

Chapter Nine

“Miss Howard? What’s the difference between a myth and a legend?” Sarah Pollock asked. She was a bright kid, one of the standouts in my class.

“That’s a very good question, Sarah,” I acknowledged and got up from my desk. “A legend is a story about people who did marvellous things in history, like King Arthur of Camelot. Whereas a myth tells a story about supernatural heroes, like Thor the God of Thunder, or Zeus the God of Lightning, and how the things they did made the world as we know it.”

“What about Batman?” Zac Moreton called out and jumped off his chair. “Nanah, nanah, nanah, nanah, Batman!” he sang the theme song loudly. The other kids tittered.

“Great question, Zac. Thanks for asking. Please sit down. I wondered if anyone would notice there is another type of story.” I ignored the performance and deliberately praised the question. Zac had been living up to his reputation. I’d found rather than getting annoyed with him, I could slow him down by finding something positive in his attempts to disrupt the class. He didn’t want anyone to think of him as good or

bright. He was in his element when he was in trouble. I hadn't figured out why, yet.

“The story of Batman is neither a legend nor a myth. It’s a fable. Fables are fiction, all made up, to tell a story. Batman is a story about a man wanting to do good things to protect the citizens of Gotham City, from the bad guys, right?” I asked Zac. He’d painted himself into my corner and had to respond. He nodded.

“The moral of that story, or the lesson to be learnt, is to show that the good guys always win. That’s how you can pick the fables. Fables always have a moral, whereas legends and myths are just stories that tell us about people or things that happened. But,” I said, dropping my voice theatrically, “and this is where it gets really interesting, in a thousand years, people may still be telling each other stories about Batman and by then the story may have stopped being a fable and become a legend, or even a myth!”

“That sounds like a good piece of homework,” I told them returning to my normal voice. “Please write me a short story about Batman but pretend you live a thousand years from now. Write the story as if you are telling it to someone who has never heard of Batman, and you’re telling it as a legend,” and I walked over to

the whiteboard and added the task to the homework list.

The final bell rang and there was an immediate rustle around the classroom. I took my time to finish writing on the board before turning and looking at eighteen eager faces.

“Have a good weekend. See you on Monday.” I stepped behind my desk, watching the room empty in less than thirty seconds. Interestingly, Zac was last to leave. I thought he was going to say something but he changed his mind. Normally he was first out the door.

I straightened my desk, putting class papers for marking into a folder. I was equally pleased it was the weekend.

“Hey,” Matt called from my class door. “You made it over the half term mark!” he told me with a huge grin.

“I can’t believe it’s been five weeks already.” I shook my head in wonder at how quickly it had flown. Matt sauntered over to sit on the corner of my desk.

“Yeah, first term is always the fastest, probably because it’s the shortest! Get it?” I shook my head pitifully at him. Not even his twelve-year-old students would laugh at that!

“So, as your mentor, it is my duty to inform you that the kids will start getting restless by the end of

next week, and by the last week of term, it's hell! If you reckon they all are little darlings now, just wait! They look forward to the holidays but not as much as we do!"

"My kids are *perfect* little darlings, Matt," I told him with a smile.

"Even young Zac?" he asked sceptically.

"I'm working on it. Have you met his parents? Neither of them came to the parent-teacher night the other week. I just got a note from his mother saying she couldn't make it."

"Yes. I met them at one of John's school BBQs, middle of last year. Nice people. Ann and... Scott, I think his name is. From what I've heard around the village, he's been working away for over six months now. Must be tough on her, especially as the boy is a handful," Matt told me.

He waited while I finished tidying my desk. "So, what are you doing on the weekend? Got plans?"

I picked up a folder. "Marking for one. Need to do a few lesson plans for next week, too," and I put the folder in my tote bag.

"Uh huh, that's the boring bits," Matt said. "And?"

"I haven't made any plans," I admitted.

“Whatever happened with that guy, Sam?” Matt didn’t bother with social politeness, like not asking personal questions. Or maybe he thought he knew me well enough that he could.

