

Chapter Twenty One

“There are way too many people in this kitchen!”
Natalie said.

“Matt, the bonfire isn’t going to build itself. Sam, we need ice for the drinks, and don’t forget your guitar! Jackson, those chairs need to be taken down to the beach, please. And, the BBQ is *still* on the deck!”

Natalie threw her hands in the air.

She was in her element organising the beach party to celebrate our birthdays. In typical Natalie style, she had only decided on Tuesday to have the party in the first place. I hadn’t tried to dissuade her but the thought of my birthday made me sad. I missed my parents keenly. My birthday was always a special occasion in my small family.

“Jackson, what have you done to that woman?”
Matt asked loudly. “It might be her birthday but she was never this bossy when I first knew her!” Matt complained. Jackson grinned at him.

Sam smiled at me.

“Ouch!” I yelled and grabbed the tea towel, quickly wrapping it around my thumb. Big mistake, I shouldn’t

look at Sam when I had a large, sharp knife in my hand.

“Tessa!” Natalie said, impatiently. “We really don’t have time for this! Our guests are going to be here in two hours!”

Jackson came to see how bad it was. “It’s fine, really!” I told him holding the tea towel firmly around it. It was stinging badly. “Go. Please, before Natalie busts a boiler! I just need a band aid,” I assured him.

“Keep the pressure on it for a few more minutes then give it a good wash. Let me know if it doesn’t stop bleeding,” Jackson told me.

“Want me to get the band aid?” Sam asked, trying to be helpful. I shook my head.

“You’d better go, too. You were picking Leiana up from the gallery, weren’t you?”

“I’ll be back really soon,” he promised and bent to kiss me. I kissed him back, slowly, winding my arms around his neck, my thumb forgotten.

“Tessa!” Natalie complained loudly.

I went to shower and change. I unwound the tea towel carefully from my thumb. It was soaked in blood. Gingerly, I pulled the last of the cloth off, expecting the cut to be deep. It was barely a paper cut. I was

relieved but at the same time mystified. Did the magnitude of Sam's healing still linger inside me?

Matt had gone home to change and was picking up Ann and Zac on his way back. Mandy was coming, she'd asked if she could bring Peter Black with her, the teacher who'd stopped by to see me, though I suspected he'd really come to see Mandy. John Brennan and his wife Sarah, expecting their first child, were also coming. I hoped Davan would be back but Sam wasn't sure.

I knew Sam was preoccupied by his Uncle's absence.

Uncle Clive arrived with two enormous bunches of flowers, one for Natalie, one for me. He gave each of us a small velvet box, too. The earrings were beautiful. Uncle Clive always made the right choice.

"So, when do I get to meet these boyfriends?" he wanted to know.

I looked at Natalie. Of course, she would have told him when she called to invite him!

"Soon!" she said. "Jackson's just gone home to change and Sam's gone to pick up his twin sister."

Uncle Clive looked between us. "Details ladies, please. I'm a lawyer, the devil is in the details!" and Natalie and I rushed to tell him about Jackson and

Sam. We sounded like we were ten years old again, talking over the top of each other, trumping each other's special moments, in a rush to share our happiness. We ended up grinning at each other.

“Looks like love is the best present this year!” Uncle Clive said, smiling at us both. “Happy birthday! When did you get to be twenty-two! You're making me feel old,” he complained.

Sam arrived by himself. He'd changed into jeans and a plain white shirt that showed off his golden tan. He carried his guitar and a striped blanket was slung over his shoulder. He came straight over to me, putting his arm about my waist as if he had been gone for days, instead of an hour.

“Where's Leiana?” I asked.

“She'll be along soon,” he answered softly.

“Sam, this is my godfather, Clive Matheson,” I introduced him.

Uncle Clive looked Sam up and down before proffering his hand. Sam looked a little amused at the 'godfather' title. Uncle Clive misunderstood the humour.

“Tessa tells me you take photos for a living, when you're not surfing, that is,” Uncle Clive said. I cringed at the barely disguised derogatory tone in his voice.

“Uncle Clive!” I exclaimed.

He’d heard everything I’d told him about Sam’s photography and painting the mural at school but chose to pick the barest facts to imply that Sam was not a lot better than a beach bum!

“Tessa, your father would have wanted me to look out for you,” he said.

I glowered at him. “My father was not judgemental about what a person chose to do,” I told him tartly. “Sam is very talented and also owns a gallery!” I defended. I wanted to tell him so much *more* about Sam.

“Tessa,” Sam murmured against my hair, his voice soothing. Then louder, so Uncle Clive could hear, “Your *godfather* is bound to protect you from any wastrel who dares steal your heart.” Uncle Clive stared at him, his body language made it quite clear that was *exactly* what he was thinking.

“I’m sorry you don’t approve of my line of work but I can assure you, my sister and I make a good income from our gallery. We diversified a few years ago into internet sales to tap the world market. We are currently working on a business plan to set up a virtual gallery to promote emerging artists, using the international network channels we’ve established. We have several

large metropolitan galleries interested as major sponsors.”

