

Falling for Alice: A Secret Kiss
(Falling For Alice Trilogy: Book One)

Alexia Praks

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The Throwaway Child

Sayonara, my beautiful daughter. Mono
no aware.

You are like the

sakura

flower

that

bloom

s vibrantly in spring, just

like this spring,

so lovely and full of

life

and

color

. You are here in my

life for only a short time, enchanting me with your innocent beauty

and kind soul, and a brief moment later you are gone again, out of my
life.

Thus, I

shall name you Alice. I am sad, my darling da

ughter,

to leave you behind. I am sad to never see you grow up, feel your love,
or

hear you call me

kasama.

But I am not a worthy mother

. Thus

, sayonara

, my beautiful Alice.

* * * * *

Alice, with no last name,
was found in spring on the

doorstep of Qu

een Mary Orphanage

in a small town called

South

Hampton

in St. Joseph Island. Her

mother mysteriously

disappeared

after leaving the baby girl in a bas

ket along with a note

that said

My

d

name is Alice

and a beautiful necklace

with a pink diamond

pendant in the shape of a cherry blossom

affection that one receives from one
parents. From very early on,
she knew she
have a mother or a father and longed to have
2 Alexia Praks
them. She did
not interact much with the other children in the
orphanage, knowing she looked different, having half-
Caucasian
and half-Asian blood, and therefore
she
was constantly picked on.
Mrs. Byrd, the headmistress of the orphanage, did
Alice very much,
and neither did
her pretty little daughter,
Tara
Byrd, who was
s age and her worst nightmare. It wa
s apparent from very early on that Tara was destined to be S
enemy. The little blond-
haired,
blue-
eyed girl enjoyed tormenting
Alice and making fun of her, isolating the girl from the rest and
setting her as a target for her amusement.
Tara knew she was pretty and everyone adored her. She
had her
mother and most of the staff at the orphanage wrapped around her
little finger. Many
times she would tell her mother, and everyone
else for that matter, lies about Alice.
T
hat Alice worship
ed heathen gods other than their Jesus Christ, spoke to the devil, stole
food from the kitchen, bullied her or the younger children, and
many more.
Mrs. Byrd, always believing her beloved daughter, would
punish Alice many times, slapping the little girl on the cheeks
, spanking her backside, taking away her toys and books, denying
her meals, and making her kneel on the concrete floor in the
church from midday until midnight without any food or water,
all
in order to teach her a lesson. Hence Alice lived in the orphanage
being bullied, hated, and ignored.
Eventually, she grew
accustomed to being alone and learn
ed to
endure the harassment. When she was told to pray to God for
forgiveness for being a naughty girl, she prayed instead
adopted by a nice family who loved her and to leave this
horrendous place where no one liked
about it actually happening, about her going far away and living
with her very own fa
mil
smile,
and
thank
the Lord for making her dream come true before it actually
happened.
Such was the power of positive thinking and law of attraction,
come true one day.
A Secret Kiss 2

seven years old. It was during the summer, and the children of Queen Mary Orphanage were invited to have a picnic with the Princetons, the wealthiest family on St. Joseph Island and sponsors of the orphanage.

Alice knew the moment she stepped out of the bus and onto the neatly paved pathway and exotically beautiful garden that she wanted to be here. When she stared up at the enormous mansion like those castles in fairytale books, she sucked in her breath with

pleasure. Her head spun in delight as she gazed up at the building that stretched high above her. So big!

murmured with delight. And Alice agreed with them.

The man of the house came out to greet them. He was very handsome with silvery-gray eyes and golden-blond hair, very much like Tara

a nice smile on his face as he greeted every one of them, and Alice felt her heart quicken with happiness as his eyes met hers. There was kindness within those eyes that Alice had never received from anyone before.

The man ushered the children to the large garden with a gentle,

rolling lawn and magnolia trees, where delicious food and sweet drinks waited for them to enjoy. That was when the whole family came out, and Alice instantly fell in love with them and knew she wanted to be with them.

They were a big family, just like she'd always wanted, and she did her best learning their names when they were introducing themselves to everyone.

The nice

James Princeton, and the pretty was Brenda Princeton. The oldest son was Nicolas, who was twelve years old and had golden-blond hair and silvery-

gray eyes like his father, complete with glasses. He looked kind and at the same time serious, just like his father. Then there were the ten-year-

olds, nonidentical triplets:

Tristan with golden-brown hair

and teal-blue eyes,

Logan with copper-brown hair and silvery-gray

eyes, and Sebastian with pale-blond hair and azure-blue eyes.

4 Alexia Praks

The boy with chestnut-brown hair and cobalt-blue eyes was eight-year-

old Hayden. He had a mischievous look about him as he introduced himself. Next to Hayden were the nonidentical twins, Alaina and Darryl, at six-year-old. Alaina, the older sister by

and Darcy, the younger brother, had raven-black hair and mauve-gray eyes. And then there was the baby of the house, Conrad, at four years old, with golden-brown hair and silvery-gray eyes, hiding his fascination because they fascinated her. She felt a pang of longing as she watched them play with the other children, especially with pretty Tara.

