

Chapter Fifteen

I spent a restless weekend, mostly walking to and from the rocky outcrop. I wondered if that was *my* destiny, to roam aimlessly up and down the beach, caught in some strange limbo, worrying about how things might have been, and what the future could possibly hold.

The inevitable realigning of events had caused my parents' death. What would their fate have been if I'd died at seven? Would they have lived to old age? Would the grief of losing their only child have haunted them to their end? The thought was agonising. I wanted to be angry with Sam for his meddling with my life but I couldn't be. I'd had a wonderful, happy childhood because of him.

Sam was so certain our future was together, yet, I was reluctant to contemplate what that could mean, caught in a web of anxiety, fearful of the impending doom the next realignment might bring.

Jackson called in on his way to the hospital on Saturday, catching me just before I left the house. I scowled at Natalie for telling tales when he insisted on checking me out again.

“I’m fine!” I told him shortly.

“You can talk to me, Tessa,” he said and his dark brown eyes were concerned.

I sighed. “Really, I’m fine, Jackson, just trying to figure some stuff out.”

“About Sam?” and I looked at him startled.

“He seems like a really nice guy. Just remember you’re allowed to be happy,” he told me.

I relaxed, realising he was talking about my fragile emotional state not my relationship with an immortal who left me at the mercy of my free will to decide an impossible future.

When Sam tapped at my classroom door on Monday just before the lunch bell, I stared at him through the glass pane. Then I remembered! It was a decision I’d made that had him standing at my door, not another strange twist of fate! I’d completely forgotten he was due to start the painting on the back wall. I told my class to keep working and stepped outside, pulling the door closed behind me.

“Sam, you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to...”

“Tessa,” he murmured cutting me off. Just hearing his voice eased my tension. “I want to very much. I don’t get too many offers to paint an entire wall!” He looked closely at me and frowned. He saw the sleepless nights and the anxiety worrying at me.

“Tessa, do you have so many friends you can’t do with one more?” he asked gently.

Friends? Relief washed over me and I felt ridiculously pleased. Yes, we could be friends!

I glanced into the classroom, which was getting noisier by the minute. “You better come meet my class,” I said. Sam smiled and bent to pick up a cardboard box. When he set it down next to my desk, I saw it had tins of paint and a variety of paintbrushes and rollers.

“Class, remember I told you about painting the mural on the back wall? This is Mr Archer. He is a very talented local artist,” and I glanced at Sam, he looked amused at my description, “who has kindly offered to paint our mural for us.”

“Good morning, Mr Archer!” my class chorused. Zac gave Sam a wave.

“Good morning!” he greeted them back and their excitement bounced off the walls, reminding me of the pod of dolphins and their clicking. I held up my hand

for silence. It took a minute longer than normal to get them settled.

“Please finish the exercises on page 31. After lunch, we will talk with Mr Archer about the mural. *Not before,*” I warned and looked around the classroom until eighteen sets of eyes were on their books and they had given up trying to peek at Sam.

Sam made several trips to his car collecting drop cloths and a stepladder. By the time he had everything stacked at the back of the class room, the lesson had finished and I sent my class off for lunch. We used the lunch break to rearrange the classroom, moving the desks to give Sam plenty of room to work, and keep the paint out of harm’s way. We’d just finished spreading the drop cloths across the floor when John Brennan stopped by.

“So what are you painting?” he asked and Sam looked enquiringly at me.

I outlined my idea of the underwater scene, with space for the marine science project, something we could continue to add to throughout the year.

“Sounds fantastic!” John approved. “Can’t wait to see it.”

My class came back early, crowding outside the door. "I'll leave you to it!" John said and my students stepped aside to let him out.

"Ready?" I asked, indicating the excited mob at the door.

"Let's do it," Sam said with a wide smile.

It took all my efforts to keep the kids focused on their work as Sam painted. Tuesday morning we made a deal. Final period each day they could watch Sam paint *only* if they got all their work done. They tried really hard. It wasn't that easy for me. I didn't have my back to him and I saw every stroke he made. He wore old jeans and sneakers, and a loose button up shirt. His blonde curly hair fell across his forehead and he smiled a lot when he saw me watching him.

Mmm... friends didn't smile at each other *that* way, I thought.

