



White Rose

*Tessa Takes
A Chance*

*Ashley Elizabeth
Ludvig*

Tessa Takes A Chance

by

Ashley Elizabeth Ludwig

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Tessa Takes a Chance

COPYRIGHT © 2008 by Ashley Ludwig

All rights reserved. This is an “unedited” as is title. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or The Wild Rose Press except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

Cover Art by *The Wild Rose Press*

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 706

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at www.thewildrosepress.com

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2008

Free Read

Published in the United States of America

Tessa Mathews leaned against the concrete barricade and took a moment to drink in the view of Zuma Beach. The glorious gray-blue of the Pacific Ocean looked like heaven on earth this morning, with the marine layer misting the morning air. Tessa secured her blonde hair into a ponytail and slipped her gold cross necklace inside her tank, as was her standard pre-warm-up ritual.

Her heart fluttered at the sheer beauty of her favorite place on earth. The northernmost region of Malibu remained bohemian despite its wealthy reputation. Tessa loved every part of living here: her rustic, ocean-view apartment; the quaint local organic market; grabbing takeout sushi whenever the mood struck her. But her morning jog along the coastline remained her biggest joy. Tessa chose to make her life—one that no longer included Greg Miklos—here. She exhaled while she stretched out her quads. She didn't want to think about the manipulative man she'd once trusted, or the fact he'd made her look so foolish at the end. Tessa forced her mind towards brighter things.

She intended to enjoy this Saturday morning to the fullest. After a solid week of not seeing the sun rise or set at her Malibu apartment—due to that hour-plus commute to the sound studio and the gritty glamour of Hollywood—Tessa eagerly anticipated Zuma Beach beneath her soles. The gulls dipped and dove, hunting through the debris washed up on shore from the latest storm.

Tessa checked her watch. Just shy of 6 a.m. She reached up with one arm, then the other, fingertips towards the foggy sky. Her muscles were loose and ready to run. Most of Malibu remained snug in warm beds, mansions dark with tightly drawn curtains. She relished being alone on this pristine stretch of coastline, save for a small band of Malibu

firefighters. They had parked their vehicles at the opposite end of the lot and were starting physical training. She counted six men, dressed in blue, laughing at some unheard joke. They seemed completely confident, cocky almost, as they stretched well-muscled legs and arms and bantered back and forth. She heard drifts of their conversation on the breeze.

One of them looked up and caught her watching. He openly stared back in her direction. A flush of heat rose to her ears and Tessa darted her eyes the other way. She took a deep, full breath to slow her pulse. *Relax! What are you, in high school?* Her mind flicked to the black scar of Corral Canyon, recently spared from burning out of control. *Firefighters had a right to be cocky, didn't they? After all, these were the guys who had saved Malibu when the wildfires blazed through.* She hazarded a quick glance back, but saw that his attention had diverted elsewhere.

Tessa usually ran north towards Broad Beach, opposite from where the firefighters trained near Point Dume. Today she hesitated. *Man up, Tessa. What's the harm in jogging by some pretty guys?* She pushed off and angled the southern shoreline, keeping Dume's rocky bluff and the firefighters in sight. Her heart pounded, arms pumped, feet beating in time with the waves.

Tessa emptied her thoughts as she picked up the pace. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Her high school cross-country trainer's voice filled her head as she focused on each breath. Still, her mind drifted to her failed relationship and wouldn't let go. So be it. She briefly closed her eyes and palmed her cross. Maybe she needed to embrace the hurt so she could finally let it go. Greg had manipulated her personally and professionally. She'd ended it. She didn't need someone who stifled her. That wasn't in the plan.

Eyes open, she ran faster, knowing she'd never get herself in that situation again. Tessa puffed out a prayer for healing, sanity, and the courage to follow her dreams. A smile touched her lips and her heart beat a little faster at that

thought. Even if her personal life was a disaster, her professional dreams were poised to come true.

After spending marathon days at her sound-board, Tessa had transformed her latest movie into an award nominee. *Best Sound!* Her heart thrilled. Her instinct told her how to manipulate sound levels to invoke tears, cheers, or terror in the audience. Since her nomination, producers now requested her by name. Tessa beamed as her thoughts swirled around the sparkly black number that hung in her closet. The background noise of the crashing waves paled in comparison to the blood roaring in her ears. *How could the award show be tonight?* Her smile faltered as she realized she'd be going alone. Best not to think about that...