It was afternoon that Alice became aware of one of the boys, Sebastian, watching her. Alice shook her head as she gazed at him, marveling at his blond hair that glittered like white gold under the sun and his

azure-blue eyes, the same color as the beautiful summer sky that shone and stretched endlessly beyond the horizon. She knew very well what he meant, for the majority of the population living on St. Joseph Island was white, and she,

a half-bred little girl who had been cast

away by her own parents, was a rare specimen indeed.

She said Alice felt her heart thumping furiously in response, her face flushing with shame. She felt like running away to hide because she did

not want a beautiful boy to know she was a throwaway, a piece of rubbish no one wanted, not even her own mother or father.

Perhaps Tara was right. Perhaps she was tainted. Perhaps she was, and that was why no one wanted her.

He asked. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his fine nose and asked. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his fine nose and

A Secret Kiss 5 made a frown very much like his father when he was

Tristan stepped toward her and pulled Alice whined.

He pretty girl shivered and pulled

Tara laughed nightmares count.

Mama said she cries at night and it sounds like a ghost. So we . Otherwise,

Alaina shivered and hugged Go

away, Witch of the West in the Wizard of Oz

. Sebastian frowned at his sister. witch,

s u ina remarked.

those dwar ve

Alice blushed, feeling a bit overwhelmed at being the center of attention. She could feel herself shaking from nervousness and

reached out and stroked her
Alice gasped
at the intimate contact and turned to look at him,
her eyes shining. No one had ever stroked
her hair before, and for
him to do so caused
her heart to flutter with joy.
Little Darcy grinned at her, his eyes sparkling as he moved his
fingers to caress her face, marveling
at the soft, pale skin.
Alice shyly returned his smile, liking his warmth and his
gentle, feathery touch
es. Her wee heart glowed, and she felt
warm

6 Alexia Praks
all over. She wondered if this was what it felt like to have a real
family, to have someone love you and care for
you.
Tara
laughed
hoar
the collar of his
shirt and pulled
him back, away from Alice.
Darcy glared
snapped, frowning darkly at
Darcy.
Darcy scowl
ed.
d
d
Darcy replied firmly, taking
Alice by the hand.
Tara looked as though she was about to scream her head off but
held herself in check before she embarrassed herself in front of the
Princeton siblings.
. Alice wa
s so
conscio
c
lasp around
hers that she did
Nicolas. When he patiently asked her
again, she glanced up, licked her lips nervously, and said
. -ku-
again.
ted in, his head cocked to one
side.
Alice shrugged her small shoulders and lowered her head to
avoid their gazes. She felt rather ashamed that she did
t know
what her name meant,
but she wa
s determined to find out once
she
got
back
to the orphanage.
said to himself.
Alice glanced up, her heart pounding with delight.
Oh God,
she thought
They are giving me a nickname. Does that mean they

my friends?
asked in
annoyance.
A Secret Kiss 7
aina shouted
at her brother.

,
demanded, furrowing her pretty
brows.
name,
and
it means
Tara butted in instantly.
not
again, smiling
muttered
plain and ugly like Mommy said. So
we should give her
a
ina said, nodding her head
furiously.

.
close to Sa-
kuSa-ku-
said, nodding her head.
I.

And so Alice had a nickname that she herself did not have
a vote in, and soon the children returned to their play and forgot all
about her.

Every night after that day, Alice prayed the Princetons would
adopt her into their family. Then one day her dream came
true in

the
most
bizarre way.

The orphanage was on fire and the whole building burned
down, killing Mrs.

Byrd, though all of the children and staff
escaped. After some hard and fast investigation by the police, it
was found that Mrs.

Byrd had been smoking in the kitchen while
the gas was still on,
thus leading to an explosion.

However, a rumor was spread that Alice was actually
responsible for starting the fire by leaving the oven gas turned on.

Though she had done no such thing, she could not rebuke the
claim that Tara and her friends made as witness
es to the whole

8 Alexia Praks
ordeal. Soon Alice found herself hated by everyone who knew
her,
and
she

lost all hope of an adoption.

One week after the incident, James Princeton walked in,
ave done such a
terrible thing,

and since she had
nowhere to go and no one would
take her, he and his wife would adopt her.