The bare wall became a beautiful ocean blue in no time. Sam kept two thirds of the wall for the underwater scene, then, working on top of the stepladder, he added sand curving back to the dunes, then hills in the distant background. A beautiful blue sky ran to the ceiling with just a few white fluffy clouds off to one side.

Matt dropped by at lunchtime and sat on the end of my desk, admiring Sam's work for a few minutes. Then, turning his back to Sam, he said, "So, is dolphin boy getting lots of brownie points for splashing paint around?"

"Matt!" I exclaimed and glanced towards the back of the classroom, straight into Sam's solemn gaze. I blushed, worried Sam might have heard him.

Matt chuckled. "Oh, Tessa," he said. "You are such an easy book to read!"

On Wednesday, Sam arrived with a big red apple and presented it to me, much to the delight of my class. I stood there holding it, wondering what he meant by bringing it but he just smiled, that beautiful magnetic smile, and went to open a can of paint.

Friends didn't confuse each other, I fumed.

When Sam was ready to start on the detail of the mural, I fast tracked our science class. There was plenty of input from my students. Working with a piece of charcoal, he quickly sketched the outlines. A turtle appeared swimming towards the surface, a school of tiny fish, coral grew out of the seabed and a variety of fish darted amongst sea grasses. Anemones and starfish found their place.

Eric wanted a shark. Sam agreed but toned down the teeth to non-scary proportions. Zac wanted an underwater cave. Sam nodded after glancing at me for approval. A couple of the girls thought mermaids would be nice. I overrode them. We were sticking firmly to reality. Sam raised a mocking eyebrow at me.

I moved my class onto a math lesson, leaving Sam to paint in the details of the outlines he'd made. Turning around from the whiteboard where I'd written a number of equations, I stopped mid-sentence when I saw the outline of several dolphins leaping gracefully through the waves. Sam looked at me from the top of his ladder. He'd drawn them exactly as I remembered them.

He held my gaze much longer than *friends* would have.

The impact of that gaze left me with no idea what I was teaching until Sarah reminded me with a giggle. I glanced at the back of the classroom, annoyed to find Sam grinning at me.

Monday was also when Zac started coming home with me after school to do his homework. I'd told Natalie about Zac's mum and my friend's big warm heart had gone out to the kid. She'd taken to having something ready to come out of the oven just as we

got home after school every day. She'd found one of my mother's recipe books and was working her way through the cookie chapter. She had also honed up on 10-year-old humour and quipped joke after joke until Zac was in danger of falling off his stool with laughter. Zac thought Natalie was super cool!

On Wednesday, I invited Sam home for afternoon tea, too. I justified it as a way to thank him for his efforts on the mural. Besides I didn't think it would hurt if Sam got to know Zac. My manipulation was not even slightly subtle but I wasn't leaving everything in fate's fickle hands. Look what it had tried to do to me, twice!

Matt dropped in, too, giving Natalie a quick hug before shaking hands with Sam. I was relieved that Matt and Natalie were back to their chummy friendliness. I'd asked Matt at school if he was okay with Natalie and Jackson being together, concerned he might be hurt. Matt had assured me he and Natalie would only ever have been friends. They were not compatible for anything more.

"I'm the type of guy that needs to be needed. Nat loves her independence, she needs a guy who is very confident, and in control, Jackson's perfect for her!"

I was surprised by his assessment. "What about me?" I'd asked curiously.

Matt had given me a very long look. “You, Tessa, are the type of woman that a man wants to worship.”

I wished I hadn’t asked.

In the aftermath of the afternoon tea, I settled Zac at the table to focus on his homework. I set him a little extra but he didn’t complain.

Thursday, the mural started to take on a life of its own. Sam added brilliant yellow to the school of tiny fish, strident reds, and oranges to the coral and ten different shades of green for the grasses, before starting on the shark.

Mandy stopped by at lunchtime. “You can almost feel the water,” she said standing next to me. “And, those dolphins... Are they *your* dolphins?” She remembered the photo that came with the flowers.

“We’re just friends, Mandy,” I told her and she looked at Sam on his stepladder.

She smiled at him when he looked our way. Sam smiled back but his eyes were for me.

“Well, I wish I had a *friend* who looked at me like that,” she scoffed.

Matt called in, too. My classroom was definitely the drop in spot of the school. He gave me a ‘told you so’ look when he saw the dolphins on the wall. I shoed him out of my classroom.

