

## Chapter Seventeen

The breeze off the sea was cold in the early morning. I pulled the covers around my shoulders but I was still cold. Cold inside.

Sam was gone. I knew the exact moment he'd left, three days before. I'd been writing math equations on the board in the lunch break when a rush of warm awareness quivered through me. Sam. I'd closed my eyes, savouring the exquisite sensation of him. The awareness grew in intensity and I'd spun around expecting to see him standing behind me. The room was empty.

Then the awareness was gone. Completely.

The shock had me running out of my classroom and into Matt's, next door. Matt had looked up startled from his desk.

"Matt, can you keep an eye on my class? I have to go somewhere. I'll be as quick as I can," I told him. I didn't wait for him to answer. I turned and ran across the quad.

I didn't stop running until I reached the gallery. I burst through the door into the beautiful interior,

surprising Leiana and several customers. I headed straight for the door at the back of the gallery.

“Tessa!” Leiana called but I was too intent on reaching Sam’s studio to respond. I got to the door and ran up the stairs. The studio was empty.

“He’s not here,” Leiana said behind me.

“Where is he, Leiana?” I turned to face her.

“I don’t know.”

“You must know! He wouldn’t leave without telling you where he was going!” I could see she really didn’t know.

“When will he be back?” I demanded.

“I don’t know.” I heard the edge in her voice. She was upset too, at her brother’s departure. I sat in the chair behind his desk and put my head in my hands.

“Is it so hard to accept who he is, Tessa?” she asked quietly.

“It’s not that,” I told her.

“You don’t believe he loves you?” There was surprise in her voice.

“I know he loves me, Leiana,” I whispered. “I feel like I’m being torn between two worlds. In my dream world, in the valley, I can’t wait to be with him! In this world, I’m afraid, Leiana! It’s like playing a third hand of chance when the first two were certain losers! I’m

afraid to believe we are meant together! What if he's wrong?"

Leiana looked at me for a few moments, the colour of her eyes so like her brother's. "Sam's broken every law our family has, with almost total disregard for the consequences, in his belief that he is right," she told me and her beautiful voice was filled with concern.

"Laws? What laws?" I asked, frowning.

Leiana paused, considering how to answer me. "We have two sacred laws," she finally said. "We are forbidden to change the course of events and we are forbidden to reveal our true identity."

"What will happen?" I asked slowly, feeling a fist of worry tighten in my chest. Her beautiful face was more serious than I had ever seen it.

"He will be summonsed to face the Ancient Council, to account for his actions."

"The Ancient Council? Who are they? What will they do to him?" The worry burst into fear.

"The Ancient Council is made up of the elders of my family. I don't know what they will decide. He was banished once before."

"Banished?" my mouth was dry and I could hardly get the word out.

“Sam has to tell you, Tessa. He will not thank me for doing so,” she said.

I jumped up and started pacing. “Is that where he has gone? Has he been summonsed?”

Leiana shook her head. “No. I would know. We are all required to attend.”

My pacing took me near the canvas in the middle of the studio. I glanced at it as I passed and stopped in shock. It was a painting of me when I was a child. I was running in golden sunlight, my dark hair streaming out behind me. My expression saturated with happiness, my mouth a wide smile. It was my eyes that made me stare. They were iris blue.

Leiana came and stood next to me, looking at the painting. She put her hand on my arm, calming me.

“Did Sam paint that?” I whispered.

Leiana nodded.

“He told me he didn’t paint anymore.”

“He did this a long time ago,” Leiana said. “He always keeps it on the easel,” and she pointed at some numbers written in charcoal in the margin of the canvas.

15398.

“What is that?”

“The date he started to paint it.”

I converted the numbers to a date, 15 March 1998.  
I looked at Leiana trying to understand.

“He painted the child you will have together. Your daughter,” she said.

I stared at her.

“If he’d stayed he would have made you love him, Tessa, like he loves you. I have never seen him so determined *not* to do something. It is very important that *you* decide the future, for both of you.”

“Why?”

