

Chapter Fourteen

“What happened with Sam, Tessa?” Natalie called out as she came through the front door. “He roared out of the driveway and down the road like there were demons on his tail.”

When I didn't respond Natalie came looking for me. I hadn't moved since he'd left. Sam hadn't said another word but the look on his face had been terrible. Judging by Natalie's reaction, mine was no better.

“Oh, Tessa!” she said and came and sat next to me. She put her arms about me, rocking me gently. “You need to get some sleep,” she said after a while. “Jackson rang and told me to make sure you got plenty of rest. He was worried about you having delayed shock. Looks like he was right.”

She pulled me up, keeping her arm about my waist and walked me to my bedroom. She flipped on the bedside lamp and pulled back the covers. I sat stiffly on the bed.

“Want me to give Jackson a call and ask him to stop in on his way home? He was hoping to finish around 11pm.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head.

“Need a hand to get changed?”

I shook my head again.

“Call if you need me,” Natalie said and closed the door behind her.

I didn't bother changing. I lay down curling into a ball, wrapping my arms about myself. So many thoughts spun through my head but I kept coming back to the most confronting of all, my life had been a battle between fate and the will of an ancient god.

My head filled with a vision of golden light and deep blackness swirling faster and faster as they fought to consume each other. The darkness grew larger, dominating, encompassing, then the golden light burst into brilliance, overcoming and banishing the blackness.

A battle of cosmic proportions because he had fallen in love with me.

I thought about him sparing my parents the unthinkable loss of me as a child. For that, I was thankful to him, an immense kindness. Then I was angry with him. Why had he not saved my parents and spared *me* the loss of them?

He was immortal! He had changed fate because he believed it was our destiny to be together. To what

end? We came from different worlds. What was the bridge between such a divide?

Had fate known better, after all?

Exhausted, I closed my eyes.

I waited for dawn to chase the long night away. Still lying curled on my bed, I watched the early sunbeam slant across the floor and slowly rise to the wild flowers, then magnify in the mirror as it had the day before. I pulled the pillow over my head.

After the sunbeam had continued on its track, leaving my room in shadow, I forced myself out of bed. I would drive myself insane just thinking the same thoughts over and over. I felt a burning need to do something useful, to justify my existence. I was alive when clearly I was not meant to be.

I decided to go see Ann Moreton, Zac's mum.

I rang John Brennan to get Zac's address. He was still worried about me. I assured him I was fine before thanking him for the day off and confirming I'd be back at school in the morning.

Natalie must have heard me in the kitchen. She came out bleary-eyed, tying her robe, and sat on one

of the breakfast stools. I assured her I was fine, too. She went back to bed.

I'd have to nominate myself for an Oscar, I thought sourly.

The Moreton house was on the outskirts of Lannoch, a street away from the beach, not far from the cliffs and the cave where Zac had disappeared. When I knocked, Zac opened the door. He looked surprised, then excited.

"Hi Zac, I wanted to come over and see your Mum, and make sure you are okay," I told him and he grinned at me.

"Mum! Granma! It's my teacher, Miss Howard!" Zac yelled over his shoulder and he grabbed my hand and pulled me inside.

I followed Zac down the hall but paused at the door of the lounge room. The curtains were drawn, blocking the morning light, a lamp turned on in a corner of the room. An elderly woman got up from an armchair, putting aside the knitting she'd been working on. She shuffled over to me with a smile.

"I came to see Zac's Mum," I said quietly and she nodded, glancing over her shoulder to her daughter, who lay propped against pillows on the sofa.

She patted my arm, kindly. "I'll make some tea," she said.

Zac stood near his Mum and he beckoned me over. As I slowly walked into the room, I saw Ann Moreton's face was nearly as white as the pillowcase except for the dark circles under her eyes. A dark blue bandana covered her head, confirming my thought of chemotherapy. She looked painfully thin under the blanket that covered her. I thought she was asleep but she opened her eyes and looked at me.

"Mrs Moreton, I'm Tessa Howard. Zac's teacher," I told her.

"Zac, go get your teacher a chair, please," she asked her son. "Call me Ann," she said, her voice sounded tired.

"Thank you for finding my boy. Are you alright? The Principal said you had a nasty fall off the rocks."