As I was tidying my desk after school, I asked Zac to see if Sam would like to join us for afternoon tea. Sam looked across the top of the boy's head at me and I felt uncomfortable under his steady gaze. No matter how well intentioned my reasoning, I was wrong to try to influence him through a child and he made sure I knew it without saying a single word. I smiled apologetically, hoping he would understand my motivation and was disappointed when he sent Zac back with a polite decline of the invitation.

Friday morning, before class, a tall, thin man knocked on my classroom door. "I'm Peter Black," he introduced himself. "I taught here last year. I had to move interstate quite suddenly at the end of the year but decided to come back. I've missed living on the coast. I just thought I'd pop in and say hello," and we shook hands.

"Very nice to meet you, Peter." I tried hard not to think about the coincidence of his sudden move interstate and me getting the job at the school.

"Are you teaching?" I asked.

"I am doing some relief work at schools at Cape Moore and Marrickville. Doubt I'll get a full time position until next year, but that's okay. I'm enjoying

the slower pace...” he broke off when he saw Mandy coming along the veranda.

I watched the reunion. Mandy looked very pleased to see Peter. Peter looked awkward. My students were beginning to arrive and they remembered him. He relaxed considerably talking to the kids. I said a quick goodbye, leaving him with Mandy.

Sam finished the mural Friday afternoon. It was truly amazing! He'd even painted a left shoe, lying on its side on the seabed with a fish poking its head out, as a partner to the shoe Eric had found on the beach. Eric put the right shoe on the floor in front of the painted one. It looked like someone had kicked off their shoes before walking into the sea cave. The kids were delighted!

So was I.

John Brennan came to see for himself and agreed that each of the grades could come by and have a look. My class was the envy of the school! Sam was very modest about the life-like piece of art and busied himself with cleaning and packing away his brushes, before folding the drop cloths.

Eventually my classroom emptied and the noise of the students heading home faded. Matt had offered to take Zac over to my place. He'd invited himself for

afternoon tea and I could see Zac was excited at surprising Natalie. I hoped she'd cooked an extra tray of whatever she'd baked.

"I can't thank you enough, Sam. It's wonderful," I told him.

"I understand why you enjoy teaching, Tessa. Being with children is a very new experience for me, one I had always wanted but never thought I'd have. Thank you."

There was an emotion in his voice that I didn't understand.

I was suddenly awkward, unsure what to say. We'd spent every day together but always in the company of others. Being alone with Sam made a mockery of our friendship pact.

"Leiana asked me to invite you to have dinner with us tomorrow night. She really hopes you will come," Sam told me. "Our uncle has invited himself, too. You've met him before," he told me.

My eyes widened in surprise. "I have?" I'd met another immortal and didn't even know it?

"Davan. The old fisherman on the beach," he said and smiled at my expression.

"You are joking, aren't you?"

“I told you, we’re just a fairly typical family,” Sam shrugged.

Dinner with a family of once-were-gods, now just mere immortals? It fit with my bizarre out-of-sync with the world feelings.

“Thank Leiana. I’d love to come,” I finally said.

Chapter Sixteen

I was ridiculously nervous when Sam knocked on the door to pick me up. I had agonised over what to wear, changing three times before settling on an ankle length tangerine coloured skirt and a sleeveless white shirt. I spent more time on my makeup than I had in six months. Far too much effort for dinner with a *friend* and his family, I thought disagreeably.

Sam's very appreciative look confirmed it.

"Prefer to cancel?" he asked, reading the strain on my face. "We could go into Marrickville for something to eat instead?" he offered. He was serious. I had no doubt he really would ring his sister and tell her two of her guests were abandoning her dinner party at the last minute if I asked him to.

"No. I'm fine," I said.

He raised an eyebrow. "You know, you only say that when you're not."

I wanted to stick my tongue out at him.

Leiana met us at the door when we arrived. She took both my hands in hers and her serene face gave me a measure of comfort.

“I’m so pleased you could come, Tessa,” she said and I relaxed a little. “Come in and say hello to Davan,” and I tensed up again.

Davan was sitting on the sofa. He wore white trousers and a white long sleeved shirt, his long hair tied back with a leather thong. There was no sign of his olive anorak. He stood up when we walked in.

His face was very grave as he extended his hands to me in greeting. His pale grey eyes searched mine and I thought I felt an odd energy flowing between our hands. He nodded slightly, as if confirming something to himself, then leant forward and kissed my forehead. I felt slightly disoriented when he released my hands. Sam and Leiana were watching us intently.

