

## Chapter Five

I went for my early morning run to the rocky outcrop. The fisherman was already there, his line out to sea. He looked at me, as always, when I passed. I surprised him with a smile. Normally I just nodded.

Smiling was getting easier.

I scrambled up the rocks and immediately saw my surfer, his orange shorts easy to spot. The waves were small, hardly any swell at all. I was bold enough to go right out to the point at low tide and I found the small ledge where I could sit and dangle my legs over the edge.

I stared out across the water. He was looking back at me. I squinted my eyes, trying to make out his features. Was it Matt? Was his wife's death the reason he spent so much time surfing? Was it a way of connecting with her? Or was it solitude he sought, like me on the rocks?

If ever the onion analogy fit a person, it was Matt. He had so many layers! Was his good-humoured, and often outrageous, teasing just the mask he wore to cover his grief? Or, had he moved on, like Mandy thought.

How must it feel to lose a partner? I knew how terrible it was to lose my parents. The suddenness of it was the hardest. All the things unsaid. Had Matt's wife died suddenly? Had he had a chance to say all the things he had wanted to say? Did knowing the end make grief easier? I wondered.

Lost in my thoughts, I absently watched the water as it swirled around the rocks beneath me. When I looked up, I was surprised to see how close the surfer was, much, much closer than he had ever been before, but he had his back to me, pulling away with long, strong strokes, out to sea.

I had been so deep in thought I hadn't even seen him! Dismayed, I stood up on the ledge and nearly called out. I waited for him to look over his shoulder so I could wave. Was I brave enough? I didn't find out. He didn't look back. I stood staring after him until I could no longer make him out.

I couldn't stop thinking about him as I did some housework, waiting for Natalie to arrive. Had he finally wanted to breach the distance between us and turned away when I hadn't noticed? What if he didn't come to surf anymore? The thought made me anxious. Would he would miss me as much I would miss him?

My chores finished, I made a cup of coffee and took it outside to drink on the deck, wondering if Natalie got away on time, or if her plans had come unstuck like mine, the day I left the city for my new life.

I'd intended to leave around noon on the Friday before Christmas and settle into the beach house over the weekend. My parents were going to come down the following Monday, to spend Christmas with me. I'd been itching with excitement as we'd eaten breakfast together. While Mum and I had done the dishes, Dad had read his paper. The radio had been on and Mum had started singing to a newly released song. I'd grinned at her, joining in, our voices harmonising. At the end, we smiled at each other pleased with our impromptu performance. Dad had looked up from his paper, beaming at us; his love for 'his girls' very apparent.

I'd suddenly had the idea to go buy Mum the CD for a Christmas present. I'd already bought gifts for both of them but she'd really liked that particular song. It would be an extra surprise, especially as I knew she would never buy the album for herself. One day, I'd hoped to convince her to use the iPod, still sitting in its box, that I'd bought for her birthday.

I'd made some excuse about needing something from the shops and ducked out. The traffic had been chaos, finding a car park worse. The crowds in the shopping centre were insane but I'd managed to get the CD. The thought of my mother's face when I gave it to her, made it all worthwhile.

Fortunately, I was driving at a crawl out of the car park when the brakes failed on my car. I managed to pull up using the handbrake. A couple of guys had cheerfully pushed my car off the road while I rang my father.

Dad had driven straight over. He'd suggested I drive his car home so I could finish packing, while he took care of getting the brakes fixed. He'd already called a tow truck and a mechanic.

I'd been happy for him to look after it. What I knew about cars would fit on a postage stamp. Besides, he would just worry about me driving to the coast if he did not assure himself everything was perfectly safe.

It had been after three in the afternoon when he'd finally arrived home, in a taxi, instead of my old VW. I'd been sitting on the front steps, impatiently waiting for him.

"What happened with the brakes? Are they open tomorrow? Or will it be Monday?" I'd called running

down to the footpath, unable to hide my disappointment, unaware of the surprise he'd spent the day orchestrating.

"The car won't be fixed till next week at the earliest, might even be after the Christmas break," he'd said with a shrug and put his arm about my shoulders as we walked back to the house.