Actually, it wasn’t *me* he’d got to know well. He had become a regular fixture at the beach house, dropping in after school to see Natalie before she went to work, or arriving home with her after her shift. Like the night before. It must have been a quiet night at The Shack. I had been in bed and heard them come in around 10pm, laughing and whispering in the kitchen, trying not to make too much noise and laughing even louder when everything sounded like they were practising for the rhythm section in a band. I had buried my head under a pillow to muffle them out.

Sam.

I had not seen him since that Sunday afternoon when I’d pushed him away. What had I been thinking? A gorgeous guy, who waited weeks to find the right moment to profess it was our destiny to meet, and I blew him off because I didn’t think fate would be kind. I didn’t even believe in fate!

“It was just too soon,” I finally answered Matt’s question. And it had been. My grief had been too raw.

“Really? You two looked great together, like it was going to be the romance of the century.”

“Matt! Don’t be absurd!”

Matt shrugged. “He was totally smitten with you, believe me, Tessa. Guys understand these things. You women are just too complicated! You want everything in neat little piles, needing to understand how all the pieces fit. What’s worse, you think guys go out of their way to knock your little piles over. We don’t, we’re just simple beings, wanting simple things.”

I kept my eyes on my desk not wanting him to see I was getting annoyed. What did he know about it, anyway? Matt might be a dedicated fun mercenary. Good for him! It wasn’t that simple with Sam! I barely knew him, yet, he had taken up a permanent place in my thoughts. When I slept, I always seemed to be looking for him in fragmented dreams of a beautiful valley. When I was awake, I tried to make sense of the dreams.

Even more surprising was that I missed him, like he was a life-long friend who’d moved away, which confused me more than the strange coincidences that connected him to my life.

He seemed to be everywhere surreal, yet, nowhere that was real.

“Got you mad, yet?” Matt asked infuriatingly and I flashed him an angry look, totally thrown off balance when he smiled with satisfaction. “Good,” he nodded.

I could see he was pleased with himself.

“Feels good doesn’t it, getting mad? Makes you realise you’re alive,” and he walked over to the door. “Am sure you’ve heard that expression, life’s not a rehearsal, Tessa. Take it from me. You can waste an awful lot of time wondering why, trying to understand, and never finding the answers you *want* to accept. I know I did. Right *now* is what matters. Close the door on yesterday. Make every moment of today count and tomorrow will be what it will be.” Matt closed the classroom door behind him with a sharp snap as if to emphasise his point.

I stared after him. Maybe he was right. I should go over to the gallery and say hello, maybe we could go and have a coffee, or go for a walk, just talk.... I sighed. I wished I could be that brave.

Ten minutes later, I headed out to the car park, tote bag over my shoulder, looking for my car keys in my handbag. I didn’t look up until I was nearly at the car and stopped with a jolt. Sam was leaning against my bonnet, hands in his jeans’ pockets. I had to stare

to make sure he was real and not some apparition I'd conjured up out of my thoughts.

"Hi, Tessa."

His voice was like thick smoke, his dark blue eyes drinking me in. My heart skipped a beat. The warm awareness of him rippled through me.

"I've missed you," he said and a pang of guilt stabbed somewhere in my middle as if I had intentionally wounded him.

"How did you do that?" I demanded. "I was thinking about you and you... appear!" and before he had a chance to answer, "You haven't been surfing!" I accused and for one crazy moment, I thought I was going to burst into tears.

I had looked for him every morning and had even taken to the beach most afternoons as well, hoping to see him. I had longed for a glimpse of him on his board. But that's all I'd wanted, to watch him surf, our old routine back.

"You needed time," he reminded me gently.

"You didn't have to stop surfing, though! That just made me feel really bad!" I choked out.

Sam hesitated a moment, looking a little guilty. "I didn't stop surfing, Tessa. I just surfed a little further up the beach."

I stared at him. “That was considerate of you,” I said but it was far from what I meant.

Sam stepped closer to lift the tote bag off my shoulder. “I’m sorry, Tessa,” he murmured. “I thought I was helping by staying away.”