“May I get you something to drink?” Leiana asked, breaking the moment and I nodded politely. She brought me a wine glass filled with a dark golden liquid. “It’s called Mead,” she told me. “Sometimes people call it honey wine. It’s made from fermenting honey and water. I’m sure you will like it.” She watched me take a sip. It was very good.

Leiana enlisted Sam to help carry a variety of dishes to the table from the kitchen. Davan and I sat in silence. It was not an awkward silence. He and I had

passed too much time together on the beach, each in our own worlds. Figuratively!

“I thought we’d have Moroccan,” Leiana announced and summoned us to the dinner table. Davan took the head of the table. Sam seated me to his right, holding my chair for me before taking his own. I smiled my thanks. Leiana lifted the lids off the dishes and the aromatic smell of exotic herbs was mouth watering. There was a lamb casserole, cous cous with sultanas, and a carrot and coriander mash. We passed the dishes to each other and shared the condiments. It was like any other family dinner. I finally relaxed.

“Sam tells me the kids in your class were pleased with the mural,” Leiana said conversationally.

“That’s probably an understatement! I hope you have plenty of photos for the gallery, Leiana. I expect Sam’s going to get commissions from every other class. He won’t have time to go on assignment any time soon,” I answered.

Leiana laughed, her beautiful tinkling laugh. Davan looked at Sam. Sam was looking at me. Obviously, I missed something.

After dinner, we settled back onto the sofas. Sam went to pick up the lute from his collection, bringing it

back to sit in an armchair. Leiana and I were talking about the gallery as he tuned the strings. When he started to play a beautiful, haunting piece of music, Leiana and I stopped talking, so we could listen.

“That was wonderful, Sam,” I said, when he’d strummed the last note.

“I miss you playing, Brother,” Leiana told him and they smiled at each other and their shared memories.

“Your mother taught you well,” Davan said and a shadow of pain marred Sam’s handsome face.

It made me realise how little I knew about him.

“Your uncle doesn’t say much, does he?” I commented when Sam drove me home.

“No. He really likes you, Tessa.”

“Oh? How would you know that?” Davan had said less than ten words all evening. He’d watched me all night, though.

“Believe me. He likes you,” Sam said again.

“And that’s important to you?”

Sam looked at me. “Of course I want my family to like you. You *liking* me is more important, though.”

Sam opened the car door for me when he pulled up outside my house and I took his proffered hand.

The warm awareness of him that resided inside me, jumped a notch at his touch. He kept my hand as he walked me to the door. I didn't object.

Friends would have said good night and waited to give each other a quick wave. We stood there much longer than 'good night' took. My emotional turmoil took advantage of my better judgement.

"Sam, would you hold me?" I whispered and he didn't hesitate to pull me into his arms. I wrapped myself into his embrace, relishing his warmth, his strength. I got lost in the onslaught of sensual pleasure pulsing through me. I reached up and found his mouth, pulling his head down to mine, and I kissed him. For a bare moment, he hesitated and then gave in, making my kiss insignificant with the intensity of his.

I could feel his heartbeat was in sync with mine. When we pulled apart, I listened to his ragged breathing. I listened to my own. Desire was making me shake.

Then, without warning, he pushed himself away from me, firmly holding my arms at my sides to stop me pulling him back.

"No," he said. "No, Tessa."

"You don't want me?" I was shocked.

“Not like this.” He took several steps away as if he didn’t quite trust himself.

“Even if *this* is my decision?” Frustration made my voice sharp.

He looked disappointed and I felt his unspoken rebuke keenly.

“A decision you already know you will regret,” he said. “I can be your friend, Tessa, a friend you can depend on, no matter what, if that is what you choose. I can leave and keep my distance, if that is what you want. But for us to be lovers, I need your unconditional love.”

He turned and walked back to his car.

Neither of us waved.

Friday afternoon finally arrived. It had been an extremely long week. My students looked as pleased as I did. I had a stack of assignments in my tote bag for marking. Zac carried it inside for me when we got home from school. Matt arrived five minutes later.

When Matt and Zac had scoffed a dozen of Natalie’s still oven-warm chocolate chip cookies, I saw the look he shot Zac. He winked, giving the boy a signal.