"Smile," he'd ordered at my glum expression. "Not that it will be the end of the world if we don't leave till the morning but I spoke to your Mum and she agreed we'll drive you down tonight. We just need a couple of hours to get organised. We'll be out of here by six and arrive around nine o'clock. At least we'll miss most of peak hour traffic leaving then."

I'd hugged him. He was the best father ever.

"I'd never forgive myself, Tessa, if something happened to you," he'd said, hugging me back.

The memory burnt through me. I jumped up to walk to the top of the dune, then back again, pacing the length of the garden. If only I'd contained my disappointment, they would still be alive. Leaving when we did turned out to be the end of *my* world, and like my Dad, I didn't know how to forgive *myself!*

If my father just had the brakes fixed, I'd probably have left around the same time, to avoid the peak hour

traffic. That would have put me on the same road, around the same time, the truck jack-knifing in front of my car. I shivered thinking about the anguish my parents would be experiencing if it had been the other way round. It gave me cold comfort they had been spared from that.

And if the brakes had not played up at all? I would have left around midday, my original plan, putting me nowhere near the truck and the careening trailer. Then nothing would have happened. Nothing at all. I groaned and put my head in my hands. There were so many possibilities of how things might have been. Yet, it had happened exactly as it had. There was nothing I could do to change it.

If only I'd had the car serviced more regularly then the problem with the brakes might have been picked up and fixed. My parents had always taught me to accept the consequences of my actions. They would have expected me to bear even this.

Mercifully, Natalie arrived at eleven, an hour late which was early for her, honking her horn as she pulled into the drive. Relieved to escape my thoughts I ran outside to help her carry in a variety of bags and suitcases. She gave me a big hug.

“Still feeling sad?” She looked at me closely.

“Better,” I said and managed a smile for her.

I made coffee while Natalie freshened up.

“This is great, Kiddo!” she said as we took the coffee out onto the deck. “Now the only thing I need is a job. Got enough money to keep me going for a while but will start looking straight away. Gotta be places around here that will snap me up.”

“I’m sure there is. And, there’s always Marrickville if there’s nothing local,” I agreed. “I think quite a few people live here and drive over to the town for work, and vice versa.” I thought of Dr McIntyre and then several of the teachers at school who preferred the town to the village.

“Let’s go shopping!” Natalie said.

Impatiently she listened to my lame excuses. I found shopping tedious and could not fathom how anyone could think of it as ‘retail therapy’. To me it was ‘retail agony’.

“Oh, come on, girlfriend! The whole economy would go bust if we all thought like you. Think of it as your fiscal responsibility,” Natalie told me and badgered me into getting ready.

We were going to head straight over to Marrickville when I suggested a look through the local shops first. I had hardly been into the village. I was overdue to get

acquainted with it. Natalie looked impressed, she thought she'd finally converted me.

The village was small but busy, catering to the multitude of visitors who flocked there in the summer. We wandered down the main street, looking in the shop windows.

"That's where we are going tonight," I said pointing to a sign painted on a piece of driftwood. Matt was right. The Shack did look like a dive. Metal shutters closed the front of the bar. They were plastered with new and tattered flyers covering everything from lost sunglasses to surf lessons with the local pro.

We passed a door at the end of the premises and Natalie spotted a typed page stuck on it. 'Bar Staff wanted. Start tonight. Apply within.'

"Aha! Now just imagine, Tessa Howard, if I'd let you talk me out of shopping. Someone else would be applying for my job about now," Natalie said tartly and she pushed the door open.

I didn't point out that it was my idea to come to the village. I just rolled my eyes at her confidence. "I'll go find somewhere to wait," I said. "Good luck!"

I thought I'd walk to the end of the shops then find a bench seat in the park on the other side of the road. I didn't pay too much notice as I walked, just glancing at



the window displays. I was about to cross the road when a large framed photograph, sitting in the window of a gallery, caught my attention. I walked over to look.

The photo must have been taken just minutes after the one hanging on my bedroom wall. The sun had finally burst through the grey storm clouds. I preferred my photo, the *expectation* of the sun breaking through was more compelling.

