

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a bright green dress, is seen from behind, walking along a dirt path that winds through a vast field of colorful flowers. The field is a mix of blue, red, and yellow blossoms. In the background, a range of rugged mountains with patches of snow is visible under a dramatic sky with large, dark clouds and a bright, glowing sun. Several yellow butterflies are scattered throughout the scene, particularly around the woman and the mountains.

# EMBERS OF THE SUN

BY CHANTAL  
MORTIMER

# **Embers of the Sun**

Chantal Mortimer



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*David.*

*You are my reason.*

*Thank you for holding the world at bay and giving me  
the precious gift of freedom to find my voice.*

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## Prologue

Dying young should not be so peaceful.

The thought wrapped around me slowly. Nor had I supposed dying would feel like being bathed in warm, afternoon sunlight.

Perhaps I was already dead.

Yet, sharp gravel pressed against my legs. I heard tortured metal creaking nearby. The smell of burnt rubber hung heavy in the air. I felt amazing warmth cradling my back.

Puzzled, I tried to sit but agonizing pain exploded through me and I froze, unable to move, unable to think, until the warmth against my back intensified, soothing away the pain.

As I started to drift back to the peaceful oblivion, I heard my name, whispered like a soft breeze, coaxing me to open my eyes.

Then I knew I had died.

I was caught in the gaze of an angel.

His eyes were the deepest blue, like a summer sky just before dusk. For several long minutes as I lay captured by his solemn gaze, an astonishing understanding dawned on me.

His existence gave meaning to mine. Even more incredible, my life gave reason to his. The conviction blazing in his eyes told me I was not mistaken.

I marvelled at the awareness coursing between us, until spasms of diamond sharp pain suddenly robbed the air from me. But what I saw in his eyes shocked me more than the crippling pain. Despair had darkened them to almost black.

No!

I fought for air, each tiny gasp excruciating, until I was exhausted.

Blackness stole me away, and with just the memory of him for comfort, I took every precious second of it with me.

I imagined he called my name, his voice persuasive, as golden light flared around me, its brightness penetrating to the very core of the darkness. I opened my eyes and saw his gaze had changed to deep indigo. The light, a bright halo behind him.

He laid his hand over my heart and the warmth of his fingers intensified as if he was infusing me with the golden brightness.



“And here?” he murmured and he touched my ribs, my hip, my thigh, before laying his hand on my forehead, caressing the hair from my face.

Starved for oxygen, I dared to breathe and the air was sweet against the back of my throat. Then, greedy for more, I took another breath and another, and I realised what he had done.

He had healed me.

I moved to see him better but the radiance about him starved my vision and I contented myself to lie in his arms, watching his eyes slowly lighten to intense blue.

“Sleep now, Tessa,” he murmured. “I’ll be waiting,” he promised.

## Chapter One

*The valley was astonishing.*

*Everywhere I looked was a riot of wild flowers, from the steep slopes right down to the valley floor. They were every colour imaginable and their perfume so sweet, it was intoxicating.*

*I followed a path, brushing my fingers through the flowers, sending tiny yellow butterflies fluttering into the sky. The path was leading me to a clearing with an enormous old tree; it was so perfectly shaped it looked as if it had come straight out of a child's picture book.*

*At a stream, I stopped to quench my thirst and I heard him call my name. He was standing beneath the tree, and I smiled. He was waiting for me, as he had promised.*

"You have to wake up, Tessa." Two voices blended, perfectly overlaying each other, one insistent, one with regret.

I opened my eyes and slowly focused, taking in my surroundings, trying to make sense of my thoughts. A man stood next to me and I looked at him, confused.

"It's okay," he said softly. "I'm Jackson McIntyre. I'm a doctor. Can you tell me your name?"

“Tessa Howard.” My voice sounded strange, as if I was hearing it from a long distance.

“That’s great! And, how are you feeling, Tessa?” He glanced at the array of machines attached to the tubes and wires running into my arms.

