

Chapter Twenty Five

Neia and Leiana showed me around the house. It wasn't so much as built into the mountainside, as built out of the mountain itself. The walls were white washed. The sparse furniture was white, too, with muted coloured cushions and throws. The only bright colours were large terracotta pots with ancient trees growing out of them, spruce and firs, olives and figs.

I was a little intoxicated from the Mead and growing anxious with waiting, especially with no understanding on how to measure time that did not exist. Thoughtfully, the cousins showed me to Sam's chamber at the far end of the long hall, so I could rest for a while. The room was bigger than my entire home on the beach. The four-poster bed was the size of two king beds, with soft white silk drapes on each corner. There was a cluster of sofas in the softest white leather I had ever felt. Icy cold water flowed from an ornate gold spout straight out of the mountain into a gold basin that sat upon a marble pedestal. I watched the water as it swirled, slowly draining away. The sound was soothing.

A massive window looked down the precipice of the mountain, giving a stunning view to a long winding valley below. It was our valley. The Valley of Flowers. Even from the dizzying height, I could see the colours of the millions of wild flowers.

I stood for a long time staring out the window, remembering Sam's promise that we would go there. His absence was making me physically ache.

To distract myself, I thought about being immortal and wondered why I hadn't guessed. Ever since the accident, I'd needed so little sleep and I could jog for miles on the beach without tiring. Even when I'd cut myself with the carving knife, feeling the blade slice deep into my thumb, it was barely more than a paper cut within minutes. I looked at my thumb. It was fully healed, not even a scar.

When I'd asked Sam why he hadn't told me sooner, he'd said at first he was concerned it would cloud my thinking, take away my ability to make a clear decision. He hadn't wanted me to feel that immortality tied me to him, that I didn't have a choice, after all. Then, when he'd started to tell me on several occasions, he'd been reluctant to spoil our happiness. Just as I had been reluctant to talk about my *mortality*.

Leiana had counselled him to let it find its own time and place. Davan made sure it did.

Would I have chosen immortality if I'd been given the chance to decide for myself? Yes, so I never had to give up Sam, nor him me.

I went and lay on the huge bed, curling onto my side, grateful that at least I could feel his warm awareness coursing through me.

I thought about what immortality would mean to my life. As Sam and Leiana knew, not visibly aging would be a constant problem. We would have to move, regularly, endlessly. Never settling into a home, never having long-term friendships, never belonging to a community where we grew old together.

I thought of Natalie. I would miss my spontaneous zany friend. She knew me better than anyone did, she was my sister. Thankfully, she had Jackson and I hoped they would have children. We could stay in touch by email and phone. A long, slow goodbye. It would be the same with Uncle Clive. Thinking about it brought tears to my eyes.

For the first time I was grateful for my parents' deaths. I would not have to abandon them to keep my secret. Oh, how they would have loved Sam! I imagined the debates my father and Sam would have

had. I pictured my mother lavishing her warm love on him, healing the hurt of losing his mother.

“Sam,” I whispered, just to feel his name on my lips.

I rolled on to my side, wrapping my arms about a pillow. I closed my eyes and escaped to my vivid imagination.

I suddenly woke, disoriented, wondering where I was, unsure what had woken me. Then I knew! I scrambled off the bed and ran across the room, yanking the heavy door open. I ran down the long hallway towards the courtyard at the far end of the house.

I saw Neia and Leiana. Neia looked at me with a startled expression as I raced past them, Leiana just smiled. Jorin cheered me on, his voice echoing off the high walls. I saw Reina but did not give her another thought. Aian, Davan and Adrin were talking quietly together and they broke off as I flew through the archway.

I saw Sam on the far side of the courtyard, flanked by his cousins. I ran faster.

He caught me as I launched myself into his arms, wrapping his arms about me, lifting me off the ground and spinning us around until our momentum slowed and we were just standing. I drowned in his blue gaze, then Sam bent his head and breathed my name against my lips.

“She’s young,” I heard Davan say gruffly and I looked over my shoulder to see all of Sam’s family in the courtyard. They were all watching us.

Sam kept his arms about me. He gave me a crooked smile. “My family are not used to displays of affection,” he murmured.

“They’d better get used to it,” I murmured back.

“Tessa, I don’t know what has been decided.” He cast a swift look around the faces of the Ancients, as if he might glean the outcome.

“I will go with you, wherever you must go, Sam. Never again will I stay behind,” I told him.

