

Chapter Twenty Two

Davan greeted me. He took my hands and kissed my forehead. His gaze was intense and seemed to pierce through me. I looked at Sam. I had never seen his face so serious. Leiana's was the same. There was something terribly wrong.

"What is it, Sam?" I asked.

"My family want to meet you," he said easily enough but he did not look pleased at the prospect.

"Is that such a bad thing?" I asked, looking between them.

"No. They will love you, as I do," Sam said reassuringly. He glanced at his Uncle.

"You need to tell her," Davan said. His voice was flat.

"I will, Uncle," Sam said.

"Tell me what?"

I looked at Leiana when Sam did not answer. She looked silently at me.

"Let's go back to the party," Sam suggested. "It was very rude of us to leave like that. I wouldn't want your Godfather to believe I really am a beach bum with no manners, after all." Davan made a choking sound.

Whether it was because of the Godfather term or Sam being thought of a beach bum, I was not sure.

“Sam?” I asked entreatingly.

“I promise I will explain,” he said softly.

I introduced Davan to the group while Sam brought chairs over.

“What do you do?” Clive asked Davan.

“Fish,” he replied curtly. “Not a lot else to do.”

I had to bite my lip to stop myself giggling with nervous tension. Sam took my hand and raised it to his lips. I looked at him and he looked back at me. His eyes sobered me.

“You remember the fancy dress party we had on our 17th birthday, Tessa?” Natalie asked, pulling me back into the conversation. Sam kept my hand firmly in his.

“I do.”

Natalie laughed. “You remembering what I’m remembering?” she asked. I shot her a pleading look.

“Nat!”

“What happened?” Matt asked, immediately attentive.

“Don’t embarrass Tessa, Natalie,” Jackson said kindly.

Uncle Clive looked mystified at what Natalie was referring to. “I remember the party. I went as Bond. James Bond,” he said, with a wink at Leiana.

“What happened? Come on, Nat, you can’t leave us in suspense, now,” Mandy said.

“Well, it was fancy dress along the lines of a masked ball,” she explained. “Some guy turns up in a tuxedo and a mask like the phantom, straight out of the opera, and monopolised Tessa for an hour before disappearing into thin air.”

She looked over and grinned at me. “He gave Tessa her first serious kiss. We never worked out who he was, though, did we, Kiddo?”

I gave her a withering look. Natalie loved embarrassing me! I glanced at Sam as much to say, who needs friends, but the look on his face made me narrow my eyes. I glanced at Leiana, then Davan. They were both looking at Sam. Davan with exasperation, Leiana with sisterly amusement.

Mandy started to tell a story about a costume party she’d been to a few years before and I took the opportunity to lean in close to Sam.

“*Sam, was that you?*” I whispered.

His eyes were very blue, and very unapologetic. “That’s when I fell in love with you,” Sam said. “You were so beautiful.”

When the party started to break up, Matt helped Jackson and Sam carry the chairs and BBQ back up to the house. Davan and Uncle Clive buried the last of the embers of the fire under a pile of sand.

I wished Sarah and John all the best for the baby, it was due in the next few weeks. Mandy came and gave me a hug. “I am so happy for you, Tessa. Sam is wonderful. Have a happy birthday tomorrow,” she said. Peter shook my hand and added his wishes, too.

I walked up to the house with Ann and Zac. “Thank you, Tessa, for a lovely evening. Don’t ever doubt that young man loves you,” she told me. “He would re-write all the rules in the world for you.” I barely stopped myself from telling her he had.

Uncle Clive decided he would drive home. “I like driving at night. I’ll have the road to myself at this time, too,” he said when Natalie and I both objected. “I’m working on a big case. It will give me some time to think through the arguments. Getting justice is getting harder and harder these days.”

Clive shook hands with Davan and Leiana, exchanging pleasantries before turning to Sam. “You

look after her, young man. Tessa is very precious to me,” he said.

“Yes, sir. She’s very precious to me, too.”

“Happy birthday, sweetheart. Your Mum and Dad would be so proud of you,” Uncle Clive said gruffly and gave me a hug. I wiped the tears from my eyes when we pulled apart and Sam put his arm around me, holding me close to his side.

