

Chapter Eleven

I greeted my students on Monday morning and gave them five minutes to chatter and settle in before I did roll call.

“Did everyone remember to bring back parent consent forms for our excursion on Wednesday?” I asked. “Put them on my desk if you haven’t already.” Half a dozen more forms made it on the pile.

“I have some news about our back wall,” I announced. I told them about the combined art and science project. I’d spoken to John Brennan when I arrived at school and he had been supportive, especially as there was no cost. My students were as excited as I was.

“So, what did everyone do over the weekend? Let’s go round the class.” I settled into my chair to listen to each of them. It was something I did every Monday morning. It was interesting what I’d learnt as they shared their home lives with me.

Zac Moreton was the only one who did not let me in. “Nothing,” he said when it was his turn. I looked at him for a moment longer. He looked sullenly back at me.

“And what about you, Miss Howard?” Laura Jenkins asked. Laura had appointed herself spokesperson for the class. She was a confident and happy girl.

“Well,” I said. “I had a special treat. I went for a picnic at the beach with a friend. We went for a swim and next thing you know, there was a pod of dolphins swimming around us!” The class were immediately attentive. I spent the next ten minutes describing the acrobatics and the feel of the dolphin I’d touched.

“That’s supposed to be very lucky, Miss Howard,” Sarah Pollock told me. “Dolphins are sacred to the ancient gods,” she added and I hid a smile at her air of intellectual superiority.

“Is that right, Sarah? Wow! Looks like I was really lucky.”

“I read it in a book on mythology,” she added.

“My Dad loved mythology, too,” I told her. “I’ll have a look and see what books he has...had,” I automatically corrected myself and the momentary lapse stabbed sharp pain through me. Quickly, I turned to the whiteboard and picked up a marker, taking a deep breath.

“They died, didn’t they, Miss Howard? In a car crash?” Laura asked.

I closed my eyes for a moment before forcing myself to turn around and smile at the child. “Yes.” I managed to keep my voice steady.

“And you were in the crash, too!” Eric Baxter, a boisterous lad at the best of times, chimed in not wanting to miss sharing his knowledge on the subject.

“Yes.”

“My Dad writes the newspaper,” Eric reminded me for the twentieth time. “He said you were a miracle. And that the crash was so bad your Mum and Dad were decapitated.”

I couldn’t bring myself to correct his mispronunciation.

“And the ambulance and police came, and a really big tow truck,” Eric added, not to be outdone by Sara’s superiority. “My Dad took the photos, too. They were in the paper.”

I thought I was going to be sick.

“Did you get hurt and go to the hospital?” Zac Moreton asked. His young face was very serious. I concentrated on him. It helped get myself under control.

“I was very, very lucky, Zac. I was in hospital for a while but that was just to make sure I was okay. And I

am,” I assured him when the frown on his face didn’t ease.

“Right! Who wants to tell me some ideas for our back wall project?” I asked with enormous effort, diverting the conversation, and nearly every hand waved frantically. I noticed Zac didn’t put his hand up.

I went over to the staff room at little lunch to get a coffee. Mandy looked up from the counter where she was making her own and gave me a smile.

“Nice weekend?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you. And you?”

“Quiet one,” Mandy said. “Story of my life!” and she sighed.

“How are my two favourite teachers?” Matt asked as he joined the coffee queue.

“Good,” we said together.

Matt leaned his back against the counter. “I just heard a couple of your kids talking about your parents, Tessa. They told me they’d asked you about it. You okay?”

Mandy frowned sympathetically when my face clouded.

“No doubt they’ve heard their parents talking about you,” Matt said.

“I’m okay, thanks. I guess I’ve been expecting it. I’m surprised it hasn’t come up before now,” I told him.

“And how was the date with Sam? Come on, have been dying to know since Nat told me he spirited you away for the day, especially as you didn’t have plans when we talked on Friday!” Matt asked, changing the mood dramatically.

“Matt!” Mandy chided him. “And, they reckon girls like to gossip!” she exclaimed.

“What if I told you it was none of your business?” I kept my voice light.