Leiana smiled gently.

“Because only you can.”

It had been three days. It felt like three years.

For the first time since being able to remember, I couldn’t find the Valley of Flowers in my dreams. Instead, I dreamed of black, inky darkness creeping over me.

I made myself get out of bed. It was the last day of school before the two week term holidays.

## Chapter Eighteen

Sunday morning, Natalie brought coffee out to the bench seat on the dune where I sat. I'd been up most of the night and had been sitting staring out at the sea since dawn, thinking. She handed me a cup and I saw her face was troubled.

"Are you upset with me, Tessa?" she asked, sitting down.

"No. Why would I be?" I was surprised and worried at the sadness in her face.

"Because I met Jackson and we're in love! I try so hard not show how happy I am when you're around but I know it's just jumping out of me!"

"Oh, Nat! I am so happy for you. You don't have to hide what you are feeling!" I felt terrible. I'd thought I was doing a reasonable job of pretending everything was okay. I had no idea she'd been thinking my troubles were because of her.

"I can't help feeling my happiness comes from your sadness," she said. "The happier I get, the sadder you seem to become. I know I wouldn't have met Jackson if the accident hadn't happened because I would never have come here, if it weren't for you. It

seems unfair. You lost your parents and I met Jackson. I keep telling myself Jackson is one of the good things that came out of it, but I can't help feeling bad!"

She was right. Would she have met Jackson in other circumstances? And if I'd died as a child, and we'd never met at all? What would she be doing? Where would she be living? Would she have fallen in love? Would he love her like Jackson did? Or would she spend her life looking for her soul-mate and never find him?

I shivered.

"Don't you dare feel bad, Natalie Shaw!" I told her sharply. "I have never seen you so happy and Jackson is a great guy. Hang on to him Nat, with everything you've got. Be more than happy! Promise me?"

Natalie hugged me, relief bringing tears to her eyes.

"You know the other good thing, don't you, Tessa?" she said a few minutes later. "Sam. You know he loves you? Even Jackson commented when Sam picked you up from the hospital, after you fell off the rocks."

I nodded. There was no doubt Sam loved me.

Natalie frowned. "Then why are you so unhappy? Are you still missing your parents? Is that it?"

I couldn't talk to her about Sam. I wanted to but didn't know how to. She would not understand.

"Tessa!" she said with exasperation at my silence. "I know it's been tough losing your parents, but it's over four months. You survived that accident for a reason, I'm sure it wasn't so you would spend the rest of your life moping about! You're entitled to be happy, fall in love with a great guy who loves you back, maybe get married and have kids. That's what your Mum and Dad would have wanted!"

The painting in Sam's studio flashed through my head. The beautiful child that belonged in a future I was afraid could really exist, painted in a past that was never intended to be. Our daughter. So mortally like me, with his immortal eyes. Like Sam, she would live forever.

"Nat, does it feel like you and Jackson are meant to be together? Like...fate played a hand?"

Natalie's face lit up with a smile. "Oh, yes," she said. "Don't laugh at me, Tessa, but I saw him at the hospital twice when I visited you and I just knew there was going to be something between us. When I went back to Brisbane, I couldn't stop thinking about him



and we hadn't even met! Then, at The Shack, on my first night here, when he turned up out of the blue, I had this really strange feeling that he was waiting to meet me, too. That's why I couldn't figure out why he seemed indifferent whenever he came into the bar. I was so sure. He told me he'd been afraid I'd turn him down, we were so different, that we didn't stand a chance.

"You know what's really weird, though, Tessa? That night you asked Jackson to come over for dinner, remember, I had the night off?"

I nodded.

"Just before you got back from your run, I rang the hospital to find out if he was on duty. I was going to drive down to Marrickville. I had this really strong need to see him. They told me he wasn't on shift until eleven o'clock. I'd decided I was going to go over to the hospital, even at that time of night. Then you told me you'd invited him over for dinner! See, it was meant to be!"

Love had converted my free-spirited friend.

