my desk staring at his feet, his head hung in stubborn silence. “Zac, you can talk to me,” I encouraged him. “If you help me understand why you are upset, I might be able to help.”

He didn’t reply.

“Okay, so let’s talk about what happened. Mr Langdon told me you kicked Lucas Gordon’s lunch box over and his sandwich got covered in dirt. Is that right?”

Matt had told me that Lucas was a well-liked boy in grade seven and it was highly unlikely he had provoked Zac. Lucas Gordon was also the biggest kid in the school. He’d been very restrained just pushing Zac away. Matt had been on playground duty and seen the incident. Neither of us had a clue why Zac would pick a fight with Lucas.

Zac just shrugged.

“Did he say or do something to make you do that, Zac?”

“Okay,” I said when he didn’t respond. “Since you don’t want to talk about it, and help me understand, can we make an agreement?” I waited until he looked

up. His blue eyes were bright with tears he was barely managing to hold back. He wasn't a bad kid. There was just something seriously bothering him.

"How about we put this behind us? You need to apologise to Lucas for ruining his lunch. I want you to write him an apology and give it to him at lunchtime. I'll buy him a sandwich from the tuck shop, so he has something to eat. What's done is done."

I saw a glimmer of relief on his face. "Do we have an agreement?" I asked.

"Yes."

I raised an eyebrow at him.

"Yes, Miss Howard," he said more convincingly.

"Good. I'll let Mr Langdon know what we've agreed. Go write that apology now."

"Miss Howard?" Zac said, after he'd sat at his desk.

"Yes, Zac?"

"Can I still come this afternoon, to the beach?"

I hadn't considered leaving him behind. Writing the apology and giving it to Lucas was enough punishment, especially as he seemed to be worried about something else.

"Yes, Zac, you can come along."

Matt and Mandy had 'volunteered' to help with my class outing. I suspected John Brennan hadn't given them a choice, not that either of them had complained. They'd arranged for the other teachers to keep an eye on their students. The purpose of the outing was to collect things from the beach to add to the underwater scene Sam was going to paint on the empty back wall in the classroom.

The rules were simple. They could collect anything as long as it was dead and it could be glued to a piece of backing cardboard; they had to stay in their group; they had to keep their hats on; and, they were not allowed to get their shoes wet. The last brought a groan from them. I hid a smile.

Before we left, I divided the kids into three groups of six and appointed Matt and Mandy to a group. I took the group with Zac. He was particularly quiet. He had offered his note and a mumbled apology to Lucas Gordon at lunchtime and then gone off on his own. I would have liked to talk to him some more but by the time I took Lucas over to the tuckshop and caught up with Matt, I barely had time for a coffee myself.

The beach was just across the road from the school and we used the steps cut into the cliff to get

down to the sand. I had a place in mind and steered everyone north, towards the rock pools.

The wind was gusty and a large swell spawned decent waves. I saw Matt looking towards them more than once. I knew where he would be after school was out.

The kids had a whale of a time running along the beach, stopping to look at shells, seaweed, dried cuttlefish, and pieces of driftwood. Eric Baxter found an old shoe, bleached white from the sun and salt water. He proudly added it to the bag I carried to hold the collection. Sticking it to the wall was going to be a challenge. Maybe Sam could paint some fish swimming out of it or something.

It helped my composure when I thought of Sam as just an ordinary person, well, if outrageously handsome and extremely talented could be considered ordinary, I qualified. Problem was, I seemed to have more memories of him that were extraordinary than ordinary.

I sat on one of the rounded boulders watching my group as they scoured around the rock pools. Matt's group was closer to the water and Mandy had her group at the bottom of the cliff, they were sifting through the soft sand. Judging from the excited

squeals coming from their direction, the base of the cliff was proving to be the best catchall for the flotsam of the sea.

I counted heads again. 1,2,3,4,5,6.

“Miss Howard, look!” Sarah held out her hand to show me a piece of bleached coral she’d found. The branches were smooth from the constant abrasion in the sand.

“That will look fantastic, Sarah,” I said and she happily added it to the bag.

1,2,3,4...5...6.

Matt’s kids had succumbed to the ongoing success of Mandy’s group and had joined them along the cliff base. So had two from my group. The other four were higher on the dry sand heading in the same direction, the rock pools exhausted of their treasures.

I turned my back to the sea so I could keep them in sight, buffeted by the wind behind me.

1,2...3,4,5...6.