“Jackson, nice to meet you, too. You look after my other special girl,” he told him. “And mind her, she’s always had a way of getting into mischief, that one,” Uncle Clive said affectionately and Natalie scowled at him in mock indignation.

Davan and Leiana took their leave as well. “Thank you for coming,” I said to Davan and he nodded. When he turned to say something to Sam, I took Leiana’s hand and pulled her a little aside.

“Leiana, is everything okay? Is Sam in serious trouble? Is that why Davan is looking more serious than normal?”

“Sam will explain,” she said. “Do you truly love my brother, Tessa?”

“Oh, yes,” I said and she nodded, satisfied.

“Your love will shield him,” she told me.

“From what?”

“Himself.”

Natalie and Jackson decided to drive up the coast to Cape Moore. The beach town had a reputation for its nightlife. It was so rare for Jackson to have an entire weekend off they did not want to waste a moment of it.

“Besides you don’t want us hanging around!” Natalie said.

I shook my head at her. “You are incorrigible, Natalie Shaw!” I told her.

“Happy birthday, Tessa!” She gave me a huge hug, then Jackson kissed my cheek. “Happy birthday, Tessa,” he said, too.

“Sam, good to get to know you,” and the two men shook hands.

The house was pin drop quiet with everyone gone. Sam and I looked at each other. I was pleased to have him just to myself.

“Happy birthday, Tessa,” he said.

I glanced at my watch. It had just gone midnight. “Thank you.”

He was holding a flat red box. “A small gift.” I searched his face for a clue but he just smiled.

I took the box and opened it. Nestled against a black satin bed was a bracelet made from fine woven gold strands and seashells. “Oh, Sam! Thank you!”

“Let me,” he murmured and fastened the bracelet on my wrist. “I made it with some of your mother’s shells,” he told me. “I thought today would be difficult without her. I hoped this might help a little.”

Sam held my hand and I touched one of the shells. I concentrated and felt, rather than heard, her memory. ‘For my beautiful girl,’ then the next, ‘This one for Tessa’s 15th birthday, happy birthday, darling girl,’ then the next, ‘For my little girl who’s become a beautiful young woman.’ I could not go on. Just hearing my mother’s thoughts was more than I could ever have asked for. It was the most perfect gift I had ever been given.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my voice was husky with tears. I reached up to kiss him. Sam pulled me against him, holding me close, deepening the kiss. I wrapped my arms about his neck and he held my face close as his lips explored mine, gently tracing his tongue over my bottom lip, before claiming my mouth again.

I was shaking when he let me go. He turned and took a few steps away, running a hand through his hair. His breathing was ragged, too.

“Sam?”

“There are things you need to know, Tessa,” he said. “Things you have to understand.”

I stared at his back. “Like you being the mystery man at my seventeenth birthday party?” I asked.

He turned back to me. “Yes.”

“Where you fell in love with me?”

“Yes.”

“Why your family wants to meet me and that is causing you stress?”

“Yes.”

“Is there anything else?” I asked.

His face was very serious. “Yes,” he said.

“Like what?” I asked, suddenly finding it very hard to breathe as fear tightened my breast.

“Tessa, for you to understand I need to start at the beginning. Can we walk while I tell you?” I nodded and followed him outside, down to the beach. We turned left, my familiar route, towards the rocky outcrop.

We walked in silence for a while then Sam caught my hand in his. “When I first lived amongst mankind, for centuries I did not care for anything other than my own comfort and satisfaction. It took at least three centuries to make the transition from being regarded as a deity to being treated as a humble man.

“It was easier then, it was a different world. With mankind’s evolution, I had to keep reinventing myself. I became disenchanted and withdraw to my ancestral home for a few centuries. I had no purpose.

“Then with new technologies being developed, I became interested and came back to the world. I travelled extensively, never settling in one place for very long. It took me another century to realise I was searching for something, without knowing what.