As if I’d fallen from an immense height, plummeting through the air then snatched sideways a second before hitting the ground. It was too hard to explain.

“Tessa?” he said when I did not answer. “Can you tell me what you remember?”

That was much easier and I smiled, closing my eyes. I could still smell the fragrance of the flowers, feel the sun on my face, see *him*.

“Tessa? Are you in pain?” The doctor’s voice intruded and he gently shook my shoulder. “Do you remember being in the car with your parents?”

I frowned, turning my head away, trying to shut him out, but his words reminded me of something, something disturbing. I pushed myself up against the pillows on the bed, and looked at him, trying to remember.

“Do you remember being in the car with your parents?” he said again.

Slowly, I nodded. “Yes. We were driving to ...” and the memory slammed into me with shocking clarity.

Then... nothing.

“Tessa, do you remember the accident?” Dr McIntyre asked very quietly.

I didn’t answer.

I saw it had started raining again. From the window in my hospital room, I could see where the sky merged with the dark grey sea. Everything was grey, just like I felt inside. All the bright colours of my life had run together.

I sighed and turned away, unable to stop myself glancing at the clock that hung at an annoying height on the wall. Even when I closed my eyes I could not escape it, the ticking just got louder. I couldn’t believe it was only three minutes since I’d last looked.

“You’re going to be discharged this morning, Tessa!” the Charge Nurse startled me as she swept into my room. “Yes, it’s going to be tough while you adjust to the loss of your family, but you’ll get through this.”

I flinched as if she’d hit me. It was still so shocking. The loss of my family. The death of my parents. They

had loved me with such completeness the prospect of them being gone was absurd. I expected them to come bursting through the door any minute and wake me from my crazy nightmare. My Dad would throw his arms around me and give me a hug. My Mum would give me her wonderful reassuring smile. Everything would be all right again.

“Come and sit down,” the nurse said, her tone softening, and she guided me to the visitor chair in the corner of the room. “Dr McIntyre will be in very soon to see you. He is extremely pleased. You are nothing short of a miracle.”

“A miracle,” I repeated in my head. A miracle because I had survived a horrific car crash. A miracle because I had no broken bones, no head trauma, no internal injuries despite the car being crushed beyond recognition under the trailer of a truck that had jack-knifed across the road in front of us.

A week after the accident, the police had come to the hospital to interview me. They told me I’d been found unconscious on the side of the road, some distance from the wreckage. They had to assume I’d been thrown from the car, even though the doors had been jammed and the roof crushed under the trailer.

They marvelled at how I'd been thrown that distance without a single cut or bruise, let alone serious injury.

Apparently, it was a notorious stretch of road, the sharp sweeping bend responsible for numerous fatal accidents over the years. There had been no witnesses to help with their investigation. The truck driver had been unconscious from the serious concussion he'd sustained. He remembered nothing after the impact.

The police confirmed, meaning to be kind, that my parents had been killed instantly.

I had nothing to tell them. I had no recall of the accident other than a fleeting image of the trailer racing towards us. I had no idea how I got out of the car. I had no memories, just blackness. The police did not press me. I had Dr McIntyre to thank for that. He'd sat in on the interview and put an end to it when it all got too much.

"It will get better with time," the Charge Nurse said as she finished straightening the covers on my bed.

I looked at her. How much time? A week, a month, a year? Give me a date, something to work with and I might believe you, I wanted to yell at her, but she had bustled out the door.

Time had become my enemy. I snuck another glance at the clock and sighed heavily.

I was exhausted by the emotional storm battering me. The first week after I woke up from the coma had been easier. Then I had been numb, in a fog of despair, but the numbness had given way to anger and guilt. I was anxious and afraid, too. Not being able to remember made it worse, with just my imagination to fill in the long blank.

When my hair pulled free from the rough knot I'd twisted it into, spilling over my shoulders in a tangle, I didn't bother to secure it. It didn't matter. Instead, I focused on smoothing the creases out of the oversized shirt that hung off me.