“The Council has decided,” Aian announced, and we spun around to look at him. “But first, I would speak with you alone, Samian.”

Sam released me but held my gaze for a few more moments before going to join his father. They walked a distance away. Aian’s face was still very grave.

What kind of father would punish a favourite son for falling in love?

I looked at Davan and Adrin. Tiana and Araila joined them. They did not speak, their faces were very serious, too. The younger gods, Jorin, Mirin, Rion, Neia and Leiana had grouped together. They did not talk amongst themselves, either.

Anxiously, I looked at Sam. His head was bowed as he listened to his father. He was half turned away. I could not see his face.

I felt awkward standing alone and thought to go and join Leiana when Reina surprised me. I hadn't seen her standing in the shade of the trees.

"Keep me company, child," she said kindly enough coming over to me. She tucked my arm through the crook of her elbow and we walked a little way along the courtyard.

"I'm sorry if I seemed upset when you first came," she said. Her eyes seemed sincere and I smiled shyly at her. "I have been worried about the distress Samian has caused his father." I nodded politely.

I glanced across to where Sam and his father stood and looked back at his stepmother and smiled at her again. She wasn't that bad.

“Now we’ve met you, seen for ourselves, we understand why Samian broke our sacred laws to have you by his side,” her face softened with a smile. “If only Samian hadn’t made that shocking sacrifice,” she said. “And so easily, without a second thought. That is what has caused his father, and the rest of the Council, such distress.”

“Sacrifice?” I repeated. “I don’t understand.”

Reina looked at me. Her expression puzzled by my lack of comprehension.

“Only fate decides who lives and dies,” she said softly. “To give immortality requires other lives to be given in return, to keep the balance. It is not our way, child.”

Her fingers tightened on my arm as unease shivered through me. I tried to pull away from her as I felt her bitterness flowing into me. She was frightening me. Her green eyes were very bright as she stared at me.

“Do you really not know?”

Slowly, I shook my head.

“To make you immortal, Samian had to give fate something in return.”

I glanced at Sam. He was still listening to his father. I looked back at Reina.

“To make you immortal, Samian sacrificed your parents, in exchange.” She dropped her hand from my arm as I stared at her.

He had sacrificed my parents to make me immortal!

At that moment, Sam glanced over his shoulder at me. I saw his eyes shone with the enormity of his love for me. Yet, I had barely guessed at the strength of that love. It was truly frightening.

Sam’s face changed to alarm when he saw my expression, then anger when he saw Reina standing at my side. In the second it took him to spin away from his father and face me, his eyes had become black with the full realisation of just how deeply I felt his betrayal.

I closed my eyes, shutting him out. I needed to escape to a place where I would never see him again.

Ever.

Blackness filled my head. It matched perfectly with how I felt.

“Tessa!” Sam’s voice was awful.

In the absolute instant he reached me, I was gone.

Chapter Twenty Six

Dense forest surrounded me, the trees blocking the sky making it gloomy. My legs buckled under me as the dizzying falling sensation pressed me down and I sank to my knees on the thick carpet of leaves and moss.

I did not know where I was. I didn't care. I hung my head and cried, my sobs filling the quietness of the forest. When I had no more tears, I lay down on the bed of leaves, curling up on my side. I would lay there forever.

“Come, Tessa.”

I thought I imagined the voice softly calling me, until I heard it again. Her voice was familiar, understanding, coaxing.

I sat up and looked around. In the distance, through the trees, I saw a pool of warm light. I sat for a long time looking towards it before slowly getting to my feet.

I stumbled through the thick mulch, catching my feet on roots and vines, until I reached the edge of a

small clearing. The light was cast from a circle of lanterns. One of the mighty trees lay where it had fallen across the clearing. An ornate bench had been carved into it.

A woman sat brushing her long black hair, humming softly to herself. She turned to look at me, as if knowing I was there, and she smiled.

“Come, Tessa,” Neia said again.

I looked around the clearing warily, expecting to see Sam or even Leiana. We were alone. The soft light from the lanterns was inviting after the gloom of the forest. Slowly I walked over. Neia patted the bench next to her, inviting me to sit.

Tentatively, I sat on the edge of the smooth, polished timber. Neia put her brush down, drawing her hair over her shoulder. It shone like black agate. She held out her hands to me. I hesitated, reluctant, then gave her mine. I felt her wisdom surge through me. She closed her eyes for a moment before leaning to kiss my forehead.

“Poor child,” she murmured. “So wounded.”