“Never had I felt such compulsion as I did that day, when you were a child, to be where you were with your family. I travelled half way around the world to be there, with no idea why. I just knew I had to be.

“When that wave swept in and took you out of your father’s hand, I understood. I had to make a decision, a decision that would influence the rest of my life. And ultimately, yours,” he added.

“I found you easily enough under the water. When you took my hand, and looked at me with your beautiful eyes, I saved you without another moment’s thought. I did not think of the consequences of my actions. I did not think of the laws I was breaking. I did not think at all. It was what I was meant to do.

“The joy of your parents, when they had you safely back, was my solace for the ten years I was banished from your world.”

“Banished?” I repeated, remembering Leiana had told me.

“Yes. I was forbidden to interact with mortals as punishment for intervening. You were meant to die. It is a sacred law not to intervene. I got off lightly,” he told me.

“Your parent’s grief when they thought they’d lost you to the sea was very tangible. The Ancient Council took pity and gave me leniency. It could have been a century.”

“A century! Then we would never have met!”

“We were always intended to meet, Tessa, it was just a matter of when,” Sam reminded me.

He grasped my hand and smiled. “Leiana brought me a camera the first year I was banished. She encouraged me to take up photography. High in the mountains, on the distant horizons of the seas and the blue of the sky, I stayed out of the world, but always on the fringe. Leiana kept me supplied with film, then, as digital cameras improved, she brought me memory cards.”

I shook my head at the total bizarreness of it. An ancient god, dabbling in digital technology.

“I still have over ten thousand photos to upload,” he told me quite seriously. “When my exile was lifted, there was only one thing I wanted to do. Find you. I feel the same awareness that you have of me, it comes from the same source, Tessa,” he told me. “Our destiny.”

I looked at him in wonder.

“I found you easily, at your seventeenth birthday party. You were so beautiful in your long white dress, your black hair in ringlets, and a coronet of flowers. Like a Greek goddess of ancient lore,” he smiled at the memory.

“Actually, I was a forest sprite,” I told him. “Natalie went as Aphrodite. She was annoyed for days when the mystery man, *you*, chose to dance with me! And you fell in love with me? In an hour? We hardly spoke!” I reminded him, blushing as I remembered the state of my juvenile emotions.

“I already loved you, Tessa, I just hadn’t fallen *in* love with you,” Sam clarified.

“What’s the difference?” I asked, puzzled.

“You love someone when you care about them, when you want to protect them, make them happy.”

When you're *in love* with someone, you yearn to share every emotion, expose your soul. That's what happened to me in that hour. I fell in love with you."

"You kissed me then left," I said.

"You were still very young, Tessa, full of excitement. You planned to finish school and go to University. I had nothing to offer but my love. It was too intense. It would have scared you. It scared me! I made myself leave. Besides, I was, *still am*, too fantastical. I had no way of knowing if you could accept it.

"And I could not interfere in your life, you had to make your own decisions, choose your own path," he added.

"Like now?"

He nodded. "I had to wait. Wait for the course of events to realign. I could not interfere. I knew one path would lead you here but I had to wait for you to take that path, unsuspecting that my destiny, *our destiny*, was no more than to hold you for that few minutes."

We walked in silence.

"But you saved my life," I said.

"Yes."

"And, they will banish you for that! Again?" My heart beat heavily at the thought of being separated

from him. I didn't know if I had a decade. I definitely didn't have a century!

We had reached the rocky outcrop.

"There's something else, isn't there?" I demanded, frightened by the look on his face.

"Yes."

"Sam!?" I exclaimed when he did not answer straight away.

"Healing your injuries was not enough. I was unable to give you up, Tessa. I refused to allow fate to weave yet another thread that would one day take you away from me again."

"What did you do, Sam?" I heard the alarm in my voice. He heard it, too. I saw it in his eyes.

"What did you do, Sam?" I asked him again.

He raised his head. He was not ashamed of what he had done. His conviction made him strong.

"I used my will to override fate, forever.

"I made you immortal."