Alice was so relieved and happy over
for the first

time in her seven years, she cried
in front of everyone.

tears, told her everything would be all right,
lifted her into his arms, and took
her home to his family.
A Secret Kiss 9
Alice, the Lonely Flower
Alice Princeton stroked the strands
of her long
tress
es away from her face. The glo
ssy lock
s refused to obey her
and fell back in place. She muttered under her breath and tossed
them back, bunching
up the curls
and let
ting
them fall
to one side
of her slender shoulder. Then she turn
ed just so to the right to
get
into a good position, lif
ted
the camera up
to her eyes, and when
she thought the lighting was as good as it was going to get, she
clicked
on the record button
. Click! Click! Click! Click!
Just then a gust of wind blew, loosening her hair and fluttering
it about. She, however, paid no heed to this as she was too
consumed with what she was
doing.
Its perfect!
Just what she needed. Countl
ess cherry blossom
petals were flying all around her like rain.
Click! Click! Click! Click!
It was so beautiful,
wildflowers and cherry blossoms
in the
woods giving out myriads of colors
ect for her painting.
She took a step back in order to take in the whole picture
cherry
blossoms, leaves, trees, and wildflowers in the background. Then
click, click, click, click.
Once she thought she
d taken enough
photos, she lowered the camera and smiled
with satisfaction.

10 Alexia Praks
tapping
her finger on the
imagined
the digits
increasing in her bank
account
and
yes,
that
also meant her plan to go overseas was getting closer to reality too.
She turned to pick up her bag, tossed
it over her shoulder and

back toward the road as she hummed to herself.

Woof! Woof! Woof!

Alice felt something soft grazing against her legs. She glanced down and saw a cute dog with fluffy white fur and large black eyes watching her, begging for her attention. The West Highland white terrier

barked her a happy greeting.

she greeted

Alice knew exactly what it was like to be an orphan. It was a most terrible feeling to have no one to share your love, your fear, your happiness, or your experiences.

It was

a lonely existence, and

no one deserved

that.

as she bent down to pick him up. The dog stuck out his tongue

and licked her cheek. She c

giggled.

The fact was Alice really loved Toby since it was she who had found him half-

buried in the snow in the depths of the woods

three winters ago. The pup was lost and very sick, having been

abandoned by his owner who had left St. Joseph Island and never starvation and hypothermia.

The pup, later named Toby by Alice herself, had known it had been

Alice who saved him and had taken a liking to her

immediately, doting on her and following her wherever she went.

he told him off. The dog looked somewhat

disappointed as he tried

liste

ed him to the ground

ore things

, looking up at the beautiful

A Secret Kiss

11 spring sky; her eyes narrow

ed

the

, and her heart skipped a beat.

Saturday would come all too soon, the day when everyone

would be arriving for the wedding and the holiday. Ther

many people Alice did

What really mattered

and what really worried

her

was the fact

that her adopted brothers

all seven of them

would be comin

g as well since it was

Alice cocked her

head to one side as she thought about the

brothers. There were the very responsible, father-

like figure

Nicolas; the very popular, mischievous triplets Tristan, Logan, and

Sebastian; the disobedient, bad-

boy Hayden; the smart, arrogant

Darcy,

who disliked her most since those unfortunate incidents

thirteen years ago; and lastly nice, sincere Conrad.

Tara, Alaina, and

their big-

city friends. The

couldn't only be too happy to be

. But Alice
too had grown up into a fine woman and strong-
will
ed. So Daddy
James told her many times. Hence, come hell or high water,
Alice wa
th their nastiness this time. After
all, she had her own life and her own plans for the future to worry
about and therefore had
no time for their bull.
As she breathed in th
e fresh spring air and strolled along the
woodland, a thought suddenly struck her. She nibbled her lower
lip, her
eyes gazing off into the far distance to the sea beyond.
Would they still remember her,
though?
She scoffed at the thought immediately. Of course not! If they
remember
ed anything about her at all, it was probably the pranks
they had played on her and the many scoldings they had received
from Daddy James and Mom Brenda because of her. Not that
shed ever been the one who told on them. It had always been
pretty Tara, who was also adopted by the Princetons, and Alaina
who had b
een the masterminds behind everything. Then they
all
gone off to boarding school
the boys to St. Michael
Boarding
School for Boys, one of the most prestigious schools in America,
12 Alexia Praks
and Tara and Alaina to Princess Margaret
Boarding School for
Girls, also one of the most prestigious schools in America.
Not very long after, Alice too had gone off to St. Helensburgh
Boarding School for Girls where she met her friends Mary Collins,
who also turned out to be the boys
side, and Katherine Hodge, a girl from a good family who also
lived on St. Joseph Island. She, Mary, and Katherine had many
lovely times together, helping each other with schoolwork and
enjoying each other
s company,
both in and out of school.
Back then, during the
holidays, Alice would stay with the
Collins
es at their farm in California, enjoying her times there with
other, Richard
. Then every so
often Daddy James and Mom Brenda would come and stay with
them for a couple of days along with Dale and Molly, her adopted
grandparents from Daddy
s side of the family. During those
times, Alice had never felt more warm, happy,
and complete to
have such a wonderful circle of family and friends. Hence she never
really saw the boys
nor Alaina and Tara for that matter
ever
since she left thirteen years ago. By the time she completed her
science degree at UCLA and had returned to St. Joseph Island to
work in the local hospital, they all had left home completely to live
wherever their hearts had taken them. Of course

where they were living now, and to be frankly honest, neither did she care.

she asked Toby, who was

busy sticking his tongue out and sniffing the air with interest.