I looked into the gallery and saw there were numerous photos on display. The interior looked very inviting. I glanced back to where Natalie had entered The Shack and figured she would be at least fifteen minutes. Besides, she would call my cell phone if she finished sooner and couldn't locate me.

Pushing open the glass door, I stepped into the cool air-conditioned interior. The gallery was beautifully lit and soft classical music played against the background of cascading water.

It felt like a sanctuary.

I paused as a strange sensation washed over me. It was as if all my senses had suddenly amplified, making me acutely aware. When I realised I was just standing there, holding the door open, I glanced around the gallery hoping no one had seen me and quickly closed the door.

The strange sensation stayed with me as I admired the photographs.

The entire collection had the sun as its central theme. There were dawn and dusk shots, a series with rainbows reflecting their brilliant colours, and several more like the one in my bedroom with the sun and clouds creating amazing light effects.

The showpiece of the collection was a photo taken in early morning light, with a bank of fog shrouding the ground, and rocky mountain peaks jutting through the mist. I stood for quite a time looking at it. I could almost see the mist burning off in the rays of the sun, feel the dampness on my skin. I wanted to reach out and touch it. The embossed gold symbol glowed softly in the right hand corner.

How had the photographer managed to get the shot? How much patience had it taken to capture that absolute, perfect moment? I considered the difference between painting the scene and using a camera. At least with a painting, the artist had the chance to compose exactly what they wanted. With a photograph, it was hitting the shutter at exactly the right moment, a split second between getting the shot and losing it forever.

I was about to leave, thinking Natalie must be about done, when a little further along the wall, nestled in amongst the larger frames, a much smaller photo, ablaze with colour caught my eye.

I walked over and the blood drained out of my face and the strange sensation pounded through me. The photo was of a narrow mountain valley, awash with an astonishing riot of flowers, like a continuous carpet, covering the slopes of the mountains from the snowy caps, right down to the valley floor. The flowers were yellows, and oranges, reds and blues. It defied imagination that such a place could exist. It looked like a place you'd find in a dream.

My dream. The dream... I'd woken from after the accident!

"Beautiful, isn't it?" a young woman said, startling me.

I had not heard her approach. I stared at her. She was flawlessly beautiful, tall and slim with long auburn hair that shimmered in the soft light. She had the most amazing eyes. They were almond shaped and very blue.

With difficulty, I pulled my eyes away from hers, back to the photo. I felt light headed, my temples were throbbing, my mouth had gone dry.

“It’s unbelievable,” I answered. There was no doubt. I had dreamt about that valley, walking through the flowers. More astonishing was that I *remembered* dreaming it!

Then a disconcerting thought hit me and I stared at the photo closer. I’d been there, *stood* in that exact spot.

“Do you know where it was taken?” My voice was not quite steady.

“The Valley of Flowers is in the Himalayas.” She had the most beautiful lyrical voice. “Would you like to meet the photographer?”

Yes.

No.

I had to get out of there.

“Some other time, thanks,” I managed and with supreme effort forced myself to hold it together until I was on the footpath. Before the glass door closed behind me, I started to shake. I ran across the road, barely looking for cars in my haste. A fence at the edge of the sand dune, preventing access to the beach below, stopped me.

Despite the hot sunshine, I shivered. I wrapped my arms about myself, closing my eyes, forcing deep calming breaths, remembering Dr McIntyre’s warning

that it could be very disorienting when my memories started to come back. He wasn't wrong about that!

"There you are!" Natalie called and I spun around. "I got it!" she said, then frowned. "Tessa? You okay?"

I took another steadying breath and nodded. "That's great," I managed.

"I start tonight." Natalie was beaming with her success.

"Great," I repeated. "I wasn't bothered about going out." I was pleased to have an excuse to cancel.

"Hey, it doesn't change anything! I'll just be on the other side of the bar," Natalie said and she frowned again. "What's wrong, Tessa? You look really white."

"I went into that gallery across the road while I was waiting for you," and I glanced over my shoulder. Several people were just coming out the door.