"I'm fine, Ann," I said. "I came to apologise for losing Zac and causing you any worry." I smiled at the boy as he brought a chair from another room.

"I doubt you lost him. Zac loves that cave. His dad used to take him there all the time. It's just somewhere he goes when he needs to get away," and she struggled to sit a little higher on the pillows. Zac helped her and she managed a brief smile at him.

“Go help Granma, Zac, while your teacher and I talk for a few minutes.” He went off happily enough.

“Please, sit down,” Ann invited.

“Zac told me you have been very sick. I guess I understand now why he’s not been coping in class. I wanted to see how I might be able to help,” I said gently, not wanting to intrude.

“It’s been tough on him,” she agreed. “I was diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer six months ago.” She said it matter of fact and I admired her bravery.

“I’m so sorry, Ann. That must be very difficult.” I did not know what else to say. We sat in silence for a while.

“About a month after I started chemotherapy, Zac’s dad left us,” she told me. “He couldn’t cope with my illness,” her words were low and I had to lean forward to hear. I stared at her, shocked.

“He said he loved me too much to stay,” she added and closed her eyes.

“Oh, Ann!” I couldn’t begin to imagine how she must feel being so callously abandoned when she needed support the most.

When she opened her eyes, I saw they were misty with tears. “Don’t be so quick to judge,” she told me. “I

was equally to blame. I loved him too much to want him to watch me die.”

I stared at her. Could someone really be that selfless?

“But the chemotherapy is helping?” I asked and she shrugged her thin shoulders and touched the bandana.

“It’s doing all the things it is supposed to but the cancer is not in remission.” She closed her eyes again as if the effort of talking had worn her out.

I let her rest and looked around the dimly lit room. A wedding photo hanging on the wall drew my attention. Ann’s blonde hair was cut short, framing her face, her smile made you want to smile back, to share her happiness. Her husband stood with his arms around her, his cheek pressed close against hers. The tender love he felt for the woman in his arms was very apparent.

“Poor Zac,” Ann said and I looked back at her. She’d seen what I’d been looking at. “He’s barely had time to come to terms with his dad leaving and now has to get used to the idea of losing me, too,” she said. Her voice was flat, emotionless.

I stared at her again. How easy she made it sound. The thought of Zac losing his mum cut deeply

into me. “Do you *really* think he will just get used to the idea? Like he’ll just wake up one morning and think ‘Oh, well’?! You have to believe you can get well, Ann. Not just for Zac but for your own sake, too!”

Her eyes did not waver from me and I flushed, embarrassed by my outburst. “I’m sorry. I lost my parents just before Christmas in a car accident. I... miss them so much,” I apologised.

“I remember reading about it. I thought you were very brave to start school so soon after. You must be very strong,” she told me.

“The hardest thing was the suddenness. We were laughing and joking and then... they were gone.” I surprised myself that I had shared that with her.

“Be thankful, Tessa. Dying slowly just hurts the people you love. I know,” and she sighed.

“You say it like you have no choice!” I objected.

“The doctors don’t have much faith,” she said wearily.

I took her hand and squeezed her cold fingers. “It’s not up to the doctors. It’s up to you, Ann!” but she’d closed her eyes. She seemed immune to hope.

When Ann’s mother brought the tea, I told them how I might be able to offer some assistance. With Zac getting behind in his schoolwork, I suggested he could

come home with me after school to do his homework, so I could give him some extra help. I'd drop him home afterwards. Ann agreed. Even Zac looked keen.

Instead of driving home after I left the Moreton's, I followed the coast road, heading north. It was a pretty drive, the road winding around the cliffs with beautiful panoramas of the sea. I found driving soothed the turmoil of my thoughts.

Oddly, the least daunting revelation was the enigma of Sam. It was a relief to finally understand and it seemed understanding gave me the ability to accept the unbelievable.

That he loved me had not surprised me. With the dark curtain shielding my memories lifted, I remembered clearly that moment when I'd lain in his arms on the side of the road, known his love for me was immense. I couldn't doubt it. The warmth of his love resided inside me.

The realisation that Sam could have saved my parents had ripped the scab off the wound in my heart, though, exposing a torrent of grief. What harm could it have done to save them, as he had saved me?

The most disturbing thought, however, was that I had no right to be alive. Not once, but twice, my life was meant to end. I felt like a fraud, living on borrowed time.