Jackson had been right. I could believe in angels.

1,2,3,4,5,6.

Jane Lawrence came running down the sand to me. “Look, Miss Howard! Look what Zac and I found. Do you think we could glue this on?” she asked. Jane was a lovely, sweet natured child. I looked at the crab

shell, perfectly preserved, just minus the crab, right down to its pincers. I turned it over and saw the underneath of the shell was flat.

“I think so, Jane. If we are careful to keep the glue off the claws, it will look like its swimming. Shall we add it to the collection?” She gave me a huge grin before dashing back up the beach.

1,2,3,4,5...

1.2.3.4.5.

I stood up and counted the kids again, looking at each of them in turn, recognising them. Sarah, Eric, Michael, Jane, Peter... Where was Zac? I jumped down from the boulder and looked back towards the sea. Nothing. I swept the beach in both directions.

I started to run towards the cliff. There was just open sand between the boulder where I'd sat and the cliff. Nowhere to hide. Matt and Mandy's groups had spread out. I counted as I ran. Seventeen kids. I counted them again. Seventeen.

“Matt!” I called and he looked over, hearing the urgency in my voice. I took a deep breath to get some control. I didn't want to panic the rest of the kids.

“I can't see Zac,” I told him when he came over.

Matt immediately counted the kids, then counted them again. He swore under his breath. "Where did you last see him?"

"Up here by the cliff. Jane was with him. She brought a crab shell they'd found, I put it in the bag and then did a head count... He's got to be here!"

We both counted the kids again.

Mandy must have guessed something was wrong because she was gathering her group and heading towards us.

Matt called, "Over here, everyone. Now, please. Everyone sit down," he told the kids.

I counted their heads again. Seventeen.

"We've misplaced Zac Moreton," Matt said quietly to Mandy. She counted then swore under her breath.

"Okay, guys, who saw Zac last?" Matt asked and Jane shot her hand up.

"We were over there," and she pointed to the spot where I had seen the pair of them together.

"Jane, was Zac still there after you brought me the crab?" I asked.

"I don't know, Miss Howard, I went over to see what Eric had found."

“Mandy, keep an eye on the class and, here, take my phone. Give John a call and tell him what’s happened,” Matt took his cell phone out of his pocket.

“Protocol,” he told me. “Principal has to be advised immediately. You go north, Tessa, I’ll go south. He has to be on the beach, heaven forbid not in the water. The cliffs are too high and I don’t remember any paths around here so I think we can rule that out. Ten minutes tops, then we meet back here. Let’s go,” Matt took complete control of the situation.

I took off at a run. It could only be five minutes since I had seen him. How far could one small boy get in five minutes? The wet sand held no footprints, constantly washed from the incoming tide. I did not want to think of him going into the water.

Five minutes and I reluctantly turned back, retracing my steps, casting between the shore and the cliffs. I was beyond sick with worry. I looked towards the group of kids as I jogged along the water line. No one was hailing me with good news.

Then I saw Sam. He was walking purposely towards the group with his long stride. Leiana was with him.

“Oh, Sam,” I breathed and the tension eased a little, knowing he was close.

We arrived at the same time and I had difficulty looking away from him but John Brennan was hurrying towards us, too, his face red and beaded with perspiration. He looked like he had been running. Sandy, from Admin, was with him. She took charge of my class from Mandy.

“I’m so sorry, John,” I said. “I just don’t know how I missed seeing him leave...”

John was conscious of Sam and Leiana. “May I help you?” he asked them.

“Hey, Sam,” Matt said at the same time and they shook hands.

“John, this is Sam Archer and his sister, Leiana. Sam is the artist who offered to paint the wall in my classroom,” I told John. “Sam, Leiana, this is John Brennan, the school Principal. I’ve... I’ve lost one of my students.” Mandy put her arm around my shoulder when my voice broke.

“We can help,” Sam told John, his voice was calm. His eyes were only for me.

“I’m sure he’ll be okay, Tessa.” I wasn’t sure if John was trying to reassure himself or me. I glanced at Sam, his reassurance meant more, but he was looking out at the sea.

I felt ill.

“He won’t be when I get my hands on him,” Matt said. “I wonder if this is pay-back for this morning.” John Brennan looked at him sharply and Matt filled him in.

“No,” I said. “I don’t think so. Something is troubling him, not that I could get him to talk about it.”