Yes. I was wounded. I wanted to die from the wound but I would not. Sam had made sure of that. I closed my eyes and wrapped my arms about myself, rocking backwards and forwards.

“How did I get here?” I asked after a long while. “I don’t know this place.”

“I brought you,” Neia said. “You are very young, Tessa. It will take you hundreds of years to perfect the art of moving through time. You were very brave to try, though.”

“Did Sam send you after me?” I asked suspiciously.

Neia shrugged lightly. “Aian bade me care for you. I honour my responsibilities.”

She reached over and pulled a leaf from my hair with a wry smile. I ran my fingers through my hair, feeling the leaf litter from where I’d lain on the forest floor.

“Where are we?”

“A private place, somewhere I come when I want solitude. We won’t be disturbed,” she assured me.

“Do you know what Sam did, too?” I asked after staring at the gold band on my wrist for a long time. With total trust, I had bound myself to a monster.

Neia tilted her head. “Do you mean what Reina told you?”

I nodded.

“Yes, I know what Reina told you.”

“How could he do that, Neia?” I whispered.

“How indeed,” she responded. There was no censure in her tone.

“I never asked for this! How could he ever think I could accept it?” I was on my feet, pacing backwards and forwards. “I loved him for saving my parents the grief of losing me as a child. I loved him for letting me grow up in *their* love!

“I loved him, Neia! How could he do that?” I whispered.

“How indeed,” Neia said, again.

I stopped pacing and looked at her calm, serene face. Her eyes were mercurial silver. “Reina said....”

“What did Sam say?” Neia asked quietly.

“That it was their fate to die. I was angry with him for not trying. He didn’t tell me he’d sacrificed them!” I shuddered. It sounded so... pagan.

“What does your heart tell you, Tessa?”

Tears flowed down my cheeks. “I don’t know,” I sobbed.

“Yes, you do,” Neia assured me.

I put my head in my hands.

Neia stroked my hair. I could feel her serene calm flowing through me. It helped me think.

“Reina lied to me, didn't she?” I said slowly and I looked up at her with the awful understanding.

When Neia nodded, I stared at her. “Why would she do that? What harm have I ever done to her?” I whispered.

“Aian loved Kaila, Samian’s mother, the way Samian loves you. The way Reina always wanted to be loved by Aian,” Neia said. “Reina took advantage of your vulnerability.”

“My vulnerability?”

“The loss of your parents is very strong in your aura, Tessa. We all feel it intensely. Just like we all feel Samian’s love for you. Reina has waited a very long time to exact revenge for her jealousy and humiliation. She gave up a long time ago trying to inflict her bitterness on Aian. She turned her attention on Samian. Hurting him hurts his father. She saw her opportunity. By taking away the only thing that would ever matter to Samian. You.”

“Fate does not demand sacrifices, Tessa. Fate weaves its twists and turns, often they seem quite pointless, right to the very end, when it reveals itself,” Neia told me.

We sat in silence for a long time. I could not believe I had been so easily deceived. I could not believe how quickly I cast such monstrous fault. Then,

I remembered Reina's hand on my arm, feeling her bitterness biting into me, like poison in my veins.

"Will seeing fate's intentions restore your belief?"

Neia asked me.

"How can I do that?"

She smiled, arching a dark winged eyebrow at me.

"I can show you."

Neia stood up and gracefully described a circle with her hand, stretching out her fingers as if pulling the very air into a ball. Round and round, faster and faster her hand moved until my head was spinning. Then she gently closed her fingers, as if she was holding something precious. She brought her hand close to her lips and blew softly through her fingers into the palm of her hand.

I saw soft light glimpse through and when she opened her hand, a shimmering ball of mist floated upwards. Neia took my hands, then, closed her eyes, her lips moved silently. I watched the mist expand and grow more and more opaque.

"We are responsible for our own decisions, Tessa, but fate weaves the final threads," Neia murmured to me.

"When Samian saved your life when you were seven, he changed the natural course of events. Fate

had to weave a different pattern in the cloth to realign the threads. Let me show you two paths that fate wove. The first, is as you know it.”

Faint at first, then becoming clearer, I watched as an image appeared in the mist. I jumped, startled, when the image crystallised into my father. Tears welled in my eyes but I blinked them away, not wanting to miss a moment of seeing him again. He was sitting at the kitchen table with his paper, smiling at Mum and me. We’d just sung our duet.

The image shifted and I was smiling at my Mum, then, I saw my face light up. I remembered why. I’d thought to go buy the CD for her.