"I saw a photo, taken somewhere in the Himalayas. I remembered it, Nat! From a dream I had after the accident. As soon as I saw the photo, it was like, wham! The memory just hit me!"

"That's great you remembered. Isn't it?"

I nodded but ended up shaking my head, confused. "I have this really weird feeling that I've *been there*, Nat, it's not like a made-up place, from a dream."

Natalie thought for a few moments, then smiled. “You must have seen something about it on a travel show or a documentary or something. They reckon that dreams come from all sorts of stuff in your subconscious,” she said, ever practical. “And, because you finally remember it after all this time, might be why it feels so real.”

I nodded. She was probably right.

“Hey!” she said. “We need to celebrate my job. How about some new shoes? Shall we drive over to Marrickville?” She took my arm and headed back to where we had left the car.

The strange sensation tinkering with my senses was gone.

The Shack was busy. It was a typical Saturday night in the bar and everyone, locals, visitors, and backpackers had migrated there.

The transformation with the metal shutters open was immediate. The interior was softly lit and the eclectic décor was all about the sea. Whimsical, larger than life mermaids, with alluring smiles, owned the walls. Conk shells, strung onto thick cord, hung across the ceiling. Chunks of driftwood stood in corners with

fishing nets and bleached coils of rope thrown over them. There were shelves and shelves of items salvaged from the sea, a treasure trove of bric-a-brac that beckoned the casual observer to look closer.

The furniture was a mismatch of old timber tables and wooden chairs, with clusters of sofas set around a well-worn parquet dance floor. A long counter ran the length of the building with views across the road to the beach. The music the DJ was mixing behind his console was a great blend of old and new.

The Shack oozed mood.

I paused inside the door. I still had time to turn around and get the heck out of there. Guilt niggled at me. It was two months, I reminded myself. Mum and Dad would want me to get on with my life. They would have wanted me to meet new people.

After Natalie left for work, I'd changed my mind about going and then changed it back. I figured I could stay home and be a sad sack, and put up with Matt's ribbing on Monday, or just go out and at least attempt to have a pleasant evening.

Besides, it would help distract me from thinking about the photo in the gallery and the worrying thought that I had actually been there. I could not get it out of

my head. There was more to that dream, I was sure of it, but try as I might, I just couldn't remember!

Quickly, before I'd changed my mind again, I put on a white, spaghetti strap dress with large multi-coloured buttons down to the knee length hem and matched it with a pair of red and white sandals. I'd left my hair loose and used just a little lip gloss. Not getting fully dressed up made me feel like I was not vagrantly going out to have a good time.

Matt must have spotted me by the door. He waved from a cluster of sofas where he sat with Mandy. I took a deep breath and put a smile on my face as I made my way over.

I felt self-conscious under the warmth of his eyes and when he kissed my cheek, I realised he might be thinking there could be more between us than just work colleagues, or friends. I tried not to pull away too quickly. I didn't want to hurt his feelings.

"Hi Mandy," I said and sat in an armchair. "What an amazing place!"

"Oh, yes," she laughed. "You have to go a long way to find somewhere like The Shack!"

"Thought you said you were bringing a friend?" Matt said but before I had time to respond, Natalie



called, "Hey, Tessa!" as she came over. She was carrying a tray of dirty glasses. I smiled at her.

"I was but she has a way of changing plans," I told him. "This is my good friend, Natalie Shaw," and I introduced her to Matt and Mandy. "Natalie only arrived this morning. We saw a sign out front when we came into the village, and hey presto! Now she works here!"

Matt laughed at the spontaneity of it. "Very nice to meet you," he said, and I watched him fall victim to Natalie's beautiful smile. Who could blame him? She looked fabulous even in the pinafore she wore over black trousers and a white shirt, cinched at her small waist, her curly long blonde hair its normal chaos about her face and shoulders.

"Have you convinced Max to provide table service, yet?" Matt asked Natalie.

"It's bar service," she told him. "I'm just collecting the dirty glasses. I'd better keep going. Nice to meet you, both. I'm sure we'll talk later," and she headed off doing a circuit of the large room.