Alice cocked

her head to one side, wondering.

enty-

ed to

herself, picturing the young Nicolas when she last saw him when he was fifteen year

s

her head to the

other side, watching Toby wagging his tail as he was sniffing

be what? Twenty-

when they were

thirteen flashed

and the twins

Yes,

Hayden would be twenty-

four by now, and the twins, Alaina

and Darcy, would be twenty-

two.

A Secret Kiss

13 The name Darcy caused

her heart to skip a beat,

and that odd,

dull pain was still there, lingering within her being, reminding her of what

had happened that summer thirteen

years ago.

Then there was Conrad, the baby o

murmured to herself, gently touching the overgrown tall grasses,

h

her heart pounding

twenty-

four in a couple of wee

But

then again,

she thought, April the 8th

It was the date she was found on the doorstep of the orphanage,

and she

d already been more than a couple of days

old.

Looking back, she thought how Tara had fit right in with th

e family as if she were born into

it. Alice, on the other hand,

ke her at all. It had hurt

because she badly wanted them to accept her. She wanted them to

love and care for her as their sister

. That, however, was not to be.

I

, though,

because there were Daddy James,

Mom Brenda, Dale,

and Molly who loved her. There was also Beth

Faber, the housekeeper, who always doted on her in her own

weird

way. And of course

young brother, who treated

her like his own child since he had none and longed for one. Not

to mention her real mother, the woman she

d never met.

Deep down

a very
beautiful Japanese name
that meant cherry blossom and left her
a cherry blossom pendant necklace. She found out not too long ago
that the pendant stone was a rare pink diamond which was of
the finest quality and very expensive. She knew without a doubt
there had to be a reason her mother had abandoned her, and
Alice was
determined to find the woman and then
Then what?
Unconsciously, she touched the pink diamond about her neck.
When the wedding was
out there into the
world
she did
to find her
mother.

14 Alexia Praks
With that thought in mind, she smiled up at the sky and closed
her eyes, savoring
this very moment, cherishing it in her memory,
and praying very hard that she
woman who had
given her life.

A Secret Kiss

15 Sebastian Princeton, Prince of Hearts

Sebastian Princeton

wanted to kill

his

triplet

siblings

Tristan and Logan

for making his

life a living hell.

First they

invite

d themselves into his

luxurious apartment in

Manhattan

. Though there were

five large bedrooms

, a fitness room,

a modern kitchen, a cinema

room, and a comfy lounge

, he still

thought it was

a bit crowded, having gotten so used to living alone

for the past five years with only

the occasional visits from

his

parents and grandparents

. The first night,

they brought in their friends and had a blast

partying in the house, emptying his beloved cellar and fridge and

destroying some of his precious paintings and photographs he

had

bought from an unknown, talented

artist he greatly admired. The

second night,

they refused

to let him stay home to finish his

work

and then

Their argument was,
Saturday
The third night,
they told
him to get packing because they were leaving for St. Joseph Island
three days early for their
prise the
bride-
to-be and their mom and d
ad, of course.
16 Alexia Praks
Sebastian knew instantly it was that damn
only wanted to annoy the hell out of him, and naturally Logan
went
along.
Then Hayden arrived on his motorbike
king-
size bed without an invitation, informing them
he was now
homeless and girlfriendless. His super-
hot girlfriend had kicked
him out after she
d seen him hugging another gorgeous guy and
had wrongly assumed him to be gay an
d cheating on her. The guy,
of course, turned out to be Darcy.
Tristan burst out laughing until his stomach hurt when Hayden
explained that he
d been
shoulder
not hugging him
who
d had a really bad breakdown
because his girlfriend dumped him for another guy. Then Darcy
arrived
all wounded and heartbroken like a little pup
as Tristan kept telling everyone, including Darcy himself,
who in fact
didn
-girlfriend of h
is dumped him
or not and w
as indeed very glad the stagnated relationship was over.
Tristan insisted they had no choice but to comfort Darcy by
taking him out drinking until early dawn, which in due course led
to a house full of men with hangovers the next morning
accompanied by lots of moaning, groaning, and of course very
colorful cursing from Darcy,
who naturally wanted to also murder
Tristan for his distasteful tricks. They all knew
handle much alcohol, and they forced him to have shots after shots
after shots.
By that evening,
they were completely sober except for Darcy,
who was still nursing his headache. Sebastian, on the other hand,
had had enough and swore if this ever happen
ed
murder his brothers for sure.
The next day,
Sebastian was on a warpath once again. It was
entirely their fault that he was now as wet and cold as a drowned
kitten and his laptop stuffed up. If Tristan and Logan
been
feeling around near the railing on the lower deck of their two

spanking-new luxury yacht, trying to kill each other to get a peek at his new apartment plan, then he and board into the ocean.