I resorted to walking. Too many thoughts were chasing through my head to sit still. My feet moved

automatically along the hard sand, I was lost in the struggle consuming me.

I walked my normal course without even realising where I was going. I was also oblivious to the dark clouds rolling in from the sea, turning the breeze cold and the water slaty grey. The sound of the waves crashing against the rocks made me aware I'd reached my destination.

Davan was in his customary spot, line out in the water, old grey trousers turned up to mid calf, his faded blue and white checked shirt sleeves rolled up his forearms. The wind was whipping his long hair about his shoulders.

"Afternoon," he said with a nod. His eyes were dark grey, stormy like the sea, and they held mine intently. Was he angry with me for Sam leaving? Worse, was he angry that Sam had broken his family's sacred laws for me? I would have welcomed his censure.

Instead, he leaned his fishing rod against the boulder and held out his hands to me. I took them, feeling his quiet composure flowing into me. He didn't say anything when he released my hands, he just turned to pick up his rod.

“I’d better get back,” I said as a strong gust of wind sprayed us with sea foam, but I was reluctant to leave.

“Stay and give an old man some company,” he said, surprising me. He moved over on his boulder to give me somewhere to sit before turning his attention back to his line. I watched as he wound it in with smooth, deft movements that belied the age of his joints before casting again, beyond the breaking waves that surged towards the beach.

As I absently watched him, my thoughts drifted. I’d opened a box of my Mum’s stuff and found her diaries. I’d checked the date Sam had written on the painting of our child. It was the day he’d saved me from drowning. In each diary, my Mum had circled the date on the 15 March page and written, THANK YOU FOR MY TESSA, in large capital letters, to express her gratitude that she’d had me for one more year.

I’d spent the night reading her private thoughts. They’d made me cry, made me smile, too. Surprisingly, I discovered my mother believed in fate, that she had no doubt everything happened for a reason. I came to realise from her scribbled entries, her belief was the source of her amazing capacity to give happiness to everyone around her. She had been an eternal optimist.

Davan's sudden cry of excitement made me jump. He was winding in the line with quicksilver speed, the rod bowing with the weight of his catch. Then he eased the tension on the line, letting the fish run before slowly reeling again, alternating between releasing the tension and reeling for several minutes.

I watched with fascination when finally a long, sleek fish came clear of the water, struggling against being pulled from its life source. Quickly, Davan caught the fish in his hand as it dangled from the end of the line and deftly took the hook from its mouth. He ran his thumb gently, almost lovingly, over the wound.

It squirmed in his hands, its mouth and gills gaping as it tried to breathe, its dark eye beginning to cloud as death approached. Davan looked at the fish for just a moment longer, then, with a mighty throw, hurled it back to the sea.

The fish flew aimlessly, tumbling through the air. Then, as if suddenly realising its course, it straightened, using the momentum to soar into a high arcing dive back to the water. It barely made a splash on the surface. It had no doubt where it belonged, no struggle to accept its fortune, just impatience to get on with living.

I stood staring where the fish entered the water.

Why couldn't I embrace *my* fortune so easily? Why was I resisting being happy? To what end?

'Che sera sera' my mother had written in her diaries, footnotes to her thoughts. Whatever will be, will be. I remembered it had been her favourite song, too. She used to sing it to me when I was very young.

My memory of her was very clear and I suddenly knew what advice she would have given me. And still trusting her implicitly, I was finally freed from the struggle. It didn't matter whether I should, or shouldn't be alive, whether I lived another day, or fifty years. What I did with my life, every single day, was what mattered.

I jumped down onto the sand, relief bursting through me. I could, *and would*, accept my fortune. The sudden liberation from fear and doubt made me shake, made my heart pound. And, just like the fish, I knew where I belonged.

"Tell him," Davan said, startling me. I thought for a moment that he was going to smile at me. Instead, he stood up and slung the frayed canvas bag over his shoulder.

"Tell him," he told me again.

"I don't know where he is, Davan! Where will I find him?"