Matt went to get drinks and I smiled across at Mandy, who looked gorgeous. I noticed she had gone to more trouble with her make-up than she did for

school days, whereas I had made a point of doing less. I was definitely out of sync.

Mandy was easy to chat with. She told me she had originally lived in Rockhampton and had relocated to the capital for her first teaching position.

“So you’ve been here two years?”

Mandy nodded, “Yes, this will be my third year here, my fifth year teaching.”

Matt was back with the drinks. “Ladies, I propose a series of toasts, let’s go round the table. Mandy? You first?” Matt encouraged as he sat next to her again on the sofa.

Mandy held up her glass of white wine, “To new friends,” she said looking at me. I smiled and Matt and I repeated it, taking a sip from our drinks.

“Tessa?” Matt asked.

“Oh, I see, chain-toast! Umm... New beginnings,” I offered and took another long sip of the white wine, not looking directly at either of them. They knew what I meant. No pity, please.

“Come on, Matt!” Mandy said. “I already know what yours is!”

“Oh?” he challenged good-naturedly.

“Something to do with surfing!” she guessed.

“Not tonight. Let’s drink to... being brave.” Matt watched me as I repeated the toast and he quirked his eyebrow at me.

“Want to share some pizza, Tessa? They make the best in town, not that there’s a lot of competition,” Matt added wryly. “Mandy, I know you’re in.”

I nodded and he headed back to the bar to place the order.

“Would you mind if I just scooted to the bathroom?” Mandy asked and I assured her I would be fine.

I was pleased to have a few moments alone. That damned strange sensation I’d felt in the gallery was back, adding to my distracting thoughts of the Valley of Flowers. I just wanted to relax, feel normal. I was getting annoyed with myself.

Mandy was back in no time and I sat and listened to her friendly patter. Matt came back a few minutes later, too.

“I couldn’t work in hospitality, the night shifts would kill me,” Mandy said, referring to Natalie.

I smiled. “Natalie comes alive when the sun goes down. She should have been a bat. Out all night, sleep all day!”

I was really pleased for Natalie. Everything was working out for her, but then it always did, in the short term. Natalie was the master of short-term success. She was one of those people that others loved to talk about, shaking their heads in wonder as she landed the most fascinating jobs, fell in and out of love with interesting boyfriends, received exclusive invitations to parties and back stage events. I was probably the only person who knew that all she really craved was long-term stability.

The pizza arrived and we ate it straight off the platter, using paper napkins as plates. Matt and Mandy started talking about some of the kids at school.

Watching them, I could see they were good friends, comfortable together. I suspected Mandy was a little in love with Matt. As I ate, I watched to see if he reciprocated the feelings. I didn't think so. Even though he sat close, and touched her arm when he emphasised a point, his eyes gleaming with wicked humour as he teased her, there was something missing between them.

My thoughts drifted to the photo in the gallery and how I'd even come to see it. It had been a spur of the moment decision to go to the village instead of directly to Marrickville to shop. If I hadn't recognised the photo

in the gallery window as being similar to the one in my bedroom, I would have crossed the road and not gone into the gallery at all. Would I have remembered the dream of that amazing valley if I hadn't seen the photo? Would seeing it again help me remember the rest of the dream? I knew there was more. It was tantalisingly close.

"Hey, Doc!" Matt called out, startling me from my thoughts.

I looked up to see Jackson McIntyre in old jeans and a black button up shirt walking towards us.

"Hi Matt, how are you?" Jackson asked and they shook hands, obviously knowing each other well by the warmth of their greeting.

"How do you reckon I am?" Matt said, indicating Mandy and me. "I'm the envy of every bloke in this bar with these two beautiful goddesses for company." He put a playfully thoughtful look on his face. "Nah, can't think of too much to complain about," and we all laughed.

"Join us?" Matt invited.

"Thanks, I will. Got the night off unexpectedly and I didn't feel like my own company."

"Absolutely! It's Saturday night!" Matt agreed. "I think you know Mandy?" Jackson nodded and gave

her a light kiss on the cheek in greeting. I thought Mandy looked pleased he was joining us.