I hadn't really cared what I looked like when I'd pulled on black cotton trousers and my Dad's white shirt. All that mattered was that I could smell his aftershave in the cloth, a safe, familiar smell I had known my entire life.

The police had brought the luggage, salvaged from the boot of the car, to the hospital. They had also found my handbag under the seat where it had been flung in the collision, and my cell phone, too. I'd sobbed when they'd given me the phone. For just a few short hours I'd had a little of my parents back, until



the battery went flat from repetitively dialling their phone numbers so I could listen to their voice messages.

No one had been helpful in finding a recharge cable. I suspected the Charge Nurse was responsible for that. She'd thought my obsession with the phone unhealthy.

"Hi, Tessa," Dr McIntyre's warm greeting made me look up as he came into my room. He was good looking with deep brown eyes and a boyish smile. He seemed genuinely oblivious to the effect he had on the young student nurses and most of the older nurses, as well. He was their favourite topic of discussion in the small hospital.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Fine." It was my standard answer. I could see he wasn't fooled.

"Ready to go home?"

I wondered if he would let me stay if I said no.

With another heavy sigh, I nodded. At least out of the hospital, I could escape the well-meaning pep talks by the nursing staff. I'd be able to wallow in my sadness, alone.

He was looking at me thoughtfully and a burst of irritation rushed through me. What did he want?

Excitement? I dropped my eyes to the floor so he would not see my expression. How could I possibly feel excited about going home? My parents, the pillars of my life were gone and three weeks later, I still had no idea how to deal with it.

He put my chart down on the end of the bed. “Okay. Let’s take a final look at you. You know the routine by now,” and he smiled ruefully.

I moved to stand in front of him, staring at the collar of his white jacket, taking a deep breath and making myself relax. He checked my eyes, got me to stand on one foot, then the other. He made me take six steps with my eyes closed and then continued with the rest of the tests he’d been putting me through every day.

“Truly remarkable,” he said when I aced the physical again. “There are often lingering effects from a coma but there are absolutely none,” he told me, “and by now, we’d know if there was.” He looked directly into my eyes. I was as tall as he was. He was five eleven.

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at my hands. I studied my thumbnail a little closer and frowned. I thought I’d chewed it to the quick earlier that

morning. Perhaps not. It was smooth and perfectly shaped.

“Okay, last chance, Tessa. Any pain? Anywhere?”

He smiled when I looked up, the corners of his eyes crinkling. I wished I could oblige and point to some part of my body just to give him the satisfaction of something to fix. He had been kind and caring, attentive to a fault, and unfailingly patient with my grief, never rushing me, not even when his pager was beeping urgently in his pocket.

I realised he was waiting for my answer.

“No, no pain.”

“Any memories surfacing?” he asked, watching me closely again. I shook my head.

I could remember everything, my childhood, growing up, leaving the city to drive to the beach with my parents, right up to the moment of seeing the truck’s trailer. Then nothing. I had a vague notion I’d been dreaming when I woke up from the coma but the more I tried to remember, the blacker it got in my head.

I glanced at the vase of wild flowers on the bedside table. They were still fresh even though I’d received them two weeks before. Reds and yellows, oranges and pinks, purples and blues. The blue ones

were my favourite. They reminded me of something. Something elusive. Something I should remember.

The doctor followed my look. “Did you ever find out who sent them? Your boyfriend? Your Godfather?”

I heard the mild curiosity in his voice. One of the student nurses had told me it was the talk of the hospital, my mystery flowers.

My Godfather, Clive Matheson, had been my father’s best friend for over 30 years. He had driven down from Brisbane as soon as he heard about the accident. Uncle Clive had wanted me transferred to one of the major hospitals in the city but the brain injury consultant he’d rushed down to see me had recommended against it. I knew Uncle Clive loved me as much as my parents but I was angry with him. He’d arranged the cremation of my parents before I regained consciousness.