“Wouldn’t make any difference,” Matt said. “I’ll find out anyway. I’ll wheedle it out of Nat,” he told me complacently.

I glanced at Mandy. I could see she was equally interested. “We went to the markets and then to the beach for a picnic,” I told them.

“That would have been lovely,” Mandy said, she couldn’t help glancing at Matt.

“It was. We had oysters straight off the rocks for entrée, ham and chicken sandwiches from the hamper for main course and then stopped for desert on the way back. The most amazing ice-cream sundae I have ever eaten, from a little roadside café just south of

Cape Moore.” I described the eatery where Sam had taken me. They both nodded, knowing the place.

“Very romantic,” Matt said drily.

“Matt, stop it! Just because you’re about as romantic as a wet sponge.” Mandy gave me a ‘pay him no attention’ look.

“Mandy, I’ll have you know that I am one of the most romantic guys on the planet,” Matt protested, trying to look hurt.

“Tessa?” Sandy from Admin called my name and I turned to see her coming towards me with a huge bunch of flowers. “For you, my dear. They were just delivered,” she said with a big smile as she handed me the vase. “Stunning, aren’t they,” she must have thought my silence was awe. “The delivery man was better!” she added with a sly wink at Mandy.

Mandy elbowed Matt out of the way to admire them. Wild flowers, every colour of the rainbow and my favourite deep, deep blue ones dotted throughout.

I had to put the vase down. My hands were shaking badly. I’d received a smaller bunch while I was in hospital, exactly the same. The memory poured into my head. The mystery flowers, delivered in the middle of the night. The flowers that had always calmed me.

This bunch was not calming!

“There’s a card,” Mandy said pointing at the envelope tucked inside the blooms but I didn’t need the card to know who had sent them. Nor did I need to ask *where* they came from. The only question I needed answering was *how it was possible*.

Matt and Mandy were looking at me curiously. I realised I was just standing there. I pulled out the envelope. It wasn’t a card but a photo, beautifully mounted in a gold foil frame. A photo of a pod of dolphins, *our dolphins*, I was sure of it, all seven diving in perfect unison in a circle a few feet above the sea.

I turned the photo over. In very distinctive handwriting I read, ‘The first of a thousand magical moments. Sam.’

“Oh!” Mandy sighed and I glanced at her. She had read the card, too. “Sorry,” she said quickly. “I shouldn’t have.”

Matt shook his head. “He sends you a photo of dolphins? What have dolphins got to do with flowers?” he asked incredulously. “That guy is seriously strange, Tessa. You know, you should have stuck with me. *I’d* have bought you chocolates!”

“Shut up, Matt,” Mandy said.

At lunchtime, I hurried out of class as soon as my students left. Fortunately, I was not on playground duty. I put my head into the Admin office to tell Sandy I had to pop into town, and that I'd be back before the bell. Sandy waved. John was a stickler for the rules.

I walked the several blocks to the main street and headed straight for the gallery. It was cool inside. The lighting, soft music and tinkling water from the fountain created the soothing, welcoming ambience, I remembered.

Well, it would have been soothing if one of the gallery's owners did not seriously disturb me, I thought.

Leiana, beautiful and serene, looked up with a smile from her counter. "Tessa! Lovely to see you," she said.

I noticed there was no strange sensation tinkering with my senses this time.

"Hi, Leiana. Is Sam in? I'd really like to see him for a few moments." I was sorry to come straight to the point but I didn't have time for small talk.

Leiana's voice stayed serene. "He is, Tessa. I'll let him know you are here," and she walked to the back of the gallery and went through a door.

While I waited, I looked for the Valley of Flowers photo. It was not on the wall. Had it been sold? Perhaps a new photo was in order. There were no flowers left, they were all in a vase on my desk!

“Tessa!” Sam said coming through the door. “What a lovely surprise!” He was wearing a black Tee and old jeans, looking like he was in the middle of a photo shoot for how good a guy could look in a pair of worn Levis. Sam being the model, not the photographer.

“I wanted to thank you for the photo, Sam, a wonderful keepsake,” I said, my voice was not quite even.

