

Chapter Thirteen

I objected. John Brennan overruled me. I looked at Sam but he just smiled sympathetically.

“We can go together, Miss Howard,” Zac said and slid his hand into mine. I gave in and climbed into the back of the ambulance.

“School policy,” John said unapologetically.

“We’ll meet you there,” Matt said.

I looked at Sam again. “I’ll come and pick you up,” he promised.

The ambulance officer, a chatty redhead, cleaned the graze on Zac’s knee and put a dressing on it. Zac was brave and hardly flinched.

“Best patient I’ve had all day,” she told him.

“Anything hurting?” she asked me and I shook my head.

Other than wet clothes, tangled hair and unbelievable thoughts, I was doing pretty good.

I groaned when the ambulance doors opened in the emergency bay at the hospital and Jackson McIntyre greeted us.

“Tessa! Matt sent me a text message and told me what happened. Zac, good to see you again, too!” he

said. "Well, you've both had an adventurous afternoon. I look forward to hearing all about it," and he lifted Zac down from the ambulance and seated him on one of the waiting gurneys.

"I can walk, thank you," I assured the nurse hovering around me and handed the blanket back to the ambulance officer with a smile of thanks.

The nurse took us to a couple of beds in the emergency room. I sat on the edge of Zac's. "You okay?" He nodded. Poor little fellow looked exhausted. I could see the dried tears on his face.

"I'm really sorry, Miss Howard," he mumbled.

"It's okay, Zac. I'm sorry I didn't manage to get your hat. Other than your poor old knee, we're both fine. Just promise me something?"

He nodded, again.

"Next time you're feeling sad or scared will you come talk to me about it? Running away doesn't solve anything at all. Promise?"

"Promise," he whispered.

Jackson came in to check Zac out. I took the opportunity to find a bathroom. My cotton trousers and shirt were nearly dry, though my shoes were squelchy. I rinsed my face and hands under the cold water and looked in the mirror. My hair was a mess, drying stiff

from the salt water. I pulled it together and braided a plait before trying to smooth the pieces that fell heavily across my forehead.

I took a deep breath and slowly let it out, allowing myself to think about what had happened. Falling off the rocks without injury, and that I hadn't panicked in the water, were overridden by the incredible fact that Sam had saved me from the sea when I was a child, just as he had saved my life after the car accident.

And, finally, I understood why. Seeing his medallion had unlocked the crucial memory.

Because my life was inexplicably bound to his, as his was to mine.

I found my way back to the emergency room and saw John Brennan and Matt talking quietly in a small waiting room. I told them what Zac had told me.

"I had no idea his Mum was so unwell. When I spoke to her on the phone this afternoon, she sounded quite frail," John said.

"I told her we'd take Zac home so she didn't have to come out. Are you sure you're fine, Tessa?" John asked. "That was such a long fall! How you missed hitting the rocks is amazing! Your friend must have

known what was going to happen, he was in the water in a second,” he told me.

Jackson came through to the waiting room with Zac. He confirmed that other than a scraped knee, the boy was unhurt. Matt ruffled Zac’s hair.

“Miss Howard, I want you to take the day off tomorrow,” John Brennan said. “And you, young man, can have a day at home, too, so you can think about what happened this afternoon. Then, we’ll all sit down and talk about this,” he told Zac sternly.

Zac looked at me and I gave him an encouraging smile.

“Would you like us to wait for you?” John asked me.

“Sam said he was going to make a quick stop to change into some dry clothes, then come and get you, Tessa. He’s probably only a few minutes away by now,” Matt said.

“We’d better get going, then,” John said. “I don’t want Zac’s mum to worry anymore than she’s already had to.”

Matt gave me a quick hug after John shepherded Zac out of the waiting room. “Thanks for saving me from class excursions for the next decade!” he said, his eyes were bright with humour. “John is sure to put

a ban on them forever after today!" Matt had told me how much he hated excursions. Belatedly, I understood why.

"Tessa, let's take a look at you and make sure you are okay," Jackson said and I followed him back to the emergency room. He listened for water in my lungs and felt for bumps and bruises.

"Well, it seems you are truly indestructible, or incredibly lucky. Matt told me where you fell. Those rocks are treacherous. Another miracle?" he pondered.

I shook my head. "Somehow I just knew to get under the waves and away from the rocks. I think the current pulled me out of harm's way. Then Sam was there." Just as he'd been before, even if the intervening years made it highly improbable.

Jackson seemed satisfied that I was okay and picked up a chart to scribble his notes.

"Jackson, can I ask you about Zac's mum? He told me she's been in hospital."