“Miss Howard, can I do my homework tomorrow?”

“Why is that, Zac?”

“Mr Langdon said he was going to teach me to surf! And the breaks are neat this afternoon!”

I looked at Matt and he mouthed silently, “Give the kid a break.”

“We will have to talk to your Mum about that, Zac.”

“Done!” Matt said, trumping me. “I called over and saw Ann last night. She gave her permission. And...!” he said drawing out the suspense. “She also asked if we could take fish and chips home for dinner tonight, and you’re invited too, Miss Howard!”

Zac’s face glowed and he held his breath, waiting for me to respond.

“Did you remember your board shorts, Zac?” Matt asked and the boy nodded, digging into his school bag to pull them out. It was a conspiracy. They’d obviously been plotting it for days. It was written all over their faces. Matt was worse than Zac at hiding it.

“Okay, since it’s all agreed, no homework today, but I’ll be very disappointed, Zac, after all the effort you’ve put in, if your homework is not completed and on my desk Monday morning.”

“It will be, promise, Miss Howard! Can we go now, Mr Langdon?” he said, his excitement infectious.

Natalie laughed. "I think I'll come along, too, *Mr Langdon!*"

Matt looked at her, wincing at the emphasis.

"Zac, maybe we should make it 'Matt', but just when we are out of school. Okay?" he asked in a low voice, as if it was the two of them.

"Cool, Matt!" Zac said and Matt ruffled his hair.

"Go get changed, mate. You too, Nat, the waves wait for no man, or woman! Zac, I told your Mum I'd have you home by six, I don't want her to worry."

Natalie and Zac made a race of it down the hall.

"It's very kind of you, Matt. I'm sure you would prefer to be out on the real waves."

Matt shrugged it off. "He deserves some happiness, Tessa. He's just a kid. Why don't you come with us? Looks like you could do with some fun, too."

I didn't reply but Matt didn't take the hint and leave it alone.

"Let me guess. Sam," he asked.

I looked away from his quizzical eyes.

"Want me to punch his lights out?" he offered.

"No!" I was horrified. Besides, with Sam's unusual talents he might turn Matt into a toad or something!

"Well, the offer stands," he said. "Just say the word."

“How was Ann when you saw her last night?” I asked to change the subject. I’d only seen Ann briefly, when I dropped Zac home. She came to open the front door for him when she heard my car, and we’d wave to each other. I didn’t want to intrude and I didn’t want her gratitude for helping out with Zac. It was too far, and the light too poor, to see her face clearly. At least she wasn’t laid out on the sofa but I knew from Zac she hadn’t had any chemotherapy in the past few weeks.

Matt became quite serious. “It’s hard to tell, she puts on a brave face. I will never understand how her husband could just desert her like that... or the kid, he’s brilliant!”

I told Matt I’d make my own way over to Zac’s, and pick up the fish and chips so they could spend an extra half hour at the beach. When the house emptied, all the happy energy went with it. I went to sit out on the bench seat on the dune. The surf did look good. Was Sam surfing? Was he thinking of me, like I was thinking of him? I hadn’t seen him since last Saturday when he dropped me home. We seemed to have reached an impasse. We both knew it was not going to be my decision to be just friends. I was too aware of him. He was too aware of me.

I was grateful for his better judgement. He was right. I would have regretted sleeping with him. It would have just clouded my thinking even more. Yet, despite the promise of the perfect union between us, the path I seemed to be on was fraught with my doubt. I couldn't stop thinking that fate had never intended us to be together. I couldn't get it out of my head. There must have been a reason why I was never meant to survive long enough to have a relationship with anyone *mortal*, let alone Sam!

Or was there another reason I was afraid to make the most important decision of my life?

"Knock, knock!" I heard Jackson call as he came around the side garden.

"Hey, Jackson, out here." I moved over on the bench seat, making room for him.

"You've got all the best spots on the beach, Tessa," he complained and I smiled.

"You're very welcome to share them," I told him. "You've just missed Natalie. Matt's teaching Zac to surf. Nat's gone with them."

"I bet Zac's excited. Matt is just what he needs, a positive male influence. Good on, him! And you, too, Tessa. I know Ann is very appreciative of your help with Zac."

“And Natalie, too! She’s spoiling that boy rotten!” I added and he looked proud.

“How’s Ann doing, Jackson?”

“Tessa,” he began but I stopped him objecting.