“We’ve definitely met,” Jackson said, stalling Matt’s introduction. “Good to see you again, Tessa,” and he held out his hand to me more formally.

“Hi Jackson, we seem to keep bumping into each other,” I said, taking his hand.

“Comes from living in a small community,” he agreed.

Natalie was doing the rounds with her tray and she stopped by with a wide smile when Matt beckoned her over. “You might be working but you’re part of the gang, whether you like it or not,” Matt told her in his friendly style.

“Jackson, this is Tessa’s friend, new housemate, and new barmaid at The Shack... anything else I need to add?” Matt asked teasingly.

“Not yet but give me ten minutes!” Natalie responded. “I’m Nat,” she said to Jackson. “Oh, I know you! You were Tessa’s doctor at the hospital, right?” and Jackson smiled at her. It made him look younger when he smiled like that.

“That’s right. Very nice to meet you.”

I saw an odd expression touch my friend's face and I thought she was going to blush. Natalie, blush! Now that was something I had rarely seen.

"And since I'm going back to the bar, I'll take your order and get it ready for you. What'll it be?" she offered brightly, recovering from whatever she'd been thinking.

I opted for orange juice and stuck to my decision even when Matt teased me about being a cheap date.

"Tessa's never been a party girl," Natalie told him. "Heaven forbid, she's barely had a boyfriend."

"Nat!" I objected, embarrassed. I had been on my share of dates, especially after I started University, but flirty, casual relationships had never appealed to me. Besides, I had been too busy studying and working part time in a local newsagency to have a lot of time for an active social life.

Natalie had saved me from becoming socially inept. We'd regularly gone out for dinner, to concerts and movies. Natalie was right, though. Parties were not my 'thing'. Eventually she had given up encouraging me to go with her. Generally, I wanted to go home as fast as I arrived. Once, I explained that I found parties boring which cracked her up for a week.

Matt had gone with Natalie to bring the drinks back. He passed me a tall glass of orange juice without further comment. We all clinked glasses for luck and the conversation turned to the recent king tides and the erosion to the beach.

I tuned out of the conversation, unable to concentrate. Between images of the Valley of Flowers flashing through my head, and whatever it was messing with my senses, my stress level was increasing by the minute. I focused on the weird feeling, trying to figure out its cause. It was like my perception of everything was sharper, as if something was making me intensely aware. I felt like I was perpetually caught in that moment, just before the name of a song you've been trying to remember pops into your head.

Matt surprised me out of my thoughts when he took my hand and pulled me up, out of the armchair. "Hey, remember me? Your fun-meister? Let's go dance," and before I had a chance to say anything, he tugged on my hand to lead me across to the dance floor, giving me little option.

Matt was a terrible dancer. Some of his moves made me roll my eyes in embarrassment, though I had



a sneaking suspicion he was exaggerating simply to amuse me. He really was a good guy, I thought.

The small dance floor filled up, pushing us closer and closer, and when the DJ threw in a ballad, Matt put his arms around my waist, drawing me nearer. It felt good being held and I relaxed against him.

“You looked awfully sad back there,” he said, dropping his goofiness.

“I’m fine,” I told him and rested my cheek against his shoulder.

Matt held me a little closer as we swayed to the music but I wasn’t thinking about him. My thoughts were of a valley full of brightly coloured wild flowers.

“Shall we head back?” I asked at the end of several more songs. I gave him an over-bright smile, pretending for his sake that I was having the time of my life.

“Sure,” he agreed.

Jackson was sitting alone. Mandy had gone to say hello to someone she knew, he told us. I was surprised that Mandy would ditch the dishy doctor so easily.

“Do you come here often, Jackson?” I asked when I sat down.

“Oh, Tessa, that’s the corniest pick up line in history and there you were just seconds ago in my arms,” Matt complained.

I hoped he was teasing.

Jackson smiled. “Depends on my shifts. I don’t get too many Saturday nights off but it’s good to come and be surrounded by lots of happy people.”

“Not a lot of fun in hospitals. I know,” I added ruefully.

He laughed at my expression. “No. High on job satisfaction, though.”