Lost in my thoughts, I took a turnoff that led back onto the highway, forcing me to take the slip road to Lannoch, and the sweeping bend where the accident had happened.

I shivered when I realised where I was, then staring out the windscreen, I slowed the car and pulled over on the verge and got out. The grassy bank was ablaze with tiny deep, deep blue flowers. The flowers I'd scattered had self-sown themselves.

I bent to pick several, holding them in my palm. The colour was the same as Sam's eyes. Gently I closed my fingers over them and a sudden thought galvanised me out of my bleak mood. I could help Ann and spare Zac the loss of *his* mother.

I would ask Sam for another miracle.

I drove into Lannoch and parked my little red Mini on the main street, and walked straight into the gallery. Leiana was with a customer. She gave me a long look, and then smiled.

I waited at the counter, tracing my fingers over the black granite trying to calm my thoughts. Surely, Sam

would help Ann. Or would he defer to fate, as he had for my parents?

The customer finally made her decision and followed Leiana to the counter. She set the photo down and stepped back to admire the perfect rainbow emblazoned across a misty grey sky.

“Isn’t it just amazing?” the woman said to me, obviously very pleased with her choice. “You could wait a lifetime and never see a rainbow like that,” she chatted and it rammed home that time was not a limitation for Sam. He had time in abundance.

Unlike me.

It seemed to take forever for the sale to be finalised and the customer to stop chatting. Leiana was patience personified. Of course! *She was Sam’s twin sister*. I watched as she processed the payment, listening to her customer’s chatter. Her flawless beauty, her sweet serenity, her lovely almond blue eyes, though they seemed a little sad. What could make a goddess sad, I wondered? What powers, *abilities*, did she have?

Finally, Leiana was able to walk over to the door and hold it open, thanking the woman again, telling her she looked forward to seeing her on another occasion.

“Is he here?” I asked before the door closed.

“He’s waiting for you,” Leiana said, unperturbed by my shortness.

“Leiana, I didn’t know I was coming myself till 15 minutes ago!” I unfairly vented some of my nervous tension. “How can he be waiting for me?”

Leiana smiled and put her hand on mine. “He’s always waited for you, Tessa. Come,” and I followed her to the back of the gallery.

“He’s in his studio,” she said. “Take the stairs. The studio is on the mezzanine level.” She opened the door for me.

The studio was a large open space with windows looking out to the sea. A huge skylight filled the room with bright, natural light. Canvases were stacked against the walls and there were sculptures of sea birds, their wings spread wide, sitting on pedestals. In a corner, was a large L shaped desk with several wide screen computer monitors.

A large easel had the centre of the room, the canvas facing towards the windows to catch the light. When Sam stepped from behind the easel, I was surprised. I thought he’d said he’d given up painting.

As he came across the studio, I saw he looked guarded, unsure. I was responsible for that. I had never seen him anything less than confident.

“Tessa,” he greeted softly.

His eyes were deep, deep blue and the warm awareness of him flowed through me as his eyes ran over my face. He was so handsome. I wanted to step into his arms, I wanted him to hold me. I wanted him to take away all the conflicting emotions tearing at me. I wanted that perfect joyous moment on the roadside when we both knew, without question, that our lives were connected. Yet, uncertainty and sadness seemed to overshadow what happiness there might have been.

“Sam,” I meant to say it in greeting but it came out with all the hurt and fear inside me. He closed the gap between us, pulling me into his arms, cradling my head against his chest. I clung to him, drawing strength from him. I could have stayed in his arms like that for the rest of my life, however long that might be.

The thought of Ann lying on the sofa, her will to live ebbing out of her, intruded. I thought of Zac, his beautiful, happy smile lost to sadness.

“Sam,” I said again, resolve hardening my voice as I pulled away from him.

He let me go.

“I’ve come to ask if you will do something. I went to see Zac’s mum this morning. She is very sick. She has given up. She’s just waiting to die.”

Sam started to shake his head. He knew what I was going to ask. “No, Tessa. Please don’t ask me for something I cannot do.”

“But you can! We both *know* you can! Please, you have to make her well, for Zac’s sake! His dad’s left them. His grandmother is elderly!”