He looked up from the chart, his expression guarded. "Tessa, I can't talk to you about that. I'm her doctor."

"I understand, Jackson. Do you know Zac's dad left? He told me this afternoon."

Jackson nodded reluctantly, looking uncomfortable. "Tessa, I really can't talk to you about Ann Moreton, not even that. Please, understand."

"I just want to help, Jackson. Poor Zac is in bits which is how we ended up having all the drama this afternoon."

I could see he was not going to budge. "Okay. I'll talk to Mrs Moreton myself. I'm her son's teacher, after all," I decided.

"You need to look after yourself first, Tessa."

"Is she very ill?" I asked and he sighed at my persistence, then nodded slowly.

"Yes."

"But you can help her, Jackson? Get her well?"

"I'm doing everything I can," but there was not a lot of confidence in his voice. "I may need one of your miracles, Tessa."

Sam was waiting in the corridor, leaning against the wall when Jackson walked me out of the emergency room. He'd changed into a navy blue shirt and jeans. He held a jacket over his arm. He straightened when he saw me and we shared a long look.

"Jackson, I don't think you've met Sam, have you?" I asked, suddenly remembering my manners.

“Sam and I met...” and I didn’t quite know how to finish the sentence. When he healed my injuries after the accident? *When I was seven and he saved me from drowning.*

“Sam Archer,” Sam smoothly filled the gap.

“Jackson McIntyre. Tessa’s doctor.” They shook hands. Jackson was looking at me closely.

“And friend, too, I hope,” I cut in realising his expression had a distinctly medical interest to it.

“Of course! Tessa, you need to go home and get some rest. You may not have been hurt but you are bound to have some delayed shock.” He looked at Sam. “Can you stay with Tessa for a while?” Sam nodded.

He held out the jacket and I pushed my arms into the sleeves, pulling it close about me, inhaling his spicy scent in the fabric.

“Make sure she eats and rests,” Jackson added. “Doctor’s orders, Tessa!” he said at my expression just as his pager started buzzing insistently. He took a quick glance at it. “I’ve got to get this,” he said. “Nice to meet you, Sam. See you soon, Tessa,” and he hurried away along the corridor.

Sam was looking at me, a tiny frown marring his forehead. He’d noticed my tension.

“I don’t need to rest, Sam,” I said firmly, just in case he felt any responsibility to follow Jackson’s orders. “I...We need to talk!”

The frown deepened a little more but he nodded. “Yes,” he agreed.

Sam took the coast road instead of the highway. I was grateful. I could not bear driving along that fatal stretch, though a different perspective suddenly occurred to me. It was also where Sam had saved my life. I looked at his profile in the dim light. His strong jaw line. The unruly curl falling over his high forehead. He turned his head and looked back at me. I could not read his expression but he lifted my hand to kiss my fingertips.

The house was in darkness when we arrived. Natalie was at work. When I flicked the lights on, I saw my handbag on the kitchen counter, a note in Natalie’s scrawl tucked under the corner of it.

‘Tessa!!!! If you’re reading this then you must be okay. Thank God! You trying to kill me with shock?!?! Matt dropped your bag back from school and told me what happened! He said Sam is with you. That’s brilliant! Given up trying to ring you! RING ME!! Nat.’

“Shoot! Where’s my phone?” I suddenly realised I didn’t know where it was.

Sam pulled it out of his pocket. “You gave it to me to call John,” he reminded me. I took it and opened the flap, expecting to see it full of water. “I thought to give it to Zac before diving in after you,” Sam said, and I smiled with relief.

The phone was still switched to silent from when I’d had it in class earlier in the day. ‘Nat - 11 missed calls’ flashed up on the display.

“Sam, do you mind waiting while I have a shower?”

Sam smiled at me. “I have waited much longer than it will take you to have a shower, Tessa.”

I gave him a long, pointed look. He just looked calmly back at me, his eyes enigmatic, as always.

I rang Natalie while I waited for the water to run hot. It went to her message service. I left her a quick message to let her know I was okay, then, gratefully stepped under the shower.

Ten minutes later, I felt better without the salt prickling against my skin. I’d shampooed my hair, too, pouring extra conditioner to soften the tangled mess. In my bedroom, I pulled on jeans and a pale blue long sleeve t-shirt before towelling my hair some more. I

looked in the mirror. There was no sign that I'd been swept off the rocks and into the sea. Not a scratch. Could I really be that lucky?

I walked over to the photo on the wall and touched the glass over the symbol in the bottom corner.

Sam had some explaining to do.