“Must be my round,” I said. He’d finished his beer and Matt’s glass was empty, too. “Same again? And Mandy’s was white wine, right?” I asked.

“I’ll go, Tessa,” Jackson said and started to get up.

“Absolutely not. The least I can do is buy you a drink, *Dr McIntyre*,” I said. “Am sure I was anything but a model patient!”

“Quite the opposite, actually, Tessa. If only all my patients were like you! Though, I’d probably be out of a job,” he joked.

I managed a weak smile. He didn’t need to remind me I was the miracle-girl.

I squeezed my way through the crowd, to the long L shaped bar. Natalie was at the far end pulling beers

from the tap, laughing at something one of the customers had said. She looked in her element. An older man, who I guessed must be Max, was mixing drinks at the other end of the bar and a young guy was blending a bright green cocktail to a stack of oohs and aahs from a group of girls hanging over the bar watching him.

Standing there waiting, I did not need the extra perception pulsing through me to know someone was watching me. I tried ignoring it, unsuccessfully.

I glanced to my left, letting my eyes roam over the crowd. A guy caught my eye for a second before looking back to his buddy. I glanced in his direction a few moments later but he'd forgotten me. I moved a little, as if I was shifting my weight, so I could look casually towards the far end of the bar where Natalie was pouring drinks.

Nothing.

I sighed. Maybe I should talk to Jackson. It seemed my sensory wiring was malfunctioning! Maybe it was connected to remembering that dream. No. It had started before I saw the photo, when I'd first entered the gallery.

Then, the crowd shifted. Without warning, I slammed into an unwavering gaze. I quickly looked

away, gripping the counter to steady myself as a surge of the bewildering awareness charged through me. My heart pounded and I felt light headed. I stared at the counter on the bar, willing myself not to look again. The temptation was too strong.

A magnetic smile was waiting for me. Even in the dim lighting, I could see how exceptionally good looking he was, his deeply tanned face emphasised by the whiteness of his shirt. His blonde hair was slicked back, except for a curl falling onto his high forehead. He had a strong square jaw that distinguished his looks.

His gaze was so intense. It wasn't as if he was staring at me, more like he was capturing everything about me, including the surrounding air.

Then I realised he was not alone when the beautiful girl from the gallery, sitting next to him, looked over her shoulder at me. Her face was very serious.

“Sorry for wait. What I get you?” the young barman asked me in broken English, he had a heavy latino accent, and I tore my gaze away to look at him.

“Umm... two beers, a white wine and an orange juice, please,” I managed, feeling ridiculously unnerved.

Natalie must have seen where I'd been looking because she caught my eye, raising her eyebrows. "Yummy!" she mouthed and grinned at me before another customer claimed her attention.

I averted my eyes, embarrassed. Why did Natalie always think every guy in the room was fair game? I kept my eyes on the barman as he put my order on a tray, then handed him a note, telling him to keep the change. He grinned in appreciation.

Determined not to look again, I picked up the tray but my eyes had a will of their own. He was still looking at me.

I jumped when Matt touched my arm, to get my attention. He'd come to carry the tray and I smiled up at him. When he started back through the crowd, I turned to follow, with just a quick, parting glance to the corner of the bar.

I immediately wished I hadn't because he stood up quickly, as if to come around the bar to me. The girl urgently laid her hand on his arm and he bent his head to listen to what she said, momentarily dropping his eyes from mine. It was all the time I needed. I hurried to catch up with Matt.

I sat on the edge of the armchair, glancing nervously towards the bar. There was a wall of people

standing between us but I knew for sure what was causing the awareness pulsing through me.

Him.

My thoughts were in total disarray.

Matt and Mandy went to dance. Mandy almost skipped beside him to the dance floor. Jackson moved over on the sofa so he was closer, making it easier to talk over the music.

“Survived your first few days at school by the look of you,” he said. “Guess the real test is Monday when the classroom is full of kids.”

“Yes,” I agreed and glanced towards the bar.

“What grade are you teaching? Six?”

I nodded.

“Ten going on eleven is a lovely age. They’re still kids and haven’t got all those pubescent hormones bouncing about!”

“No.”