He reached out to touch my chin, raising my face to his. He looked deeply into my eyes before nodding very slightly to himself, as if satisfied with what he saw.

“Say it out loud,” he counselled. “Once spoken, the truth resonates forever.”

He brushed my cheek with a gnarled finger, nodding again, before propping his rod on his shoulder and heading towards the rocky outcrop.

“I love him,” I whispered on an outgoing breath. The words felt warm in my throat.

“I love him,” I said it louder and my lips softened around the words like a caress.

“I love him,” I told the world in earnest and the words whipped from me on the wind.

Certainty stripped all inhibitions away. I started to run. “I love him!” It became a litany, keeping time with my steps. I flung my arms wide and I ran until finally I dropped to my knees on the sand, overwhelmed with the joy of knowing my own conviction.

Overhead, the heavy clouds shifted, buffeted by the winds. A golden shaft of afternoon sun shone through, radiating the beach in warm golden sunlight. I turned my face up to it, closing my eyes against its brightness, letting the warmth caress my face and throat.

Sudden awareness burned through me, making me gasp with its intensity. I could feel his warm breath, smell his scent, and hear his heart beat. I smiled, a smile full of my love, my eyes still closed against the brilliance of the sunlight surrounding me.

“Look at me.”

I opened my eyes to his amazing blue gaze and saw he hungered for the words I had given to the world with such abandon.

“Tell me.”

“I love you, Sam.”

For a moment the world stopped. The moment was ours, just for us, a companion to the moment months before that had united our paths.

His eyes blazed with triumph, yet there was deep humility in his voice. “I love you, Tessa.”

Thunder rumbled across the water and the sky overhead darkened with the storm. Sam pulled me up into his arms, holding me, as we watched it come. I remembered another time we had stood on the beach and the storm that had raced in. I was not afraid. Then had not been our time. This was.

“What’s he doing?” I suddenly exclaimed. Sam looked where I pointed to the rocky outcrop. We were some distance away but I could see Davan standing

on the narrow point, his face upturned to the sky, his arms spread wide as if in supplication. The waves were smashing against the rocks. I knew how treacherous that point could be with the waves crashing over it.

“Davan!” I screamed into the wind. He did not hear me. “Sam, we have to get him down from there! The waves will wash him off!” I started to pull away but Sam kept hold of my arm.

“Tessa. We can’t interfere.”

I looked at him and then back to Davan. The volleys of thunder were deafening, quickly following the lightning jaggling across the sky over us. I cried out as a monstrous wave hit the rocks, a wall of water pouring down.

Davan was gone.

I wrenched my arm out of Sam’s hold and started to run.

“Tessa! No!” Sam yelled over another volley of thunder and he caught me before I had gone more than a dozen steps. It was useless struggling. Sam’s arms were steel bands around me.

“But we have to help him!” I was scouring the waves for any sign of him.



“He doesn’t need our help, Tessa. He knows what he’s doing,” Sam assured me. “He’s been immortal 100 times longer than me!”

I suddenly stopped struggling in his arms. “Well I don’t know how that all works!” I complained and Sam loosened his grip to curl his arm about my waist, pulling me close to him.

He glanced at the sky. The thunder and lightning were overhead and the clouds suddenly opened, dumping freezing rain on us. Sam’s warmth was a blessing and I pressed myself closer.

He looked down at me with a smile. “I don’t suppose you drove?” he asked. I shook my head, wiping the rain out of my eyes. “We’ll have to walk, then,” he said with resignation.

“Can’t you just....” and not knowing how to phrase it, I wiggled my fingers.

Sam threw back his head and laughed. “No, Tessa,” he said, amusement all over his face. “There are laws that dictate how we must act.”

I frowned at him. “Leiana told me about the laws. We need to talk, Sam! There is so much you have to explain!”

“Yes,” he agreed but he was looking at my mouth. He raked the dripping hair off his forehead and bent

his head very close to mine, his eyes had changed to indigo. “But not till we’ve done this a thousand times!” he murmured against my mouth and captured my lips with his.