The genuine remorse in his voice made me feel guilty again. I was behaving badly. “No, Sam. *I’m* sorry. It’s just been a difficult time,” and he reached for my hand and raised it to his lips. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stood up at his touch. Being so close to him was like coming home.

“But you’ve enjoyed teaching?” he asked.

“Yes! My first day with the class, I was a mess! I was so nervous, I could hardly write on the board, my hand was shaking so badly.” I was really pleased to share it with him.

I told him about the kids, their enthusiasm and wonder, and some of the harmless pranks they’d pulled on me in that first couple of weeks. How I’d ousted the true culprit. Matt Langdon! The kids all loved Matt, probably because he was just a taller version of them. I’d made him write lines on the whiteboard. ‘I will be kind to Ms Howard’. Everyone enjoyed it.

I suddenly realised I'd been rattling on like there had never been any separation between us. "Sam, thank you for asking... and listening to all that," I said.

"Do you still need time, Tessa?" Sam asked softly and then without waiting for my answer, "I wondered if you would like to spend the day with me on Sunday. We could drive up to the markets at Cape Moore and then have some lunch at one of my favourite places."

I didn't have to think about it. "That sounds great, Sam. Should I wear something warm?"

He frowned, puzzled. It was late summer and still very hot through the days.

"Just wondering where you are planning to take me for lunch. You told me a valley in the Himalayas was one of your favourite places," I reminded him and he burst out laughing at my unexpected humour.

"You're still thinking about that?" he asked.

"Every night," I assured him. "It's a great dream!"

"Local," he said with a wide smile than made my heart flip over. "We'll definitely stay local."

I got busy Saturday, cleaning, washing and grocery shopping in the morning, then marking class assignments and doing class prep in the afternoon.

Natalie had surfaced around noon. When I assured her everything was under control, she went back to bed with a huge yawn.

Sharing the house was working out. In fact, we saw very little of each other. Natalie was always in bed when I left in the mornings and was out in the afternoons, or curled up on the sofa watching re-runs of *The Simpsons* with Matt, when he came over.

Thankfully, because of our different timetables, it had been several days after that eventful Sunday before Natalie had asked me about Sam. I'd brushed it off, saying we were both busy. I hadn't wanted to talk to her about him. There was no way I could leave out the weird stuff. She'd made it very clear if angels were involved, it was off limits. I doubted she'd be any more open to discussion if I told her I suspected angels were appearing in person.

Saturday night, I curled up on the sofa with Enya playing on my iPod. I let my thoughts wander and realised somewhere along the way, my grief had lessened. Never more than an hour went by that I did not think of my Mum or Dad. Things to tell them, moments to share, advice to ask, but the sharpness of the loss had softened. I wore it on the inside. I liked to think it was close to that warm awareness of Sam.

Sam.

He was enigmatic. I rolled the word off my tongue. I had never really understood the meaning of the word before. Sam personified it. I drifted off to sleep with him in my thoughts and sat up startled when Natalie came in a little after 1am.

“Hey Kiddo! Sorry,” she said, as I sat up blinking in the glare of the overhead light she’d turned on.

“Hi Nat, good night?”

She nodded, though there was something bothering her, I could see it in her face.

“What’s up?” I went to sit on the bar stool at the counter in the kitchen.

“Want something to drink?” Natalie asked instead.

I frowned. She was avoiding the question. Never a good sign with Natalie. “Tea, please,” I agreed. “Nat? What is it?” I asked as the silence grew.

Natalie leaned her elbows on the opposite side of the counter and sighed. “I just don’t understand guys.”

“Matt?” I guessed.

“Matt’s a buddy.”

I nodded as if that made everything clear. Not. “Anyone I know?”

Natalie stared accusingly at me. “Yes, actually. *Your* doctor,” she fired back.

“Jackson?!”

“Yes, Jackson! I don’t get him at all. He comes in and sits at the bar, happy to chat with Max, but goes all quiet whenever I try to get a conversation going with him. I bat my eyelids, pout a little, give him the ‘come-on’ signals and he just checks his damned phone to see if he’s missed any calls from the hospital. That’s twice this week he’s done that! What’s wrong with the guy?” she demanded.