I picked up my hair brush and went through to the lounge room. Sam was standing at the sideboard looking at the photos of my parents and me. I sat on the sofa cross-legged, pulling the brush through my hair, watching him.

He came and sat next to me. "Let me," he murmured and took the brush. I shifted so my back was to him. Each stroke felt like a slow caress, his fingers brushing the nape of my neck as he lifted each lock, sending goose bumps down my arms.

I thought through my memories. Sam surfing, Sam cooking breakfast for me, Sam taking me to the beach for a picnic, sitting on Sam's surfboard surrounded by dolphins, Sam holding me in his arms on the road side. Sam waiting for me in the Valley of Flowers. Sam saving my life when I was a child. Sam healing my wounds after the car accident.

Sam never explaining anything.

I stilled his hand, turning to face him and took the brush from him. I tossed it on the coffee table where it landed with a loud clatter, shattering the intimacy, then scooped my hair over my shoulder. It was silky smooth.

“Thanks,” I said, the tension making my voice a little unsteady. I saw the frown crease back on his forehead.

His medallion was under his shirt.

“May I?” I asked, indicating my intention and he nodded. I drew it out, resting it on my palm. The gold was warm from his skin. I studied the intricacy of the detail in the bow, saw the fine threads of gold that held the sun disc in its centre. It was a beautiful, unique piece. I dropped the medallion against his shirt and looked up at him.

“There was nothing random about us meeting, was there, Sam?”

“It has always been our destiny, Tessa.” There was absolutely no doubt in his tone.

“When I saw this symbol on your photo in my bedroom, when I moved here, I knew I’d seen it before,” I told him. “I have tried so many times to remember why it is familiar. When I saw your

medallion under the water this afternoon, I remembered.”

Sam just watched me, waiting for me to continue.

“I remember it from when I was seven years old.”

Still he said nothing.

“My parents always said a surfer found me in the sea and brought me to shore.” His eyes deepened to a darker shade of blue.

“It was you, wasn’t it, Sam?”

“Yes,” he said calmly.

I searched his face. His beautiful, handsome, *young* face. “That was 14 years ago, Sam!” He looked twenty-something.

“So, you were either a very mature looking teenager when you rescued me or you know where the fountain of youth is.” I couldn’t help the sarcasm with my mounting agitation.

“You know you could make this all so much easier and just explain!” I complained.

Sam took my hands and held them between us.

“Tessa, age is not something I count like you do. I just... am,” he said.

I frowned trying to understand what that meant.

“You just are,” I said slowly. “Are what, Sam?”

I pulled my hands out of his when he said nothing. I stood up, pacing away from him and then turned back. "I think I have a right to know, Sam."

"Yes," he agreed. "What do you believe?" he asked quietly.

With finally the chance to understand, I was suddenly reluctant. I wasn't sure if I was afraid of being right, or wrong.

"Tell me," he coaxed persuasively.

I was reminded of another time he'd used that same tone to influence me. Then, it had been to open my eyes and see for myself the bond that tied us.

"Other than saving me from drowning? I believe you saved my life after the car accident. You got me out of the car, healed my injuries." I hurried over the words. "I believe I've been to the Valley of Flowers. And, you were there, too, waiting for me."

"Yes."

His simple confirmation was like a jolt of electricity bursting through me. It released me from months of doubt and confusion. I savoured my sanity for a few minutes before the astounding implications of what it all meant assaulted my rational brain.

Acknowledgement wasn't enough. It demanded proof.

“Twice you brought me flowers. Flowers that came from that valley,” I challenged him.

“Yes,” he agreed amicably. “They seemed to be your preference.”

“Oh, they are!” I guaranteed him. “But I know for a fact you didn’t get on a plane and fly there so you could pick them for me. You simply didn’t have time to do that when you brought the flowers to the school!”

I narrowed my eyes. Was that amusement making his lips twitch? “How is *that* possible, Sam?!”

He looked at me with his infuriating calm. “Nothing is impossible, Tessa. You just have to believe.”

“It would help if I knew what I had to believe in!”

“Fate,” he told me quietly.

“Sam, please!” I exclaimed. “You say ‘fate’ like it answers everything. It answers nothing,” I snapped. “Fate doesn’t explain how all these things can happen or why you always seem to be right there when I need rescuing! You did it again today!” I accused, then realised how ungrateful that sounded.

“I didn’t rescue you today, Tessa,” he said calmly and stood up to come over to me. “You didn’t need rescuing. You would have made it to the surface on your own. You were waiting for me.”