“Okay, our priority is to find him. We can worry about why later. I’ve called the police. They should be here very soon. First, we need to get these kids back to school.”

“I can help with that,” Leiana offered.

“Thank you, that would be appreciated,” John said.

“Okay, Mandy, can you, Sandy and Leanne get the kids back to school, please? It’s only half an hour until the end of the day. Keep reassuring them that Zac is fine.” No one corrected him on Leiana’s name.

“Matt, Sam, best if you keep looking for him,” and they both nodded. “Tessa, you and I need to talk to the police when they arrive, then I’ll get back to the school and answer any questions parents might have.”

“Sandy, keep trying Mrs Moreton’s number. Put her through to my cell phone as soon as you reach her,” John called over to his assistant and she nodded.

Mandy gave my shoulders another quick squeeze and headed over to Sandy and the kids. Leiana gave me a warm, reassuring smile and followed Mandy.

“I’ll see you all in class tomorrow,” I told my students. They were all looking very serious. I gave them a wave and the best smile I could muster. They waved back. I watched them march off down the beach. Leiana was popular with the girls I saw.

Matt and John were devising a search grid, drawing it in the sand. Sam stepped closer, taking my hands, and I felt the warm comfort of him flowing into me.

“Are there caves around here?” I suddenly asked as a thought took hold.

Sam released my hands.

“Yes,” John said looking up from his lines in the sand.

“I think that is where Zac has gone. Do you know where they are?”

“I can show you,” Sam said.

John Brennan thought for a moment. “Okay. I’ll wait for the police. Matt, you go back towards town in case he was heading home. Everyone got a phone?” Matt and I nodded.

“Send me a text, every ten minutes,” he ordered.

Sam led me north, his hand warm and strong over mine. I kept scanning the waves, terrified I would see Zac's small body. Sam was watching the waves, too, and when he suddenly pointed across the water, my heart nearly stopped, expecting the worst.

I followed the direction he was indicating. Just beyond the waves, I saw the pod of dolphins, all seven of them, skimming rapidly over the surface before diving under the waves and reappearing again.

"We can concentrate on the beach, Tessa," Sam told me and I stared up at him. "We'll find him," he said.

"Do you *know* that for sure, Sam?"

"I don't know the child's fate."

"Oh, Sam! What if something terrible happens to him? I don't think I could bear it!"

"Look!" Sam pointed at the jutting headland that thrust out into the sea in front of us. "The cave is up there," and I scanned the sprawl of dark rocks that had collapsed from the cliff millennia ago, tumbling into the sea. The waves were crashing over the end, sending spray high into the air.

"Why do you think he will be at the cave?" Sam asked.

“Batman,” I told him. “Zac wrote a story about Batman for some homework. I read it last night. He spent more time writing about a little cave and it occurred to me that it might be his favourite spot.”

Sam helped me scramble up the steep rocks until we reached the ridge. Sea spray showered over us. I could see the opening to the cave. Just big enough for a small boy.

“Zac?” I called. I could not see into the cave, it was too dark. I walked closer and bent down. “Zac?”

I heard something move. I glanced at Sam to see if he had heard it, too. He nodded. “Come on, Zac, at least let me know you aren’t hurt,” I cajoled. There was a long silence. I waited, holding my breath.

“I’m alright,” drifted out and Sam grinned at me as I struggled to get my temper under control. The relief was overwhelming, making me mad.

“That’s good, Zac,” I managed conversationally. “I’m really pleased to hear that. I have been horribly worried.”

I took my cell phone out of my pocket and found John Brennan’s number. I hit the dial button but the call did not connect. There was no signal. “I’ll go back to the beach, away from the rocks,” Sam offered and I handed him my phone.

“Zac, I need you to help me out,” I said, sitting down with my back resting on the side of the cave opening. “It would really help if you came out so we can talk about this, especially as I am going to have to explain to your parents, Mr Brennan, the police and everyone in the class, too.”

“Wasn’t your fault, Miss Howard,” Zac said, his voice came from just inside the cave.

“Well, I didn’t do a very good job, otherwise you wouldn’t be sitting in a cave and I wouldn’t be sitting out here getting saturated by the waves,” I told him and out of the corner of my eye saw him crawl out of the opening. I resisted looking at him. He sat down next to me. I waited.

“I just wanted to hide for a little while,” Zac said very quietly after a few minutes.

“Because of what happened this morning with Lucas?”

“No.”