I raised my hands in surrender. “No idea. I don’t really know him that well. He was just my doctor. He was a very good doctor, very dedicated. Maybe he’s just not interested,” I said.

“Not interested?” Natalie’s voice raised an octave. “Well, thanks a lot, Tessa. That makes me feel really great!”

“Hey, I’m just trying to help,” I said. “Besides, aren’t you and Matt together?”

“Matt’s a friend. Period. He’s a lot of fun. You should come out with us sometime,” Natalie said. “It must be time for you to meet some new people, maybe a guy. Especially as you and Sam didn’t seem to work out.”

“Actually, Sam and I are going out tomorrow,” I told her and jumped off my stool.

“I’m going to bed,” I said. “Good night!” and I bolted for my bedroom before Natalie could quiz me for details.

“Tessa!” she yelled after me.

Chapter Ten

Sam arrived at 8.30 Sunday morning.

I had just got out of the shower and pulled a terry robe on to answer the knock on the door. "Sam! You're early!" I exclaimed.

He was wearing black shorts, a white t-shirt and Reeboks, looking relaxed, and glowing with his wonderful intensity.

"Too early?" he asked. "Shall I come back later?" he offered, starting to lean off the jamb.

"It's okay, you're here now. Come on in," and I opened the door wider.

"Sorry. I've never been very patient," he apologised and followed me.

"Want to make coffee while I get dressed?" I asked and he agreeably detoured into the kitchen.

"How dressy is this place you're taking me for lunch?"

Sam smiled with a touch of mystery on his handsome face. "Casual. Shorts would be perfect. Wear some swim gear underneath in case it gets hot and we fancy a swim."

I stared at him suspiciously.

“Tessa,” he said very softly, his eyes full of promise, his voice a caress. “You can trust me.”

I really wanted to. “Okay.”

The markets were full of local handmade crafts and fresh produce. There were buskers everywhere, some singing to canned music, some playing guitars, some improvising with spoons. The sound of kids squealing with delight on the jumping castle overlaid the jumble of sounds.

Sam and I wandered from stall to stall admiring the pottery, woodcarvings, jewellery, and leatherwork. Somewhere along the way, Sam caught my hand and entwined our fingers. I looked up and smiled at him. He smiled back and I flushed with a burst of warmth.

An artist had an array of canvases for sale and I stopped to look. They were mostly abstracts of under-the-sea scenes. I studied them for a while, trying to figure out what the bright colours were meant to represent. Sam looked at the paintings with disdain. He misunderstood my interest. “May I buy one for you?” and he reached for his wallet.

“No!” I exclaimed and walked away from the stall. “I don’t like them at all, but they’ve given me an idea!” His relief made me smile. I hadn’t realised he was a purist.

“I have this huge wall at one end of my classroom. It was covered with posters, surfing posters,” and I told him the story about Matt and his wife.

Sam looked sympathetic. Normally, whenever Matt’s name came up in conversation, he looked a little tense.

“I’ve been waiting for inspiration, and those paintings have just given it to me! If I had an underwater mural painted on the wall, done by a proper artist to get everything into perspective, then the kids can add to it in our science projects!”

Sam smiled at my enthusiasm. “Do you have an artist in mind?”

“Not at the moment, I’ve only just thought of it. Plus, I’ll have to talk to the Principal about how much it will cost.” I pursed my lips thinking it through.

“Well, since you wouldn’t let me buy you one of those paintings,” and he shuddered remembering them, “I’ll offer you my services, at no charge.”

I stopped and looked up into his face to see if he was serious. He was. “You paint, too?”

He laughed. “Well, if that can be called painting,” and he glanced back at the stall, “my talents stretch to making sure your class knows seaweed doesn’t have eyes!”

I laughed, too, and then looked at him curiously. “I don’t remember seeing any paintings in your gallery.”

Sam looked down at me, his eyes liquid blue, taking in every detail of my face. “No, I switched to photography a while back. I’ve been trying to master the art of patience, photography is good practice.”

I smiled and linked my arm through his. “Thank you, Sam. That would be wonderful, if you have the time, of course.”