“My pleasure,” he responded but the colour of his eyes was deepening, as if he knew the strain I was barely containing. His eye colour was definitely a barometer of his emotions, I thought.

“How on earth did you get that shot of them, all seven leaping in perfect unison?” I asked, still trying for a normal tone. I was slightly mollified when he looked uncomfortable.

“You won’t like the answer,” he eventually said. When I did not demure, he shrugged with resignation.

“I asked them.”

“You *asked* them?” I repeated and he nodded.

“You’re right,” I told him coolly. “I don’t like the answer.”

“Please, Tessa. Don’t let it spoil the memory.” I heard the soft plea in his voice.

“No,” I agreed. It rated as the best memory of my life. “The flowers are magnificent, too. Thank you.” I was proud of myself for getting that out so calmly.

“There’s only one place I can think of where they could have come from and that’s *impossible*, isn’t it, Sam?” My calm veneer finally cracked, making my voice quaver.

Leiana was standing very still behind her counter, watching us.

“Nothing is impossible, Tessa,” he said softly.

“Sam, when I was in hospital after the accident, someone sent me a bunch of the same flowers. There was no card.” Sam didn’t say anything. He just watched me. “*You* sent them, didn’t you?” I meant to ask but it came out like an accusation.

“I brought them myself,” he clarified.

“It was the middle of the night!”

He nodded, remembering. “Yes. It was late.”

“How did you get into the ward? No one saw you. It’s been a mystery all this time!”

Sam shrugged. "Like everyone else. I walked in through the door. The nurses were watching something on TV in a lounge room. I found your room easily enough. You were having a nightmare." A small frown briefly marred his forehead, as if he was remembering. "You looked so sad."

Yes, I had been sad. Devastated.

"Why?" I asked. "I was a total stranger."

Sam held my gaze steadily. "You have never been a stranger to me, Tessa."

"We had never met!" I objected.

Sam's eyes became enigmatic. I searched his handsome face. I knew there was something I should know. Something that would make sense out of all the strangeness.

I glanced at my watch. "I have to go. Class gets back in ten minutes." At the door, I turned back. He had not moved. "I'm going to figure this out, Sam," I told him.

"I'm counting on it, Tessa," he answered very seriously.

Somehow, I made it through the afternoon. The smell of the flowers drifting through the classroom

tormented me, even when I managed not to look at the riot of colour. I didn't need reminding of the Valley of Flowers. Since I'd woken on the beach after the picnic, the jumble of memories had bound tightly together, with startling reality. There was nothing dream-like about it, at all. I had walked in that valley and Sam had been there, waiting for me.

I glanced at the photo, propped against the vase of flowers. The dolphins were just meters above the water, dawn breaking on the horizon. Sam must have lain flat on his board to get the perfectly synchronised shot, but how long had he waited, never sure it would come. Unless you asked, I thought, clenching my teeth with frustration. I put the photo in my handbag, out of sight.

I dismissed my class a few minutes early much to the delight of my students. I was sure the only thing I'd taught them through the afternoon was how a neurotic person behaved when they received flowers. They were far too young and impressionable to be subjected to that!

Sam's gifts were a catalyst to my needing to understand the peculiarities about him. Is that why he'd sent those particular flowers?

'I'm counting on it,' he'd said.

After school, I walked for hours along the beach, trying to piece together the splinters of memories that were plaguing me. My head ached with the effort. Repeatedly, I sifted and sorted them, trying to fit them into the dream of the valley. They didn't seem to belong to the dream at all.

It was after midnight when I crawled into bed and turned out the light. I lay in the soft light the full moon was casting into my room and was just on the verge of sleep when I realised why I couldn't make the pieces fit. They were memories from another place and time.

An intense blue gaze holding mine.

Warmth cradling my back.

Bright sunlight starring my vision.

Immense pain soothing away.

Darkness stealing me.

I must have fallen asleep because I awoke to the early morning sunbeam shining through the French doors. With summer over and autumn progressing, the sunbeam had changed course, no longer reaching the photo on the wall, instead slanting onto the wildflowers where I'd put them on the dresser.