I stared at him. He was right. I should have panicked in the sea. I didn't.

"When I was seven, was I meant to drown?"

He looked at me for a few moments. "Yes," he said very quietly.

"And you saved my life?"

"I intervened," he corrected and taking my hand, he led me back to the sofa, pulling me down beside him. "You were such a beautiful, happy child," and he smiled at his memory. "Fate had no right to make the claim on your life. It was too cruel, especially for your parents." His eyes grew very dark and his expression stern.

"So, you just happened to be there, on the beach? You saw it happen?"

He shook his head. "I was waiting where the current took you," he told me.

Goose bumps balled my skin.

"How could you know where I'd be?" I demanded. The same way he'd known exactly where the car accident had happened.

Sam didn't answer.

"You told me you weren't an angel," I reminded him.

“No.” He looked steadily into my eyes for a few minutes, as if he was making a decision.

“Take my hands, Tessa.” The tone of his voice made me shiver and an eerie feeling washed over me. Slowly I put my hands in his and watched with fascination as his eyes changed to iris blue. I couldn’t look away and as I stared at him, the enormity of his fundamental nature hit me. Perhaps it was because I already thought of him as an angel, capable of performing miracles, that it was just a small step to comprehend his real identity. I looked at him in wonder.

Sam’s eyes blazed in the same moment that understanding filled me. His medallion grew bright against the dark fabric of his shirt as if a beam of light had fallen on it, reflecting the gold.

“A very long time ago, we were considered kin to deities,” he told me. “We lived amongst mankind but as the centuries went by, and the world changed, we eventually withdraw completely and passed into the fabric of time.”

“We?” I managed, unable to think about the first part of what he’d said. Sam’s eyes had shifted back to their normal intense blue and he smiled gently as if fully understanding my bewilderment.

“My family. A fairly dysfunctional family, even by today’s standards,” and he smiled again.

I took a deep steadying breath. “What are you *considered* to be now?”

Sam shrugged as if it was no big deal. “Immortal.”

“But you *feel* real!” I exclaimed and he laughed, it was not what he expected me to say.

He placed one of my hands on his chest. “I am as mortal as you, Tessa. My heart beats. Blood runs in my veins. I breathe air. I am just eternal.”

My head spun with the bizarreness of it.

“And you have special powers! Is that how you healed me after the accident?!”

“We don’t think of them as special powers,” there was humour in his voice. Then, he grew quite serious. “Yes, I had the ability to... heal you.”

I was too bowled over by the impossibility of what he’d said to pay attention to the slight hesitation. How could I doubt it? I was living proof. I remembered the pain. I remembered I was dying. Wonder coursed through me.

“And the ability that let me be in a valley on the other side of the world, and in a hospital at the same time?” I eventually asked.

“That was *your* ability, Tessa! I showed you in my thoughts where I would wait for you. And you came!” I heard the triumph in his voice.

“Is that why I was in a coma when they found me? My body in one place, my mind in another?”

“It was your soul, actually,” Sam clarified.

“I had to come back, though, didn’t I?” I remembered the feeling as if I was falling, plunging, and being snatched before I hit the ground.

“Yes.”

I remembered the deep contentment I’d felt walking through the valley, knowing he was there waiting for me. I thought of all the sadness I had endured.

“Couldn’t I have stayed?”

“No. It would have been too terrible for those who loved you.”

I pictured Uncle Clive and Natalie sitting beside my hospital bed, waiting for me to wake up from the coma. He was right. It would have been too terrible.

“Sam, I was meant to die in the car accident, too, wasn’t I?”

“Yes,” he said.

“But you intervened again?”

“Yes.”

How fragile my life had been! Then, as acceptance of the absolute impossible became credible, a shocking realisation hit me.

“Sam, you could have saved my parents!”

His eyes darkened to midnight. “No,” he said with immense regret.

“Why not?” I demanded, the certainty in his voice affronting me.

“It was their fate, Tessa,” and I stared at him.

“But it was supposed to be mine, too! You could have *chosen* to save my parents, like you *chose* to save me. *Twice!*” I cried.

The realisation that they could still be alive was devastating. Tears streamed down my face. Sam took my hands, trying to comfort me.

“No,” he said gently. “I’m so sorry, Tessa.”

I still stared at him. I could not, would not, accept that.

“Why was my life more important than theirs?” I demanded.

“I fell in love with you,” he said simply.

What was the strength of his love that he would choose to do nothing, when it was within his power to prevent the most difficult thing I would have to endure?

“The price for your love is too high, Sam,” I told him bleakly.

He released my hands. His eyes were very black.