He looked pleased but there was also amusement in his eyes. “Tessa, I have the time,” he assured me.

“How does the week after next suit you?” I asked, keen to get everything locked in and he nodded agreement. “Thank you!” I said, again. “My students are going to be so excited! I’ll talk to the Principal tomorrow just to make sure he is cool with it,” and we started walking again.

A street performer was creating slapstick illusions and we stopped to watch. As the crowd pressed closer and closer, I stepped in front of Sam to give a family next to me more room. We were not touching but I could feel his warmth, smell the spiciness of his skin. His proximity was messing with my composure and the shard of memory I’d experienced on the dance floor when we first met, flashed through my mind again. The

memory of lying in his arms, caught in his amazing blue gaze.

It unsettled me, threatening to spoil my budding happiness and I pushed it away. Now is what mattered, I told myself firmly. Matt was right. Today was too important. Everything could be different tomorrow. Losing my parents so suddenly had taught me that.

“Want me to tell you how he’s making his magic?” Sam breathed close to my ear and his warm breath raised goose bumps along my skin.

“Don’t spoil it for me,” I whispered back but I had absolutely no idea what the performer was doing. Sam’s closeness made concentrating impossible.

When the performance finished, the crowd cheered and started to break up, giving me room to turn around and face him. He looked smug. He *knew* what he was doing to me!

“Are you practicing your magic on me, Sam Archer?”

“My magic is not an illusion,” he said softly and I wished I had not asked.

We left the markets and headed further north, keeping to the coast road.

“Hungry?” he asked as he pulled off the road onto an obscured track and slowed the SUV to negotiate the bends.

“We have to walk part of the way,” he said when he parked the car.

Curious, I got out, pushing my hands into my pockets. We were on the top of a cliff, the ocean stretching out in front of us. I walked to the edge and looked down and saw a tiny cove below, protected on each side by dark rocks. There was an arc of golden sand fringing the calm blue water. I couldn’t see any kind of café or restaurant.

“The path is here,” Sam said and I turned to join him. He was holding a large picnic hamper in one hand, several towels, and a brightly coloured blanket tossed over his shoulder.

“A picnic?” I laughed.

Sam offered his hand as we walked down the steep path. The cove was deserted and Sam headed towards the rocks, choosing the location and spreading the blanket on the sand.

“I reserved the best table in the house for us. I hope you are impressed?” he said and I laughed again.

“Come on, entrée is waiting!” Sam took my hand and led me down to the water’s edge near the rocks, stopping to kick off his Reeboks. “We have to wade out just a little,” he said. “There are no waves here, Tessa. The rocks protect the cove,” he encouraged when I hesitated. “You are very safe with me,” he added and I squeezed his hand.

Sam stayed close to the rock wall as we waded out. I found that reassuring as I could keep one hand on the rocks. The sea was warm around my legs and the swell so small it just lapped my knees. I stood very still when Sam stopped, impressed that no signs of panic had set in, though I couldn’t tear my eyes from the open water beyond the cove, keeping watch for any rogue wave wanting to spoil my minor triumph.

Sam was surveying the rocks and found what he was looking for. “I need my hand,” he said apologetically. “Hang on to my waist if you want,” but I managed alone, digging my toes into the hard sand. Just a few steps further I spotted a smooth rock and I inched forward until I could lean my back against it. There were plenty of edges to hang onto, as well.

Sam had taken a short rounded knife from his back pocket and with a quick flick of his wrist opened a barnacled shell. He presented the oyster to me.

“I’ve only eaten them cooked,” I said dubiously, taking it from him.

“Oysters straight from the rocks, with the saltiness of the sea still in the shell, is the only way to eat them,” he promised. “If you prefer, there’s chicken and ham in the hamper.”

“I’ll give it a go,” and he looked pleased.

Sam detached another oyster and with a quick flick of the knife opened it. He tipped his head back and raised the shell to his mouth. I watched then did the same.

“Good?” he asked and I nodded as the crisp salty flavour burst on my tongue.