I lay looking at them, the warmth of the sun bursting their fragrance. I remembered the smell of them from when *I'd walked* in the valley.

Impossible!

Slowly the sunbeam shifted, sliding upwards until it shone on the mirror, magnifying its brightness and starring my vision. Quickly, I turned my head to protect my eyes and froze as the errant shards suddenly connected into a single, continuous memory. A memory bathed in bright golden sunlight, not in a valley but on a roadside.

For a long time after the sunbeam continued on its path, I lay trying to convince myself it must have been a dream.

It was too fantastical for belief.

I got in from school just after four o'clock, fretful with the impossible thoughts that refused to be pushed aside. I changed into my running gear. I was too edgy to relax.

Natalie was coming out of her bedroom wearing a cotton sarong and baggy t-shirt, as I tied my laces. "How does pasta cabonnara sound for dinner?" she asked.

"Not working tonight?" Food was the last thing I needed!

"No. Got tonight off."

“Is Matt coming over?” I hoped not, I was not in the mood for Matt’s keen observations or his humour either. We’d been on playground duty together at lunchtime and he’d looked sharply at me a few times.

“No. I didn’t invite him.” Her expression told me not to ask. Had they had a fight? No, I didn’t think so. Something was bothering Natalie, though. That made two of us, I sighed.

“I’ll be back soon,” and I headed out to the beach.

I started my normal slow jog to warm up and quickly settled into a steady pace. My stamina and endurance still surprised me. I never seemed to get out of breath or even tired. Maybe I should enter one of those marathons. I immediately dismissed the idea. I was not the competitive type. I was only competitive with myself, always wanting to do better. One of my father’s traits.

“Oh, Dad,” I breathed. “I still miss you so much.” I had to suck air into my lungs to clear the lump that rose in my chest. What advice would he have given if I could tell him what was worrying me?

I broke into a run, tearing along the beach as if being chased, startling people lying on their towels, catching the last of the afternoon sun.

I reached the rocky outcrop in record time and scrambled to my favourite spot. The sea was flat and gentle, hardly a white cap to be seen, not surfing conditions. I knew Sam would not be there but I was still disappointed. Our daily ritual had ended when I'd raced down to the sand to meet him weeks before. I'd been right, it had changed everything between us but not in any way I could have thought possible.

"I'm beginning to wonder about you and these rocks," Jackson McIntyre hailed from the sand below. I jumped, startled by his voice and peered over the edge.

"Hi, Jackson." It had been a week since I'd last seen him. We'd both been on an early morning run.

"Mind if I join you?"

I waved him up.

"Great spot," he said taking in the view.

"Pull up a rock," I offered and he laughed, choosing a rounded protrusion.

"You looked miles away, I nearly left you to your thoughts," he said.

I was pleased he hadn't. He was the only person I could talk to.

"Off work early?"

“Late shift. I start at eleven unless there are any emergencies,” he replied and patted his pocket where I presumed he had his phone.

“Jackson, can I ask you something?”

“Of course, anything.”

“Do you believe in the supernatural, or paranormal, or whatever people call weird stuff that can’t be explained?”

Jackson looked at me thoughtfully for a few moments. “Sometimes it’s the only explanation,” he answered. “Because we don’t understand it, doesn’t mean it can’t happen. What’s on your mind, Tessa?”

What was on my mind? That I was *losing* my mind.

“What injuries did you expect me to have when I came into the hospital?”

Jackson counted them on his fingers. “Head trauma, broken bones, internal bleeding, organ damage, extensive bruising, abrasions. They are the typical injuries from road accidents.”

It was a horrific list. “I couldn’t have got out of the car by myself with those kinds of injuries, could I?”

“Tessa, I saw a photo of the accident in the paper. I really don’t believe you could have got out of the car by yourself. You must have been thrown as the police thought.”

“Being thrown out of the car would have caused injuries, though,” I said and he nodded slowly.

“We x-rayed every bone in your body, *twice*, and ultra-sounded your major organs. We found nothing. Other than being deeply unconscious, you were not hurt.”