“Jackson, Ann told me about the breast cancer. She told me about her husband leaving her. She told me she is going to die. I’m not asking you to tell me anything I don’t know. All I’m asking is, how’s she doing?”

“She’s had every treatment available. Now we have to wait,” he finally said.

“And, what about you, Tessa? How *are* you? Natalie tells me you’re not sleeping well. She hears you up and about through the night.”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “So, how come you discuss *me* with Natalie?” I asked.

“I’m asking as your friend, Tessa, not your doctor. It’s what friends do,” he told me.

“I’m fine. More importantly it’s really good to see you and Nat so happy,” I said to divert him. If he knew I hardly slept at all, I’m sure he’d have me admitted to his precious hospital.

My diversion worked, a slow smile spread across his face, softening his features. “You know, I had no idea that anything was even missing in my life till I met

Natalie. My work has always been everything. I've become a workaholic without even knowing it. Natalie makes me laugh. I love her zaniness, her passion for the moment. Now, I look forward to leaving work instead of having no reason to. Even my patients are commenting on the happier me! And, I have *you* to thank for that, Tessa!"

"Me? What did I do?"

"You brought Natalie here."

Goosebumps shivered along my arms.

I arrived at the Moreton house with several large packets of fish and chips from the local take-away shop. I was met at my car by Matt and Zac who enthusiastically took the packets off me and whisked them inside.

Ann waited at the door for me and smiled. "I think they're hungry," she said ruefully and I smiled back, taking a close look at her face. She definitely had more colour and the dark circles under her eyes had lessened. She wore a pale lavender bandana.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, putting my hand on her still thin arm.

"One day at a time," she told me.

Matt and Zac had the table set and the fish and chips on plates when Ann and I arrived in the kitchen. They were wrestling over the tomato sauce bottle. Matt gave in, letting Zac have it first. He flipped a crooked smile at Ann.

I did my best to put aside my turmoil during the meal and managed to keep up with the banter between Matt and Zac, laugh again at Natalie's jokes when Zac shared them with his mum. I noticed Ann ate very little. Matt seemed particularly attentive when she started to tire and he slowed the mood down, getting Zac to share the highlights from his first surf.

"Mum, you should've seen me!" Zac said.

"I would love to see you surf," she said and a catch in her voice made me look at her sharply.

"Then, let's go tomorrow!" Matt said. "The conditions are favourable for the next few days. How about I pick you up around 10 o'clock? Come on, Ann, we'll have some fun watching the boy. Think of all the stories we'll have of how many times he got dumped before he turns pro," Matt encouraged and she nodded slowly at first, then her face lit up with a rare smile.

"Awesome, dude!" Zac yelled and we all laughed.

After dinner, Matt insisted on washing the dishes and he handed Zac the tea towel. Ann and I went through to the lounge room.

“I can’t thank you enough, and your friend Natalie, for what you are doing for Zac. Matt is so wonderful with him, too! I haven’t seen him this happy in such a long time. I’d forgotten what it was like to have laughter in the house,” she said.

A spark of relief shot through me. There was an improvement since I’d last spoken with her. She had something to fight for. Her son’s happiness, and perhaps her own, too.

“I’m just pleased to be able to help and Natalie is in her element,” I said. “Zac is such a bright young man. I think he has picked up a lot of missed school work this past couple of weeks.”

Ann nodded and smiled again but she was looking at me the way my mother used to when I didn’t want to talk about something. “What’s troubling you, Tessa?” she finally asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I dismissed.

“Boyfriend?”

I could hardly tell her to mind her own business. I had barged into her life. She was entitled to barge into mine. I nodded slowly.

“I’m a good listener,” she offered.

What could I tell her? He’d saved my life a few times but his obsession with me living had left me at the mercy of my own free will and I was filled with doubt that we were really meant to be together, anyway. Oh, and by the way, did I mention he’s immortal? No, I didn’t think I could talk to her about Sam.

“Does he love you?” Ann persisted gently.

“Yes.”

“Do you love him?”

I took a deep breath to still the sob that rose in my chest. Ann reached over and took my hand, squeezing my fingers.

“I’m afraid to,” I whispered.

“Love is not something we decide, Tessa. It’s something that happens. What we do with the gift of love is what defines us,” she told me.

I noticed her wedding photo was no longer on the wall. In its place was a photo of Zac.