Sam went hunting in earnest and I grew confident enough to help him, moving a little deeper into the water until I was up to mid thigh, the gentle swell wetting the hem of my shorts. Sam opened the oysters as quickly as I found them and we gorged like hungry seagulls.

“I’m done,” I said after a dozen or more and scooped some seawater to rinse my chin.

“Same,” he said and taking my hand, we waded back to the beach.

Sam dug into the hamper, producing two glasses and a bottle of mineral water. I lay on my side, propped on my elbow, watching him. “The salt makes you thirsty,” he commented handing me a glass and I eagerly gulped it down.

Next, he produced a big floppy hat from the hamper and dropped it on my head to shade my face from the sun’s glare.

“Do you always think of everything?” I asked when he started layering ham, chicken and slices of cheese onto chunks of crusty bread.

“Yes.”

I laughed at his unapologetic certainty.

“Main course, madam,” he said a few minutes later, handing me a paper plate.

“Do I need to leave room for dessert?” I asked eyeing the huge sandwich he’d prepared for me.

“Absolutely!”

We ate, sitting in the sunshine, listening to the gentle rhythm of the water, the breeze off the water keeping us cool. It was perfect. When I had done the best I could with the sandwich, I lay back on the blanket, pulling the hat over my face to block the glare.

I lazily watched through the tiny holes in the hat's weave as Sam packed things back into the hamper. When he moved it out of the way, he lay on his side next to me.

"Is it fate we are here, right now, Sam?" I wondered, thinking about his certainty that it was our destiny to meet.

Sam tilted the hat so it still gave me shade but he could see my face. He was very close. His deep blue eyes filled my vision. "Part of the journey," he told me and very gently brushed a few grains of sand from my eyebrow with his thumb.

I closed my eyes with pleasure as his thumb traced lightly over my eyelids. The Valley of Flowers, resplendent with its riot of colour, filled my thoughts.

The sheer slopes of the valley were steep on either side as I followed the path towards the clearing. I knew the way. I couldn't resist brushing my fingertips through the taller blooms to release their sweet perfume, to send the tiny yellow butterflies fluttering into the air. It was late afternoon and the first flush of sunset was staining the blue sky.

I reached the stream where the water cascaded over the mossy rocks and looked to where the massive old tree stood. He was there, waiting.

Smooth, rounded rocks made easy stepping-stones across the stream and Sam came to meet me, walking out from the shadow into the golden sunshine. We smiled at each other.

The sound of the sea puzzled me and I opened my eyes to the bright blue sky overhead. Sam was still lying on his side next to me, his head propped on his hand, watching me. I gazed back at him. We'd finally reached each other in my dream.

Or was I dreaming now?

"What time is it?" I felt disoriented and sat up.

Sam glanced at the afternoon sky. "About four o'clock."

"Oh, Sam. You should have woken me! I'm sorry!"

"I was very happy just watching you sleep," he told me and sat up too. He ran his eyes over my face. It felt flushed and bothered, like my thoughts. Sam got to his feet and pulled me up.

"A swim will cool you down. Come in with me?"

My thoughts cleared rapidly. Walking knee deep was one thing, swimming was another. I was a hopeless swimmer. "Sam, I really don't swim very well. You go, I'm quite happy here," I told him.

He grinned at me. "I have a better idea," he said. "I'll be right back."

He turned to jog across the cove, towards the cliff. I watched as he easily ran up the steep path, wondering at his intention until I saw him undoing the straps around his surfboard and lift it off the roof rack.

Oh, no! I quickly looked at the sea. The water was calm, just little white caps further out beyond the rock walls. I breathed a little easier. Well, catching a wave was out, I thought with relief but Sam was back before I could formulate any good reason why I should stay put on the sand.

“Trust me?” he asked.

I thought of my dream. There was no doubt whatsoever about that. “Yes,” I said.

Sam pulled off his shirt and kicked off his shoes. I left my shorts on the blanket but kept my tee shirt on over my bikini. Sam kept hold of my hand as we waded in. When we were knee deep, he held the board steady and encouraged me to climb on. I managed to settle myself into a cross-legged position, hanging onto the sides tightly. Sam boosted himself to sit behind me and adjusted his position until the board balanced. Then, with powerful strokes, he propelled us out to the deeper water.