He was looking at me closely. “Tessa, how much is this bothering you? You could talk to a grief counsellor, get some help to find closure. I have a friend...”

“There *is* an explanation,” I interrupted and he pushed the Raybans to the top of his head, his look deepening. He waited patiently while I convinced myself to tell him.

“I’ve been remembering bits and pieces,” I told him. “It’s like pieces of a jig saw puzzle. Some pieces I keep remembering, some I forget as soon as I remember them.”

“That sounds quite normal. It’s a good sign that you are remembering at all,” he reassured me.

Unfortunately, that didn’t comfort me. My memories were far from normal.

“Problem is, the memories feel very real, even though they should belong in a dream. They are just too impossible to have happened!”

Jackson frowned, trying to understand what I was saying.

I struggled on.

“Isn’t dreaming supposed to be like watching a movie? You see it and hear it, understand what’s happening but only from the perspective of an observer, because you don’t actually experience it?”

Jackson thought about it. “Yes, that’s right.”

“So, because I *remember* the smell and feel of things, it’s because the memories have to be real.” I looked out at the sea for a few minutes, mustering the courage to tell him. Some of it anyway, I finally decided.

“I woke up on the road after the accident.”

Jackson nodded, encouraging me.

“I don’t remember how I got there but I was being held by an... someone,” and I dropped my eyes from his keen gaze.

“The miracle wasn’t being thrown from the car without getting hurt, Jackson. The miracle is that someone healed me on the side of that road,” I told him. “I was in so much pain, I could hardly breathe. He knew where the pain was and he touched me with just his hand, and the pain was gone.” I laid my hand on

my chest, suddenly remembering how he'd put his hand over my heart.

I held Jackson's even gaze. "I thought he was... an angel."

Jackson didn't say anything straight away and I realised there was something I hadn't thought of. Why an angel, *Sam*, had saved my life.

"Do you really believe that's what happened?" Jackson finally asked.

"It's what I remember." The more I thought about it, the more certain I was that it had happened.

He reached out and put his hand on my arm. "Then it was indeed a miracle," he said. There was no disbelief in his tone or face.

"You don't think I'm crazy?"

"No. You seem very rational to me. You're working, coping with day to day life. They are always good signs," and he smiled.

"You believe it could have happened?" The relief in my voice was apparent.

"*Something* definitely happened, Tessa. There is no doubt about that. Because there is no other obvious explanation, I can let myself believe it was a miracle."

I stared at him to see if he was humouring me. He wasn't. "Have you seen other miracles? Like me?"

Jackson started to nod, then shrugged, changing his mind. “I’ve seen patients recover when all hope is gone. A miracle? Or the strength of will to survive? I don’t know. The will to live is very tenacious and I suspect miracles are very few, and very far between. I know I could sure do with a few more.”

We sat in silence for a while, both lost to our thoughts.

“Jackson, do you think we are born for a specific purpose? That we are meant to do specific things in our lives?”

He sat back on his rock. “I think that is the dilemma of mankind, Tessa. At some point, we all question what our purpose is in life. Being a doctor has always felt like mine.”

I understood. Being a teacher had always been mine. I couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

I thought of Sam’s absolute belief in fate and it being our destiny to meet. Yet, he seemed so in control, not at all the type to be at the whim of some grand, unknown plan.

“Do you believe in fate, Jackson?”

He shrugged. “I think I have to. When I have done everything I can, and know there is nothing more I can

do, and still lose a patient, I have to believe it was meant to be.”

“Because believing in fate absolves us from responsibility?”

Jackson looked at me for a while. “Is that what you need, Tessa? To stop blaming yourself for your parents’ deaths?”

I didn’t answer.

“Tessa, you weren’t driving. You didn’t do anything to cause the accident. You can’t hold yourself responsible,” he told me firmly. “If I felt responsible for every patient I’ve lost, I would never be able to move on to all the patients I *can* help.

“How about we make a deal?” he asked me.