Uncle Clive looked at Sam intently. Sam just smiled back at him.

“Hi Tessa,” Leiana said, joining us on the deck. “You must be Clive, I’m Sam’s sister,” she introduced herself. Leiana had left her long auburn hair loose and it floated about her like a golden halo. Her blue eyes, so like Sam’s, had Uncle Clive’s total attention.

“I’m sorry, I think I interrupted your conversation,” she said.

“Your brother was just outlining your new business plans for the gallery,” Uncle Clive said. His voice had lost its coolness. “Very interesting idea. I’d be happy to take a look at the legal matters if you don’t have a lawyer already,” he offered, turning back to Sam.

We all smiled at each other. I left Uncle Clive with Leiana and tugging on Sam’s hand, he followed me into the garden.

“Oh, Sam. I am so sorry. I had no idea he would do that!”

Sam smiled down at me unconcerned. “I’d have been very disappointed if he didn’t. Think of it from his perspective,” Sam said.

Yes. On the surface, Sam's identity was well masked.

"Sam, was all that stuff you told him about the virtual gallery true? Or was that just part of your cover of living in the mortal world?"

Sam pulled away from me, his eyes darkening. "I never lie, Tessa. Ever." He let go of my hand and walked down to the beach. I watched him go, startled by his reaction. I hadn't meant to imply he did.

Matt arrived with Ann and Zac. Ann looked great. I saw straight away that she had put some weight on. Her face had lost the sallow, grey complexion and her hair, whilst very short, had been spiked with gel. It suited her. Her eyes were the real difference, though. They were alive.

"Ann, I'm so pleased you could come," I greeted her with a hug.

"Thank you for inviting us," she answered.

"You look so much better," I ventured.

"I am, Tessa. I got some results yesterday. The cancer is in remission!" and I hugged her again. Over her shoulder, I looked for Sam. He was standing down by the water line, looking out to sea. Had he intervened, after all?

"Can I light the bonfire, Matt?" Zac asked.

“Hey, buster! I built it! I’m lighting it!” he said with mock indignation. “But I need help,” he added. “That’s you!” Zac raced down to the sand.

“Shall we go down to the beach, too?” Matt asked, offering his arm to Ann. She smiled radiantly at him.

I went to the kitchen to collect a platter of savouries before following them. I saw Jackson and Natalie were talking with Uncle Clive. No doubt he approved of Jackson, I thought sourly, still a little annoyed with his pompous attitude. Leiana was talking with John Brennan and his very pregnant wife, Sarah. Matt was settling Ann into a chair next to Mandy. Zac was kicking the soccer ball he’d brought. It rolled towards the water and I watched Sam catch it with his foot. He looked at the boy for a moment then kicked it back, much to the boy’s delight.

By the time I reached the party, an impromptu game of soccer was taking shape. With enthusiastic encouragement from Matt and Jackson, Sam, Mandy, Peter, Natalie, Leiana, and I were drafted. Ann and Sarah were nominated to referee and keep score. Uncle Clive opted to applaud and call encouragement.

While Matt and Jackson drew the pitch in the sand, and dragged some driftwood to mark the goals, I

took Sam's hand. He immediately wrapped his fingers around mine.

"I'm sorry, Sam" I said. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"I know," he said looking down at me and when relief washed my face, he frowned. "Tessa, forgive me, I didn't mean to hurt you. Sometimes I'm just too arrogant. It's my worst trait."

"Kiss me," I said and he did.

"Would you two cut it out?" Natalie called. "There are children present!"

By the time we'd eaten from the BBQ, the bonfire had burnt down and we congregated around its glow. Zac was sitting watching the flames. Matt had found him a long stick so he could poke the fire from a safe distance.

Jackson, John, Peter, and Uncle Clive were discussing sport. Leiana, Sarah, and Mandy were talking about babies. Matt and Ann were watching the stars, pointing out the constellations to each other. They were holding hands. Natalie was sitting on the sand leaning back against Jackson's legs. His hand rested on her shoulder.

“Sam?” and then I hesitated, remembering the last time I had raised the topic.

“Tessa?” he encouraged me, a small frown appearing on his forehead at my sudden reluctance.

“Did you... help Ann?” He looked steadily at me, his frown easing. “She is so much better. She told me she is in remission. I thought....”

“No, Tessa. You did.”

I stared at him.

Sam took my hand and raised it to his lips, slowly kissing each fingertip, assaulting my senses.

“Are you tired of watching me sleep, yet?” I asked hopefully, totally distracted.

“No.”

I took my hand away. “Then don’t tease me, Sam Archer, or I may not be responsible for my *decisions*.”

Sam picked up his guitar and started to strum a soft, simple melody. I did not recognise it. After a minute, he added some chords and the tune shifted. It was like listening to two distinct parts, until they interwove to create a single sinuous melody of highs and lows.