I hung on tight until I realised it was easier for Sam to concentrate on paddling if he didn't have to keep

balancing the board, as well. Once I relaxed, it was exhilarating, the board sliced effortlessly over the water and my heart pounded with a mixture of thrill and daring. This was definitely the deep end! Who'd ever have thought I would overcome this fear!

We were beyond the rock wall of the cove when Sam stopped paddling, letting us drift. Being careful not to tip the board, I uncrossed my legs and let them hang over the sides. I ran my hands through the water in time with the gentle rise and fall of the sea.

Sam leaned forward, "I have a surprise for you."

I looked over my shoulder and he pointed. I followed the direction towards the horizon.

"Here they come," he said with deep satisfaction.

Before I could ask what he meant, a large grey dolphin leapt out the water in a graceful curve off to our right. Two more followed suit coming on the same course. Sam touched my shoulder and pointed to our left, just as two pairs of dolphin leapt in perfect unison.

Seven in total. I was awed.

Effortlessly, the dolphins made a formation as they raced through the water, breaching simultaneously before turning and racing back, leap frogging over each other then turning again before gambolling across the water towards us.

“Oh, Sam,” I exclaimed. “I can’t believe they are so close.”

“Wait,” he breathed. “They are showing off. When they’re done they’ll come over,” and I turned my head to stare at him disbelievingly.

“You’ve seen this before?”

“Every day.”

Sure enough, the dolphins glided through the water to encircle us, less than three metres away. Sam slid into the water, keeping a steadying hand on the board, and then swam a short distance and trod water. He bowed his head to the largest of the pod and the dolphin emitted a rapid clicking sound, opening its beak as if in a huge grin. Sam held out his hand and the dolphin swam right up to him. It made another series of clicking sounds, looking in my direction.

“She would like to greet you,” Sam said and I thought he was joking until he caught hold of the dolphin’s dorsal fin and together they came alongside the board.

The dolphin looked at me with gentle, intelligent eyes then ducked her head to me. With a glance at Sam, I bowed my head back as he had done, then tentatively reached out to stroke her surprisingly warm, pliant skin. The dolphin clicked softly, starting a chain

reaction amongst the others. They all clicked and whistled, ducking their heads at me.

I twisted around, looking at each of them in turn, which seemed to encourage their song. Profound wonder washed over me.

Then, the large dolphin suddenly pushed up on its tail and propelled itself backwards across the water before twisting and diving beneath the surface. The other dolphins followed, though the smallest of the pod swam closer to nudge Sam with its beak, like a dog wanting a pat. Sam inclined his head and stroked his hand down the length of its body before it too twisted away, showering us in spray.

Sam agilely boosted himself onto the board. I was too busy watching the dolphins as they raced towards the horizon to be alarmed by the brief destabilisation. I spun around so I was facing him.

“That really did happen, didn’t it, Sam? I’m not dreaming, am I?”

“They wanted to honour you. It’s their way,” he told me very solemnly.

The sun glinted on his medallion. It was the symbol he used on his photos. I stared at it. I’d definitely seen it before, recognition was right on the edge of my memory.

“We need to head back to shore, Tessa. It will be getting dark soon,” Sam said softly and the tantalisingly close memory evaporated.

I glanced to the west. The sun was only just above the hills. Sam steadied the board as I turned around and he started to pull at the water with his hands. I joined in, wanting to help, and soon found Sam’s rhythm. We laughed together with the thrill as we flew across the water. The fin of the board grounded in the sand too soon for either of us.

“That was beyond amazing, Sam,” I said as we walked back to the blanket, still awed by the dolphin ceremony. “Do you really see them every day?”

“Yes. We surf together most days. Yes, surf,” he repeated at my astonishment. “Dolphins surf the waves, too. I’ve learnt a lot about surfing watching them,” he added.

“Thank you, Sam. I’ve had a wonderful day,” I told him and he smiled down at me.

“We haven’t had dessert yet, Tessa.”