Chapter Twenty Three

I drove to Sam's house and parked on the driveway. I sat for a few minutes looking at the photo of my parents on the dashboard. What would they have said to the strange events that had changed my life? Would my mother have been philosophical in her fatalism? Would they have been happy for me? Would I have ever been able to tell them?

Leiana was coming down the stairs when I finally opened the door to get out. She was wearing a long white robe, cinched with a length of pale blue silk at her waist. She had braided her hair into a thick golden plait that hung over her shoulder. I felt underdressed in jeans and a pale pink blouse. I'd had no idea what to wear to meet an ancient family of gods bent on handing out punishment. I doubt my mother would have known, either.

Leiana came to greet me, holding out both her hands. I felt her empathy flow through me, it helped ease my disquiet. Her beautiful smile was full of understanding.

"He loves you so much, Tessa," she murmured. "Are you okay?"

“I don’t think it’s sunk in yet, or even what it means to be immortal,” the word sounded strange as I said it. “The only thing I keep thinking, is that we can be together. But Leiana, what if I’d chosen a path without him? What would have happened?”

“You didn’t, Tessa. You chose your future, his and yours. Sam was very sure of that, even when you were a child.”

She kept hold of one of my hands, leading me towards the back of the house.

“What will they do to him?” I asked her.

“I don’t know. Davan will use his influence. Not just for Sam’s sake but yours, too. He wants you to be happy. He likes you, very much.”

“I hardly know him.”

“He knows what you have done for Sam.”

“What have I done?” I whispered. My very existence had done nothing but get him into an awful lot of trouble.

Leiana looked at me evenly. “What every woman’s love does to a man. Gives him purpose.”

We followed a path and entered an alcove protected from the sea breeze by a tall hedge. An olive tree with a twisted trunk was its centre point. Underneath was a stone bench and flagstones in a

concentric circle with low growing plants and grasses in the spaces in between.

Davan was seated on the stone bench. He was wearing white trousers and a white shirt, his long hair left free. He looked very... god-like.

He held out his hands to me and I walked over and put mine in his. I felt the full force of his might for the first time. He was far from an elderly man willing away his days, fishing on the beach. He was so much more.

“Sit beside me, child,” he said.

Leiana went back to the house. She offered to take my handbag. I guessed there wasn't a lot of use taking it with me. I swallowed to stop the nervous laugh that rose in my throat. I doubted I would need my credit card or cell phone.

Davan and I didn't talk. My thoughts tumbled and spiralled, always coming back to the same point. Sam had broken sacred laws. His family had summoned him. They were going to punish him. Our future was at their mercy.

Sam hurried into the garden a few minutes later, his eyes searching my face. We'd spent our first night apart. Sam had respected my need to come to terms with the force of his conviction, the lengths he'd gone to, to have me always at his side. The strength of his

love knew no bounds, and whilst I rejoiced never to be parted from him, the degree of his determination had frightened me a little. What wouldn't he have done?

With the first flush of the early morning light, there was only one thing I was sure about, I never wanted to spend another night without him.

I smiled and held out my hands to him. For a moment, he looked surprised at my initiating the formal greeting used by his kin but he came eagerly to take my hands, his face relaxing, relief changing the colour of his eyes. I felt the strength of his love flow into me.

"We need to go," Davan said when Leiana came back to the garden. I looked between them, unable to hide the anxiety from my face.

"Tessa," Sam murmured. "You don't have to come. I can deal with this."

He was giving me the chance to back out. I looked at him. I knew there was something else; something he had yet to tell me. I knew him well enough not to ask, though. He wouldn't lie about it, or skirt around the issue. He would just tell me when he was ready. It was his way.

"Sam, if you're going, so am I. Besides, I was invited, wasn't I?" I asked, turning to Davan. He nodded.

Sam still looked uncertain. “Tessa,” his voice became persuasive.

I held up my hands to stop him. “Just explain to me again how we get there.”

Sam looked at me steadily for a few more moments then gave in. “We think of the place and we step into the fabric of time,” he told me, taking one of my hands.

“And I can do this, too?”

“You’ve done it before,” he assured me. “To the Valley of Flowers. Collectively, we will think the place and project the image to you, and we will be there.”