Tessa focused instead on a problematic scene in her newest project. What could she do to really pack a punch? Draw the audience in and then shock them? Her mind turned over solutions as she lost herself in thoughts of work. Suddenly, her toe caught against a piece of driftwood. Startled to reality, she caught air in an all-out sprawl. Pinwheeling her arms, she landed with a face full of sand. Shaken, she pushed to her knees, her muscles jarred from the fall. Tessa turned awkwardly to a sit. She spat the grit out of her mouth while she brushed the beach from her face and hair. Her knee throbbed. Further inspection showed a mottled, ugly-looking scrape. *Great. Just beautiful.*

Out of nowhere, the firefighter she'd noticed earlier appeared and plucked her off the beach like a wayward seashell. "Are you okay?"

"Caught my toe."

"El Nino's washed a bunch of junk onshore." He pulled her to a stand and she tipped her head to take in the full view. He towered above her, his chiseled face carved into a smile. He finger-combed through his dark hair, damp from his morning shower, she guessed.

A quick glance at his tanned physique raised her pulse a notch. Pumping iron quite obviously ranked high on this guy's to-do-list. And since when did being a Greek-god-look-alike become a prerequisite for the Malibu Fire

Department, anyway? She tasted sand in her Chapstick, her only attempt at makeup this morning. *Marvelous.*

“Yeah. Guess my mind was somewhere else.”

He wrinkled his tanned forehead and gave her a deep once over, turning her chin in his hand. “How many fingers do you see?” He held up three.

She laughed. “I’m fine. Really.”

“What’s your name?”

“Tessa. And you are?”

“Chance.”

Makes sense. He does have that bodice-ripping-hero look about him. Tessa tested her leg at the knee and hissed. “Well, Firefighter Chance. I’m not on fire. Just skinned my knee and bruised my pride. You’re free to go.”

“I’m a paramedic. And your knee’s bleeding. Come up to the ambulance. We’ll take care of you.”

Tessa clamped down her objection. Greg had once warned her to be suspicious of all strange men. Well, Greg was history. And since the man in question looked like Adonis-on-steroids and had a healer’s touch to boot, why not follow him?

Moments later she found herself perched on the running board of the shiny ambulance. A trio of probationary firefighters watched as Chance deftly cleaned and dressed her wound. His fingers sparked against her skin as he cupped her calf. Tessa’s breath caught. She met his heavy-lidded eyes, the green of a cresting wave. She caught a glint of humor beneath his serious expression. Tessa bit back a smile, and the giggle that filled her throat. *Lord, how long had it been since a man made her so completely goofy?*

“We good?” His words for her alone, over the pounding surf.

“Pretty good so far.”

He gave a warm squeeze at the back of her leg. Tessa’s nerves did a happy dance.

Chance turned his head, “And that’s how we conduct minor first aid, wherever, whenever. Understood, Probies?”

The young firefighters murmured their agreement. Heat

rushed to the top of Tessa's head. Three shades of red now, to be sure. Tessa found herself the star of her very own private show. Her morning jog now over, she looked up at the hill she'd have to climb to get home. A heavy sigh escaped her lips.

"Get in." Chance motioned to his shiny red truck. "I'll give you a lift."

"Don't you have more important things to do than ferry damsels in distress?"

"Not today. I'm off duty."

A few minutes later his truck idled in her drive. The opportunity to see him again, quickly fading. *What would the old Tessa do?* Her heart thudded as she stood outside his window. "Thanks for the ride."

"Any time." He touched a hand to the gear-shift. Her heart shot to her throat.

"So, I have this black-tie party thingie to go to tonight. Wanna come? About six o'clock?" Tessa blurted.

His eyebrow arched, a smile touched the corner of his full lips. "Like a date?"

"Yeah, just like that, actually."

"I suppose I could dust off my tux. I clean up pretty good, you know." Chance reached out to brush her hand.

"Hopefully I do, too." She gave a slight laugh. Their fingers engaged in a tentative dance; the sensation ignited her bloodstream. *Maybe I am on fire, after all.*

"Six o'clock it is." He squeezed her hand goodbye; his touch lingered as she turned to go.

Tessa sauntered to her front door with a grin that wouldn't quit. Win or lose, this promised to be quite an interesting evening after all.