Barely disguising my resentment, I’d listened while he explained his reasons. Then, faced with my unforgiving silence, he’d gone to find Dr McIntyre so he could confirm it had been impossible to say when, or if, I would wake up from the deep coma.

It had lasted seven days.

What made me angrier was I knew Uncle Clive had made the right decision. The funeral

arrangements had been complicated by the Christmas period, when most of Australia took holidays until mid January. I knew I was behaving badly but I couldn't help it. Being angry with Uncle Clive made up for the anger I couldn't take out on my parents for leaving me.

I looked again at the flowers. I'd had a nightmare of screaming brakes, smashing glass and metal grinding on metal before an abyss of silence that threatened to smother me. I'd jerked awake, wide eyed and frightened. The flowers had been right in front of me on the trolley table, burning the nightmare away in an instant.

It had been two o'clock in the morning and a nurse checking in on me had been equally dumbfounded. The flowers had not been there at midnight when I'd turned off the light. The day-shift nurses had also been mystified the next morning. There was no record of the flowers being delivered earlier in the day, nor had there been any visitors on the ward after visiting hours. There was no card, either.

"No. Not Uncle Clive," I said. "I don't have a boyfriend," I added.

I could see the doctor was a little surprised by that. It wasn't as if I had two heads, I'd just been too busy

studying for my teaching degree to be distracted with boys.

“So, it remains a mystery?” Dr McIntyre smiled.

I shrugged.

After a quick glance at my chart, he said, “Well, Tessa, the only thing that might bother you is your memory. You may never remember that night, or you might remember bits and pieces. There is a chance that you will remember everything, in time. Sometimes not remembering the bad things is a blessing, our brain’s way of protecting us,” he told me.

“So, what are your plans? Are you going to stay on at the beach? Or go back to the city? I need to write a letter to your local doctor.”

Finally, the question I’d been dreading.

“I’m going to stay,” I told him. “I’m supposed to start my new job in three weeks.” I felt I needed to justify my decision. It had been the hardest thing I’d ever had to decide. Going back to my family home in the city, where I’d grown up, surrounded by the safe familiarity of my parents had been my other choice.

Grief and guilt had warred with each other. Guilt won. By staying and taking up the teaching position made me feel my parents’ deaths would not be in vain.

Going home, the easier option, would make their deaths seem pointless.

I sighed. It seemed impossible that it was only a matter of weeks since I'd finished University, buzzing with excitement at landing my first teaching job in a little seaside village.

Dr McIntyre read the turmoil on my face. "Sounds like a good plan," he said calmly.

"I know your grief seems overwhelming right now, Tessa. Just remember it's okay to feel sad and angry. You know it's okay to feel happy, too? It's all part of the healing process," he counselled. "Just take it one day at a time. And though it might not feel like it at the moment, don't forget to appreciate how lucky you are."

I nodded, forcing a smile and wrapping my arms around myself. My eyes drifted to the flowers.

"So, I don't need to write a letter to your local doctor because that looks like it's me for a while!" he exclaimed, sounding genuinely pleased, the corners of his dark brown eyes crinkling with his smile.

"I'm fine, really. Can't think why I would need to see a doctor," I objected.

"Okay." He knew I hated the fuss. "But I am here if you need me. Any headaches, any disturbing memories or bad dreams, no matter how small, call



and make an appointment. It'll take two minutes to check it out."

He scribbled a few more notes in the chart. "All done! I'll drop the discharge forms into the nurses' station."

I stood up. "Thank you." I didn't know what else to say.

He smiled easily. "The nurses will give you a script for some tablets. Take one at night if you have trouble sleeping. Come see me anytime, even if you just want to talk."

He walked over to the door then paused, turning back to me. "It wasn't your fault, Tessa," he said kindly. "No-one knows why these things happen but it was an accident. A very tragic accident. Clearly your future has something else in store, a different purpose. While it is impossible for us to know what that might be, when it arrives, it'll make sense of this very difficult time. Hang on to that."