The next images showed me driving to the shops, the crowds of people everywhere, my perseverance to get the gift.

I saw two young lads pushing my car off the road and my Dad arriving. Then, he was at a car yard. I watched as he put his hand on the roof of a red Mini, then shake hands with another man, both smiling, pleased with themselves.

When he arrived home in the taxi, goose bumps balled on my skin as I saw myself run down to meet him, unhappiness all over my face. I watched him talk

to me, put his arms about my shoulders and then I threw my arms about his neck.

I watched him go inside and talk to my mother, whisper in her ear and her wonderful smile of delight at whatever he'd told her, they hugged each other.

Tears ran down my face.

Neia released one of my hands and gently waved her fingers through the mist, making the images spin past. She found the spot she was looking for, just a few minutes before the accident. Dad was driving, holding the steering wheel with one hand, Mum's hand in his other. My memory was filling in the missing sound track. We were all laughing and then the truck's trailer was careening towards us.

Even without the sound of the screeching tyres and my mother's scream, I looked away. It was too hard to watch. My heart was thumping, I felt sick. When I looked back to the mist, I was in Sam's arms. He was carrying me away from the wreck. I lay slack in his arms, my head lolling over his arm. There was blood all over my face.

Neia closed her eyes and the image started to fade.

"This is an alternative path, Tessa. You won't recognise all of it," she told me a few moments later.

As before, the images were faint at first, then clearer. Neia started at the same point in the kitchen, my Dad smiling at Mum and me after our song. I was smiling at my Mum. In the next image, I was hanging up the tea towel, glancing at my watch and heading out to the hall, taking my cell phone out of my pocket to talk to someone.

I looked at Neia, confused.

Neia squeezed my hands, “An alternative path,” she reminded me.

In the mist, I was sitting on the front stairs laughing at something the person on the other end of the phone was saying. Then I snapped my phone shut and ran back into the house. There were bags and boxes stacked in the hall and my Dad came out of the kitchen. He gave me a hug before picking up several of the suitcases and heading for the door.

I watched the mist in horror. I hadn’t driven the car. I didn’t know the brakes were faulty!

Then my Mum and Dad were standing outside. They hugged me, waving me off, waiting until I got to the corner and waving again. My Dad had his arm around my Mum’s shoulders. I could see she had tears in her eyes. Tears of happy sadness that I was leaving home.

Again, Neia flowed her fingers threw the mist looking for a point. I stared at the image she found. I had the car window open, my hair whipping wildly in the breeze as I cruised along the highway.

I looked closer. It was a different stretch of road to where my parents had died.

I looked like I was singing. Then the car in front of me suddenly swerved wildly and I reacted instinctively, spinning the wheel to avoid it. I saw myself look down, alarm on my face as I pumped the brake pedal. The VW hit the car in front and lurched into a spin, round and round, until it hit the gravel on the verge. The VW flipped, rolling over and over, till it landed on its roof.

I thought my legs were going to buckle under me. Neia squeezed my hands firmly. "It didn't happen, Tessa," she said.

Then in the mist, I saw an ambulance and police cars, people swarming down the hill towards my car. I did not see Sam.

"Sam did not come for me," I whispered.

"This is not the path you took, Tessa. Fate would only allow Samian to be on the path you chose. I cannot show you *your* future, Tessa, because it constantly shifts and changes as decisions are made. I

can show you what fate had in store for this alternative path. Do you want to see?"

I nodded.

Neia raised her hand, to flow her fingers in the mist.

I recognised the room straight away. It was the lounge room in my parent's home, where I had spent most of my life growing up. What I struggled to recognise were the people in the room. I looked closer and then draw back shocked. It was my parents. My mother sat on the sofa. She was painfully thin, her face heavily lined, her eyes red and swollen from crying. My father was standing, staring at our family portrait, the same portrait that sat on my sideboard at the beach house. He looked grey and old.

On the coffee table was a photo of me, taken that night we'd celebrated my finishing University. Surrounding the photo were thick, white column candles that looked like they had been burning for some time. I counted them, twenty-two. It was my birthday. They did not speak to each other. They did not even look at each other.

I sobbed silently.

Neia's fingers flew through the mist and stopped when the mist turned bright red and orange. I stared. It

took me a couple of minutes to understand what I was looking at. My parent's house was on fire, flames shooting out the windows, engulfing the walls. When the roof started to collapse, I couldn't take any more. I wrenched my hands free.

I ran to the edge of the clearing. Into the darkness.