“Because this is your favourite place?” I looked down at him and he nodded, his face very serious. I saw he had scraped his knee, probably scrambling up the rocks.

“I have a favourite place, too, where I like to go when things are a bit tough,” I told him, but only in my dreams.

Zac nodded again.

“What’s troubling you, Zac?” We both had to wipe our faces from another shower of seawater.

“It’s my Mum,” he said eventually and he looked at his bloody knee. “She’s really sick.”

“Oh, Zac, I’m sorry to hear that. And you’re worried about her?” and he nodded. “Is Dr McIntyre her doctor?” I remembered Jackson telling me she was his patient. I’d assumed in the context of general health, not an illness.

Zac nodded again.

“Well, she’s very lucky to have a good doctor who will make her well again. Dr McIntyre was my doctor, too.”

“Did he look after you when you were in hospital?” he asked.

“Yes,” I told him and his face seemed to relax a little. If it gave him comfort to think Jackson made me well, I was not going to refute it.

The waves were crashing with growing intensity and while we were in no danger of getting cut off, or unable to get down to the beach, we were getting

awfully wet from the spray. Still, Zac had opened up. I thought it more important to keep him talking. A bit of sea spray wasn't going to do either of us any harm.

“Is your Mum in hospital, Zac?”

“Sometimes. But she's really sick when she comes home.”

I wondered if she was having chemotherapy. “I understand now why you are worried. Who's been looking after you? Your Dad?”

Zac shook his head slowly. “Dad went to live somewhere else. Granma comes and stays.” His voice was rough with tears.

I put my arm about his shoulders and hugged him, my heart going out to him. Poor kid!

Sam came back over the rocks but didn't climb up onto the ridge. We looked at each other then he smiled at the boy.

“Zac, this is my friend, Sam. Sam this is Zac,” I introduced them and Zac said a shy hello.

“Pleased to meet you, Zac,” Sam said solemnly.

“Tessa? Tessa? Everything okay?” John Brennan's voice floated up to us.

“I think we had better go,” Sam said, glancing down over his shoulder. “The police have arrived. I think they might come up otherwise.”

Zac looked apprehensively at me.

“It’s going to be okay, Zac.”

“Do you want me to come up, Tessa?” Matt yelled.

“We’re coming down,” I called back as I stood up, holding out my hand to Zac. He took it and stood up, wincing as the dried blood caught on his knee.

Sam lifted the boy down to the rock he stood on. “I’ll help him down,” he said as a huge wave hit the rocks and water poured over us. I waited until Sam and Zac were half way down before I started to follow.

A gust of wind caught Zac’s hat. It flew upwards then fluttered across the rocks, landing in a pool of water that was rushing back to the sea. Without thinking, I chased after it, losing my footing and sliding right to the edge before I managed to regain my balance. I froze, trying to think of the best way to get back to safety. Too late, I realised I should have just hurled myself away from the edge when the next wave crashed against the rocks, dumping water over me. The weight of it knocked me off balance and I plunged over the edge, falling, falling, falling into the sea.

I hit the water and instinctively kicked to get below the waves to avoid being smashed against the rocks in the next surge. The current took me, pulling me rapidly

away. It happened so quickly, I didn't even think to panic.

I was oddly content to float with the movement of the water. It was so quiet beneath the sea and memories from my childhood filled my mind. Then, as if reliving one of them, I looked upwards, towards the surface and something shiny caught my attention. I focused on it with fascination. I knew what it was before I could see the detail in the muted light.

Sam's medallion.

Then Sam was there. I took his hand as he reached for me. He drew me close and smiled. I smiled back at him.

*Just as I had years before!*

With his arm around my waist, he propelled us upward until we broke the surface of the water. Instinctively I gasped air into my lungs. Sam kept his arm around me, treading water, keeping us both afloat.

"Tessa! Oh my God, Tessa!"

We both looked around. Matt and John were at the edge of the water, pulling off their shoes. Behind them, a police officer was running down the sand with an orange flotation device in his hands. Zac was standing with another police officer, near a four-wheel drive. He

looked like he was crying. The police officer had her arm around his shoulders.

I gave Zac a wave. He waved back.

I looked at Sam. He loosened his hold on me and we just bobbed with the waves. Sam's medallion lay against his sodden shirt, gleaming in the sun, and I picked it up. The gold shone brightly against my palm. I stroked my thumb along the outline of the bow and then onto the disc of the sun in the centre.

Two distinct pieces intricately bound together.