A Secret Kiss

17 Furthermore, if he was cellent swimmer, since he d been one of the best professional athlete swimmers during his late teens, he could have buried himself and his laptop deep under the ocean.

yden can

coolly, throwing him a dry towel.

Sebastian glared

at his brother as the towel land

ed on his head,

partially covering his handsome face and azure-blue eyes that were

glinting with

fire.

matter-

of-

ly

stuffed, b

, looking heavenward as

he pull

ed down the

growled.

, the youngest of the

brothers,

put in calmly from the other side of the pool.

.

ted in, putting down

ped. He was at his limit and was ready

to throw at least one of them into the ocean, and that person was preferably Tristan who was smiling cheekily on the other side of the pool a good distance away.

Tristan knew he was in trouble, and it was best for him to keep

out of reach since Sebastian had very powerful fists. After all,

Tristan had seen too many times to count when perfectly good-

looking faces got restructured into very distorted ones with a few hty punch

es. Of course,

Tristan did

gorgeous face to be ruin

ed, and what would he do without his

handsome face and flirty smile? The

was

for sure, and Tristan would be very devastated indeed.

gir

Logan said matter-

of-factly, emphasizing the word girlfriends as

plural.

d. Though he had to

admit it was

losing the photos

that really pissed him off since he

had

up some of the most recent ones on his hard drive.

18 Alexia Praks

ou had a girlfriend, Sebastian,

said,

sitting across from him, her long, slender body posing elegantly on

piece bikini that barely covered her hot body, and she knew the brothers liked looking at her.

Oh hell!

Who did

want a b

ody like

hers? Even women envied her for her figure.

She tossed her long hair, dyed platinum blond ever since it turned brown years ago, over her shoulder and leaned toward

Sebastian

the brother she

d

always wanted. Only,

so far, she

d

never been able to grab his attention let alone his interest in her as a woman. In fact, all the brothers had always treated her like a sister, like they treated Alaina, which annoyed the hell out of her.

Alaina butted in, pulling her slender body out of the water. She grabbed a towel resting on the side of the pool, wrapped it around her, and sat down beside Tara.

My poor

. When will you all get a nice girl and settle down? Aside from you,

Conrad snort

ed at his sister to show her his annoyance and return

ed his attention to his tablet, playing the new, not-yet-

released zombie game Hayden and Darcy had given him as a trial from their video game company,

HD Game,

Inc.

, which they had

built themselves from scratch a year ago.

.

tied down

yet.

a sip of his

cocktail and then relaxed back on the poolside divan, gazing up at the

-eight is still too young to settle down

murmured to himself.

Darcy asked.

Nicolas raised his brows.

ver Pri

queried

Nicolas sighed. Of course, all the brothers knew their dad had been asking him to take over the business, b he was ready to take on such a big job as CEO of their family empire, the Princeton Group aside from the fact that he had

A Secret Kiss

19 three of his

own businesses to take care of, even though they were mostly online and his employees were outsourced.

a look at i

, none of you are bringing any

girls home to meet M

to Hayden.

napped.

. This of course

welcomed a death

ked.
Darcy frowned at Tara, telling her to piss off and mind her own business.
Tara thought
ad grown even more in
these past few years. This frustrated and pissed her off because she
feelings multiplied since she had a big crush on him. Well, she
d? Especially with him
looking like that
with long, raven-
black hair that he always wore
tied back into a ponytail. Then there were those mauve-
gray eyes
of his, the type of color she
d never seen before on any person. Not
to mention his tall, lean body
toned and well maintained via
years of training and hard work. Any woman would want that
particular body in her bed
Tara included.
supplied.
Darcy grabbed a towel and threw it at Tristan. The force of the
throw caused the towel to smack right on the side of
face.
Instead of cursing, the older brother laughed and said, as he
watched Darcy walking past
up to the high-
Get over it, Darcy boy
.
you again like all of your other ex-
Darcy was over it. He was simply sick of women smothering
him with what they thought was love but was in fact lust,
clinginess, and jealousy. When he
d started dating this
last one,
20 Alexia Praks
Kate Anderson, he h
one of A
he had known,
in the first pl
ac
a choice since
the beginning. Alaina had cunningly gotten him drunk, and the
next thing he knew, he was in bed with Kate. The next day, she
practically moved
in with him.
Now he was only too glad to be rid of her. Well, more
specifically, she had gotten rid of herself,
to control herself from screwing another guy in their apartment,
which he happened to witness by accident. Her reasoning? He
, and it had been five
months. Then of course she had the gall to accuse him of being
just coldly stared at her and then
walked out again. The next day,
he had texted her and told her it
was over,
and if she wanted to stay in the luxurious apartment, she
could since he
d already paid the rent until the end of the year.
Now he felt as though a heavy burden had lifted off his chest.
Standing there on the diving platform and gazing off into the
endless blue horizon, he breathed
in the salty ocean air. He clos
ed his eyes, his handsome face serene, and then he jumped and

tiful somersault as his body soared down into the pool below.