Leiana had been watching us closely. “Davan, do we have to go today? Another couple of days won’t make any difference, surely, and it will give Sam and Tessa a little more time,” Leiana asked her uncle.

“I have done my best to give them the time they’ve already had, Leiana. Delaying further will only make it worse,” he said curtly. I looked at Davan. Worse than what? I looked at Sam. They were looking at each other.

Leiana smiled encouragingly at me and took my hand. Davan stood up and took her other hand, then closed the circle with Sam’s. Sam raised my hand,

brushing his lips against my fingers. I thought I saw a plea in his eyes that I didn't understand.

"Ready?" he asked. I took a deep breath and nodded.

For just a moment, I felt like I was falling, as if from a great height, plummeting downwards rapidly. I wasn't sure if I closed my eyes or not, or maybe I just blinked, but when I opened my eyes, we were in an enormous courtyard with high, whitewashed walls of stone enclosing three sides. The natural stone of the mountain formed the fourth.

A waterfall ran down the rock face into a long rectangular pool that spanned the length of the courtyard, mirroring the towering snow capped peaks above in its glassy surface.

Polished white granite, speckled with black and pink, paved beneath our feet, and trees with branches hanging low with fruit were dotted about, creating shade and bowers. The air smelt of clean crisp snow yet it was not cold.

"Welcome, Tessa," Davan said and he smiled warmly at me. I smiled in wonder back at him.

"Leiana, walk with me." She put her hand on Davan's arm and they headed towards the far end of the courtyard. I watched them walk through an arch.

I looked at Sam and took a long steady breath.
“What happens now?”

“My family are gathering,” he told me. “Davan and Leiana have gone to join them,” he was very grave. His expression, his voice, his eyes, escalated my worry.

I was suddenly a coward. “Can’t we just leave, Sam? Go somewhere that no-one knows about?” Even as I said it, I knew my father would have been disappointed in me.

Sam opened his arms and I stepped into his embrace. “I must face the consequences, Tessa, so we can be free to start our life together. Whatever they decree, it *is* our destiny to be together, I have put all my trust in that, and continue to do so,” he whispered against my hair, then pulled back to look into my face, before kissing my forehead.

“Tessa, my deepest regret is not my arrogance to believe I could change fate to have you by my side forever but that I may be made to forsake you because of it.”

I stared at him. “Forsake me?!”

“It is worse than I feared,” he told me.

I stared at him. This was what he’d kept from me.

“I have greatly offended the Ancient Council. My actions have created unprecedented turmoil. They are at odds with each other, not only because I broke our two most sacred laws, but also because I made you immortal. It is not our way.

“The consequences were serious enough when I changed the course of events after the car accident. So many lives have been affected. Natalie’s, Jackson’s, Ann’s, Matt’s, Zac’s, even Mandy’s,” he told me.

I thought about them, pictured them around the fire on the beach. They were all happy. There was no reason to think the course of events had been perverted.

“It would not be that way if you had died in the car accident,” he told me, knowing what I was thinking. “You are the reason for their happiness, Tessa. Your wonderful, generous spirit affects everyone around you.”

“How can you be punished for that?” I demanded.

“Because it is not the way it is meant to be. There are other people, strangers who we will never know, their lives have been affected, *their* paths changed,” Sam explained. “Allowing you to know my identity, and

Leiana's too, will add to the penalty," he added with a sigh.

"And, of course Davan's also, though it was he who insisted on meeting you at Leiana's dinner party. He thought to involve himself, to show support for my actions."

"Is that everything?" I was barely able to get out the words. I was reeling at the thought of living without him. How long did forsake mean?

He nodded.

"Oh, Sam."

I felt sick.

"My conviction blinded me to the full ramifications of my actions." Sam's eyes were so deep blue they looked black. "I am so sorry, Tessa. My conceit has led to this."

The sorrow in his voice cut deep into me. Was it conceivable we could be separated? Fear speared through me.

"What of our daughter, Sam?" I whispered. "I saw the painting, in your studio. Our beautiful girl, is she to be forsaken, too?"