Maybe he thought I was nervous because he said, “You will be fantastic, Tessa!” and I tried for a smile at his confidence in me. “You must have Zac Moreton in your class?”

I really tried to concentrate. Zac was my potential problem child. “Do you know him?” I asked.

“I’ve met him a few times. His mother is one of my patients, he’s come along with her to appointments,” he told me but I was barely listening.

Jackson put his hand on my arm and I jumped, startled. He frowned with concern. “Are you feeling okay, Tessa?”

“I think... I think I’m beginning to remember some things. It’s just a little weird.”

Before he could say anything, Natalie breezed over and sat down next to him, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “Lunch break,” she said. Her face was flushed and her eyes sparkled.

“Hey Tessa, that guy in the corner was seriously checking you out!” she told me with a grin. “You should go over and say hello. His girlfriend was positively glowering when she left a few minutes ago!”

Jackson must have read the look on my face. “Busy night for your first shift,” he commented, rescuing me.

Natalie glanced back towards the bar and nodded. “Sure goes off! Nice bunch of people, everyone having fun. Better than my last job,” and she told Jackson about the five star restaurant in the city where she had been the assistant manager. “Lots of very uptight

patrons. Smiling was considered a sin.” Jackson laughed as she impersonated a pompous woman.

“You’ll enjoy living here,” Jackson said. “The only thing people get bent out of shape about around here is when the weather is bad, which is seldom. You’ll get to meet all the locals working here, too. Hardest part about moving to a new place, not knowing anyone. That was me a couple of years ago.”

“Well, we know you, Matt and Mandy, that’s a pretty good start, don’t you reckon, Tessa?”

“Yes,” I said automatically.

The awareness had changed. It was intensifying, growing stronger. I closed my eyes.

“Are you alright, Tessa?” Jackson asked.

“I’m just feeling a little odd,” I murmured.

“When did it start?” Jackson persisted and I opened my eyes to look at him, he was leaning very close, his dark eyes running over my face.

“A little earlier today, it comes and goes. Please. I’m fine,” and I tried to smile but it felt wrong on my face.

“Why didn’t you say something earlier, Tessa?” Natalie asked. “There I was dragging you all over the shops...” and she trailed off when I held up my hand to stop her.



“Nat, I’m fine,” I said, even as the awareness throbbed wave after wave through me.

A few minutes later, when Natalie said, “Here come Matt and Mandy,” I automatically turned my head to follow her look.

And froze.

*He* was coming through the crowd, straight towards me. His eyes did not waver from my face and people moved aside for him, as if on cue. I watched him come, my heart racing, the awareness pounding through me. I felt like I was going to burst out of my skin.

I stood to meet him before I was even conscious I had moved, dimly aware of the startled looks my friends were trading between me and the striking young man striding across the crowded floor.

When he stopped in front of me, I saw he had the most amazing blue eyes.

“I’m Sam,” he said.

It was like the name of the song finally popped into my head. Goose bumps balled along my arms.

He held out both hands to me. Unable to do anything else, I put mine into his. The overwhelming awareness mellowed, replaced with a radiant warmth that coursed through me instead.

I stared at him. What had he done?

“Will you dance with me?” he asked.

I left my friends without a word, letting him lead me to the dance floor. He found us a tiny corner in the crowd and entwined his long fingers with my much smaller ones. His touch increased the warm awareness. We didn't really dance, there wasn't room. We mostly stood, just looking at each other. It struck me that there was no awkwardness between us, two strangers meeting in a crowded bar. Quite the opposite. I felt like I had known him my entire life.

“I'm Tessa,” I said belatedly, realising I hadn't told him my name.

“I know,” he murmured.

“How do you know my name?” I asked, startled.

He just smiled and raised one of my hands, brushing the back of my fingers against his lips. Shivers raced along my nerves. His eyes were astonishingly blue.

I stopped pretending to dance as a fragment of memory teased me. “I know you,” I said slowly. Somehow, I managed to keep my voice light. “Are you an angel?”

Sam pulled back from me a little, his eyes were enigmatic.

“I have never been an angel,” he told me gravely.