Tara and Alaina applauded after Darcy slipped into the water with barely a splash.

Logan said

Most shook their heads, and Tara turned her attention to Sebastian, now rubbing his wet, blond mane with the towel. She admired his masculine body. She had to admit he had one of the best bodies she

d ever seen, with firm muscles and toned six-pack

abs. What girl did

oh ever

so slowly

down those abs of his? And those azure-

blue eyes, the color

of the

summer sky, so

vibrant they took

She was sure if she dated him every woman would envy her. Of

course,

she was sure guys secretly envied him as well. Not to

mention, he was very smart and rich and at only twenty-

six years

of age had accomplished so much. With his real estate business and

A Secret Kiss

21 investments going international,

now he was planning to get

another business up and running.

Deep down she was very glad all the brothers were still single

because it made her feel special, like all those times when they

d been children when she was the center of their worlds. Now sh

e wanted that again. She want

ed all seven of them around her. But

most of all,

she want

ed Sebastian Princeton. She want

ed him to

love her as a woman. She want

ed him in her bed, making love to

her and calling her sweetheart. But then again, she also wanted

Darcy

despite he was

a

have any interest in her whatsoever, which of course made the

chasing even more exciti

ng. Oh God! The choices.

They were so

hard to make, and she felt

just like a kid in the candy shop.

Tara grinned and lay back, feeling the warm sun on her skin.

She had

this whole spring

to work on it. Sooner or later Sebastian

Princeton

or Darcy Princeton,

for that matter

would be hers.

Darcy said from the

high-

shotown on St. Joseph Island that suddenly appeared in the

It was a picturesque island with Mount St. Joseph standing grandly in the middle, the lush, green woods surrounding it and the historic, Victorian town securely nestled against its bosom to the west side.

This was their hometown, had since 1750 when the first generation had arrived from England and

made this island theirs.

Darcy felt his heart do a somersault, and an odd pain spread

out across his chest. It wasn't

physical pain, but a type of emotional

pain he was sure he

had before that was now buried deep within

his heart, forgotten. Now it was there again,

and he didn't

have a

clue why. He fisted his hands, feeling frustration building up

within him as he watched the island getting bigger and bigger as

the yacht sailed closer and closer.

Sebastian strode to the side of the deck and gazed out at the

island in the distance. Suddenly, he felt an odd thump in his chest,

22 Alexia Praks

as if there were something on the island that made him pause, and

he wondered

why.

Not long after,

the luxury

yacht, the

Lady Elizabeth

, came

into the harbor of St. Joseph Island, and soon they were

ready to drive

home to Princeton Mansion, which was located on the other side

of the island, about

twenty-

five minutes

drive from town.

The brothers decided to split up into the two out of the three

Mercedes-

Benz

and brought along in the yacht. Tara and Alaina,

on the other hand, decided

shopping before driving home.

Once they were out of the busy, tourist-

infested town, they

pretty much had the road to themselves, and Tristan being Tristan

went over the speed limit and,

just to annoy Sebastian, dangerously

overtook his brother.

bloo

.
again

,
ed matter-

of-factly, his attention on his tablet.

en we get home.

onrad informed them before

closing his eyes and making himself comfortable on the back seat,

resting his

.
Darcy grunted and showed

side, and closed
his eyes again.
Sebastian frowned when both Tristan and Logan waved at him,
urging him to
try to overtake them if he could.
, shaking his head.
Sebas
the urge to give them the
finger but managed to control himself. Then just when he thought
ny more annoying, Tristan honked at him five
times, waking up Conrad,
who also got
very annoyed.
k
, glaring at
the car in front of them.
, typing away
on his tablet.
ed under his breath,
knowing very well how Sebastian would respond to the challenge.

A Secret Kiss

23 On cue, Sebastian felt adrenaline rushing in his blood. He
stomped his foot on the accelerator. He quickly changed lanes and
overtook the black car in front of them with ease. When he saw
the shocked look on Tris
n smiled with
satisfaction and sped up even more. He laughed, knowing very
well he had
left his brothers in his dust once again.
ob, Seb.
d.

grown
under his breath.
Darcy said, noting they were going
way too fast.
A split second later,
it happened. The car turned
a corner onto
a narrow road,
which was covered by thick woods on both sid
es. Before he knew
it, Sebastian quickly stepped on the brake, his
heart pounding with dread as the car headed straight toward the
person who suddenly materialized as if out of the blue onto the
middle of the road.

shit
ed. 24 Alexia Praks
Darcy Princeton, Prince of Darkness
Alice knew she
had a
fifty
-fifty chance
of living or dying
once she
saw
the car heading
straight at her. Before she had
time
to react
, she felt
herself smashing against hard metal and
flying
back, landing on the road. She ha
the remnants of the car on her

live
, when Toby ran to her and started
barking
at her and licking her hand with concern.
Alice stared up at the sky through her hair covering her face,
wondering if she was dead already. Her head was spinning out of
control. She closed
her eyes, trying to get her bearings
back.