Sam walked over to the bank of windows with the perfect view of the sea. He put his hands on the windowsill, staring out.

“Please, Sam. It is just so wrong that she should die and leave Zac alone!” I implored.

Sam turned and sat on the sill. His face was uncompromising. “I cannot intervene, Tessa.”

“But you did for me!” I choked out.

“Yes,” he said. “For *you*, I am prepared to suffer the consequences.” The gravity in his voice struck me.

“What consequences, Sam?”

He didn’t answer straight away but his voice softened when he did. “Tessa, there are many possible outcomes for the boy and his mother. It’s very human to expect the worst but fate delivers equally happy outcomes, too,” he told me.

“Do you know what will happen?”

Sam shook his head. “I do not have foresight.”

“Please, Sam. He’s only ten years old,” I entreated him.

“Tessa, I cannot do what you ask. I will not intervene with their fate,” he said with finality and stood up.

“What if it’s not fate, Sam? What if it’s about the decisions we make instead? What harm could it do to help *her*?” I cried.

Sam looked at me steadily. “Tessa, because of his mother’s death, Zac might be reunited with his father, creating a strong bond between them. Would you deny him that?”

I hadn’t thought of that. I shook my head.

“Or being orphaned so young might give him some inordinate inner strength that makes him an outstanding benefactor to mankind? Would you deny him, or the people he may influence?”

“No,” I whispered.

Sam’s face softened. “Their futures are mapped out. Intervening changes the natural course of events.”

I thought about that for a few minutes and suddenly shivered as if a cold breeze had blown over me.

“Were the natural course of events changed when you saved my life?” I asked slowly.

Sam walked over to me, a small frown appearing on his face. “Yes,” he said very quietly.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Good things, Tessa,” his voice was reassuring.

“Like what?” I asked again. I needed to know.

“Your friendship with Natalie,” he said.

It was shocking to think Natalie and I were never meant to meet. I thought of all the things we had done together. We’d laughed together, we’d cried together. We’d supported each other through the trials of growing up. Who would Natalie’s best friend be, instead of me? The thought tore me up.

I suddenly felt like I was adrift, purposeless, as if a security blanket had been yanked from under me.

“And I don’t have a future mapped out?” I heard the uneasiness in my voice and tried reminding myself I did not believe in fate, that I was in control of my own destiny!

“The car accident, Tessa, was the realignment of the events after I intervened in your life as a child,” Sam told me quietly. “All the events that have changed since the accident will re-align, too. Fate does not leave loose ends. Without consciously knowing it, you

are choosing your path again, like you did to be friends with Natalie and studying to be a teacher. They were choices you made. Once you decide your path, fate will weave its threads.”

“But that morning we met on the beach, you told me it was our fate to meet. How can you be so certain it’s fate, if fate doesn’t have me on the radar?”

“It was *my* fate, Tessa. It was your free will, your choice that made it possible.”

I frowned. “What did I do?” I couldn’t remember deciding anything.

“You waved to me,” and I stared at him.

“It is often the smallest things we decide to do that make the biggest difference,” Sam said. “I had to wait until you chose to reunite our paths. Being out on the water was the closest I could be to you, all those weeks, just waiting. Until you waved, you had never given any indication you wanted anything more. I was beginning to think *that* was our destiny, me surfing and you watching, separated forever by the distance of the sea.”

“But we met at The Shack the night before!”

Sam smiled. “Yes, I was impatient. I had waited so long, Tessa! The storm, when we went for the walk on

the beach, was a warning for me not to interfere. What happens between us is up to you.”

I remembered the storm. I remembered Sam standing on the dune, his head turned upwards as the lightning raged around him. I remembered his words to me.

“Is that what you meant when you said it had to be my decision?”

“Yes. Leiana begged me to wait. She’d put the photo of the Valley of Flowers in the gallery, sure you would come in and recognise it. She’d hoped she could introduce us and let a natural path develop. Of course, neither of us knew you had no memories after the accident. That you did not remember. It explained so much,” he added.

“Yet *my fate* never intended us to be together. Twice it has made that abundantly clear! How can you be so sure, Sam?”

“It is our destiny,” and his eyes blazed. “I’m not wrong about this,” he said adamantly.

“So, what happens now, Sam?”

“I trust our destiny to your keeping. It will be what you decide, Tessa.”