“How about we agree that it was a miracle, some divine intervention that we aren’t meant to understand. And because of it, you’re alive and spared from potentially life-long injuries and scars? Don’t let the accident define your life, Tessa. Instead think about what it has given you.”

“What’s that?” I whispered.

“The ability to believe in angels.”

“Deal?” He put out his hand to me.

“Deal,” I said slowly and put my hand into his.

The pasta sauce smelt fantastic. Natalie called out from the kitchen when she heard me come in, “Hope you’re hungry, I’ve cooked enough for a small army.”

“That’s good because I ran into Jackson on the beach. I invited him to come and join us,” I responded, heading over to the kitchen.

Natalie’s hand flew to the rough ponytail on the top of her head, as she looked at me with absolute horror. She threw the wooden spoon she’d been stirring the sauce with into the sink and bolted up the hall.

“Tessa!” she wailed from the bathroom. “How long till he gets here?” her voice was muffled as if she was ripping the t-shirt over her head.

“About half an hour, I would think. He was heading home to change. Want me to stir the sauce?” I called and retrieved the wooden spoon.

Natalie and Jackson? My scatty, impulsive friend attracted to the dedicated, serious doctor? And vice versa? Jackson’s face had lit up when I’d asked if he’d like to come over and help eat Natalie’s famous pasta cabonnara. I was sure it wasn’t my strange company, or the pasta dish either, that had caused his enthusiasm.

I turned the gas ring down when I heard the shower and slowly stirred the sauce, round and round, mulling over Jackson's advice. I should have talked to him earlier. He made it all sound... believable. Would he change his mind about my sanity if I told him I thought Sam was the angel?

Natalie re-emerged fifteen minutes later, wearing black jeans and a red tank top, her curly hair loose and glorious. I noticed she had put on a little make-up, too.

I didn't have time to ask her anything. Jackson arrived at the door, thirty seconds later. He'd obviously hurried as well. His hair was still damp and he looked nervous when I opened the door for him. All signs of the confident, totally in control doctor eradicated by the prospect of eating home-cooked pasta with my vivacious friend. I gave him a smile of encouragement and he followed me through to the kitchen.

"If you guys will excuse me, I'm going to take a shower and get changed," I told them. I don't think either of them heard me.

I didn't join Natalie and Jackson for dinner. By the time I showered and dressed, they were sitting on the sofa, deep in conversation. I left them to it. I grabbed a bowl of pasta and took it out onto the deck with the pile of essays my students had written on their Batman

legends. I managed to read a couple but gave up by the fourth. I wasn't concentrating.

I thought of the marks on my chest and undid a couple of buttons on my shirt. I aligned my hand over the discolorations, remembering the warmth against my heart. My palm was smaller but it fit within the outline.

Sam.

He had held me on the roadside after the accident. He'd healed me even as I struggled to breath. He was the angel who consumed my thoughts. I recognised his eyes, his voice, his smell, his touch. Somehow, I had *been* to the Valley of Flowers, knowing he was there, waiting for me. If I needed proof, there was a photo taken in the exact spot where I had stood at the stream, looking across to where he waited in the shade of the tree. His confirmation that he had taken the photo, a place I had never been to, and had never even heard of, added testimony.

Twice, Sam had given me flowers that could only have come from there, a special place that somehow belonged to just us, half a world away, the flowers delivered with the mountain dew still on the petals.

What magic did Sam possess? How was any of it possible? Sam had told me nothing was impossible.

Jackson had said we weren't meant to understand divine intervention. Little Sarah Pollock had read dolphins were sacred to ancient Gods.

I got up and went through the French doors into my bedroom. I tapped the keyboard on my laptop. The screen lit up and I did a Google search. I scanned a dozen sites, clicking on the links, searching deeper and deeper. Sarah was right. Dolphins and ancient deities had been tied together since the beginning of time.

My mind shied away from that conclusion and I snapped the laptop closed.

It was a beautiful night, just a light breeze coming off the sea, the waves whooshing gently back and forth on the sand with the outgoing tide.

I found the path to the beach.

It was a full moon and in the silvery light, I walked, searching for belief.