The brothers rush
ed out of the car, their stomachs flipping in
dread.
Holy shit!
Sebastian wondered if he had just killed someone. He
knew, however, that he
d stopped the car just in time. If he hit her
at all, it was probably only slightly,
which would have caused her
to fall back
like so.
When he saw the slender body lying there motionless, his
stomach flipped again. He rushed toward her.
ed
m calling the ambulance.
las dug into his backpack,
searching for his cell phone.

A Secret Kiss

25
ed, his voice hoarse, his
heart pounding hard.
Darcy
growl
ed
, for
Just then the black car drew up behind th
ed back.
mutter
ed as they all got out of the car.
Alice stroked her hair back from her face and managed to sit
up. Toby jumped into her lap and ask
ed her with his eyes if she
was all right.
, patting his head in reassurance. The
dog whimper
ed at her and lick
ed her hand.
Sebastian sigh
ed in relief when he heard she spoke, not to him
but to the dog.
ed again, thinking she ha
him the first time. When she did
ped his hand
around her soft, slender arm to get her attention.
Alice felt tingles of sensations rushing through her being, and
she shivered at the alienated feelings. She held her breath as he
continued
to ask her questions she did
What the hell do you think?
She wanted to shout at him.
You
nearly killed me with your reckless driving.
he replied none
too gently.
Darcy who was on the other side of

thumping of his heart the moment he heard her voice.
Calm down,
you old beast
, he told his heart. Why was his heart beating so hard
and fast? Why was
Curious, he glanced i
her would put him at ease, hoping it would explain the reason his
heart was behaving so abnormally all of a sudden.
He only glimpsed her long hair and the side of her slender form
as the majority of her person wa
s
frame.

26 Alexia Praks
gs moved without his
command. He found
himself by her side in an instant, oppos
ite
Sebastian. He said
The voice! Oh gosh! The voice!
Alice
had the feeling she
d heard
that voice before. Only now it was deeper and manlier and caused
her stomach to flip and her heart to race.
She lifted her head and came face-
to-face with a handsome
young man with raven-
black hair and mauve-
gray eyes. Alice
held her breath as she stared at Darcy, drowning herself in the
depth of the unique color that once had looked at her with
affection.
Darcy felt his body
go rigid, his heart skipped a couple of beats,
and he just stopped breathing altogether for a couple
of seconds
the moment he saw the dark-
haired, dark-
eyed beauty that was
their victim. To say she was
beautiful was
an understatement. She
literally took his breath away, and indeed,
he found it hard to find
his breath again.
Suddenly he felt the world swimming around him
as he continued to gaze at her. Something deep within him stirred
, inching its way from within the locked chains that kept it
imprisoned, preventing it from ever escaping.
Then it happened. A soft, gentle voice echo
ed in his head
. Darce
! My dear
Darce
! That voice! Whose voice is that?
Why did it call to
me? Why was it
referring to me as
My dear Darce?
Darcy didn
t have any answers to these burning questions
swirling within his head as he began
to feel himself tense.
Under his intense gaze, Alice felt the heat rising at the like

away
only to meet Sebastian
s eyes. Instantly, she was
lost in the
azure color.
Sebastian too was holding his breath as he stared at her,
and his
hea
rt seemed to have stopped beating all of a sudden.
Holy shit!
was his first thought as he gazed at the woman he
almost killed.
She is a beautiful creature, all right
. W
ith the blackest
hair, the palest skin, and the darkest eyes that seem
ed to draw him
A Secret Kiss
27 into the
ir mysterious depths. She was so damn beautiful it knock
ed the wind out of him, and he found
want to stop staring.
Sebastian finally managed to get his wits back and uttered
Alice drew her arm away from Sebastian
s grasp and look
ed away, feeling his intense stare was beginning to unnerve her. She
was hoping
leave her alone when the man gave
her a fright by touching her again. He was in f
act closer to her now.
She could feel his warm breath against her skin and the heat of his
large, masculine body against her small, soft one. In response, her
body began
to shiver.
She pushed him away, causing him to fall on his backside in
surprise. Trist
an laugh
ed from the distance, and Sebastian gritted
his teeth, knowing his brother was
enjoying his embarrassment.
he said
to her.
Darcy queried, his eyes still on her.
No broken
Alice turn
ed her attention to Darcy and instantly felt her
heart do another somersault. Any moment now, she thought, he
d recognized her. Any moment now, he
d remember who she was.
The thought didn
t sit well with her.
ed his
eldest brother, who was apparently still searching for his cell phone.
ed under his breath.
said
would have
Nicolas frown
ed
loudly.
ed, moving his face even closer to
her
now.
Shit!
He could smell her