Sam hummed quietly to the tune, bending his head over the guitar, his fingers alternating between picking the strings to softly strumming them. Across

the fire, Leiana started to sing and Sam looked over at his twin. They held each other's eyes across the embers of the fire.

Leiana's voice was beautiful, hypnotic. It took me a few moments to realise they were not words but sounds she sang; sounds that blended into the music Sam made. Slowly, one part of the melody faded, then the next, until Sam brought the song to its conclusion. We all clapped.

Sam smiled at me. "My mother's favourite song," he told me quietly.

Matt called across the fire, "Do you know any Red Hot Chilli Peppers, mate?"

"Heathen," Sam muttered.

Sam mixed it up, playing covers to satisfy his audience. He had an amazing repertoire. When conversation started again, Sam went back to quietly playing unfamiliar but beautiful melodies, sometimes humming, sometimes just watching me as he made his music.

"Did you see that?!" Matt suddenly exclaimed. We all looked into the night sky where he pointed. "The most amazing falling star! Did you make a wish, Ann?" he asked and she smiled up into his face.

Sam had stopped playing. He was staring down the beach.

“What is it, Sam?” I asked, putting my hand on his arm.

He gave me a quick smile. “Davan’s back.”

“Who’s Davan?” Uncle Clive asked.

“My uncle.”

Leiana had seen, too. She walked over to Sam. I saw the look they exchanged. I couldn’t ask. Uncle Clive was too close. I looked down the beach. In the moonlight, I saw Davan in the distance.

“I’m just going to go say hello,” Sam said, putting his guitar down.

“I’ll come with you,” I said quickly.

“You have guests, Tessa,” Sam said softly. “I won’t be long. I promise,” he added, feeling my tension and brushed his lips across my cheek.

“I’ll come and say hello, too,” Leiana said.

“Invite him to come join us,” I told her and she nodded.

“Thank you, I will.”

“What’s with the uncle?” Uncle Clive asked when I turned back.

“Oh, he’s been away, longer than expected. They’ve been worried about him.”

“I like Sam,” Uncle Clive told me. “I was a bit worried at first,” he admitted and I frowned at him.

“You’re going to have quite a nest egg when the house is sold, Tessa. I’d hate for some surfer-bum to think he’s on high street at your expense.”

“Uncle Clive! Sam’s not like that, at all!”

“No. Seems like a solid enough young man. Don’t be upset with me, Tessa. You’re young and in love, you see what you want to see. Talking about the house, all the probate paperwork has just been finalised. That means we can go ahead and list the house for sale. Is that what you still want to do?”

I nodded. My future did not lie in the house in the city.

Natalie came over and joined us. “Hey, Birthday Girl,” I said.

“Hey, wannabe Birthday Girl,” she returned the ritual greeting that had been going on for ten years. I had to wait until midnight. We smiled at each other.

“Don’t you just love Sam, Uncle Clive? And my Jackson?” and she looked over to where he was sitting with Ann and Matt. I saw Zac had curled up on a blanket and was sound asleep.

“Yes, though I would have sworn that Tessa would end up with the doctor and you with the artist, Nat.

Funny how things turn out,” Uncle Clive said. “But as long as you are happy that is what is important. Never compromise what’s in your heart,” he told us both.

We went over to join the others, moving chairs until we sat in a circle. I let the laughter and conversation drift around me. I kept glancing down the beach in the direction Sam and Leiana had gone. I could feel Sam’s presence, his warm awareness glowed within me. We had hardly been apart through the days and I slept in his arms every night. We had talked our way through a thousand topics, our favourite things, our pet hates, things we agreed on, the things we held separate views.

However, I was worried. I knew Sam was keeping something from me. Something that was connected to Davan’s extended absence. Even Leiana’s serene composure was showing strain. If she’d found him the night we’d had dinner together, she didn’t let on. I tried to believe Sam when he said everything would be okay.

Whatever it was, I knew it was because of me.

I looked at my friends around the fire. Natalie and Jackson. Jackson was the rock Natalie needed, while Natalie had brought laughter and fun to lighten his serious nature.

Matt, Ann and little Zac. Matt, fun, loving, protective. Ann, content and dependent on Matt's strength. Zac, the beneficiary of their love, the beginning of a beautiful family.

Mandy, a beautiful kind person, not in the least resentful that Ann had claimed the spot she had wanted with Matt. And by the way Peter Black kept looking at her, I hoped he might be her Mr Right, she deserved it.

John and Sarah were excited, awaiting the birth of their baby, their love shone between them.

"Uncle Clive?" Natalie asked. "Why didn't you ever marry?"

"I did," he said. "My work."

Everyone laughed.

"I love the law and am passionate about justice being done. In twenty years, I have not found a woman who was prepared to accept the little bit of me that's leftover at the end of the day. I guess by now, I'm too set in my ways."

I felt Sam's closeness and was impatient for his return. I stood up to look for him. He and Leiana were walking back along the beach towards our little party. Davan was with them. I excused myself from the group and walked to join them.

In the moonlight, I could see their faces were very solemn.