something else.
Something sweet.
It tickled something nice and
warm within his being. He loved
it.
firmly.
28 Alexia Praks
Sebastian comment
ed, and without her consent, he scoop
ed her
into his strong arms.
Alice was
shocked.
In fact, she was outraged.
Oh my gosh
! He
touched her! Without her consent!
she snapped
Sebastian was so taken aback by her burst of outrage that he
did
do. The other brothers, who had gathered
behind Sebastian, looked at one another. This was new,
all right.
Any other girl would have been over the moon if Sebastian were
to pick her up like that. But not this one. This one demand
ed he
put her down
immediately!
What was even more odd was the fact
that Sebastian had willingly scooped her into his arm, which of
course made the brothers suspicious
especially Tristan. T
hey
moved
around to get a better look at their victim.
Sebastian let go of her and stood up. He did
do s
ince she had
rejected his offer to help. He did
her without her permission, nor did he want to walk away and
leave her sitting there. Then he sensed his brothers gathering
around him, and when their victim finally raised her face to them,
he heard Tristan suck
in his breath and say
smokes
Like moths attracted to a flame, the rest of the brothers saw the
most enticing image
theyd ever seen. This was, of course, instantly
followed by sharp inhalations. Sebastian wanted to hide the poor
girl
who he thought
was
too pretty for her own good
from his
brothers
not only two of the
Princeton brothers but all seven of them to deal with. Sebastian
was still staring at her as if God himself had just descended from
heaven. Nicolas looked so shocked to see a woman and a dog in
Hayden, and Conrad just gawked at her as though they were
watching a really interesting movie.
And Darcy?
Her heart jolt
ed with his heart as she met his gaze again. These eyes

A Secret Kiss

29 intense

were on her. She felt her body quivering and quickly glanced away.

Fully conscious of her predicament, she hugged Toby even tighter against her chest, unaware that in doing so she was

experiencing her beauty

with her sitting in

such a position that the hem of her dress rested

high on her thighs,

showing off her slender legs. Not to mention the thin straps of her dress that had fallen down her arms, the material barely covering her breasts and hinting at just how beautiful they could be if she were naked.

Sebastian had had enough. He

, with

his brothers enjoying the poor girl in such a dire situation. He bent down to help her, his hand touching her arm once again. She gasped and pushed him away.

The brothers watched

in shocked surprise because no female

had ever pushed Sebastian away. Girls flocked to him

as they did

to all his brothers. It was the Princeton charm, not to mention the

mere fact that they were very

good-looking. Women found them

hot and would do anything to date them;

even just getting close to

them was a dream come true. But it was odd indeed that this young woman

yes, this very pretty young woman

was pushing

Sebastian away. Did she not find him attractive? Or any of them

for that matter?

Toby chose

at that moment to bark a friendly greeting to the

intruders, sensing the seven men were only trying to help his poor

master. Then, without ever consulting with Alice whatsoever, he

jumped

out of her arms and into Sebastian

.
Sebastian chuckled

Then he glanced up, eyeing Alice,

who looked

rather upset about

Alice noted that his eyes were

glinting at her, which caused

her heart to beat faster. She quickly looked

away and began to

gather her stuff that had

fallen out of her bag.

As she was doing this, they simply stood there and watched her.

It wasn't

the fact that they were heartless and didn't

30 Alexia Praks

but it was because what they saw was

preventing their male brains

from performing their

functions

properly.

Alice was bending over on her knees as she was gathering her

cameras, notebooks, sketchbooks, and coloring pencils. They could

which they thoroughly
enjoy
ed. Then, once
she was done,
Alice
tossed back her
tresses
, seemingly in slow motion. It was like she was one of those very
beautiful models in the hair commercials
Tara longed to do.
The men c
more seconds after that.
Slowly, Alice managed to get up and stood straight, her body
sore all over.
eve it. None of these men helped her
stand.
Not when they had been
younger, after they played tricks on her,
and not even now. The thought brought forw
ard a rush of anger,
and she saw
red.
She stared at them, one by one, no longer afraid of them as
shed been when she was
young.
First, there was Sebastian with the typical Princeton looks that
dated back for generations and had caused many hearts to flutter
recklessly and perhaps even swoon with longing. He was also way
too tall, broad
at the shoulders, and handsome for her liking. No
t to mention the fact that he was wearing one of those studs in his
left ear,
the stone the same color as his eyes. It made him look
like
a rogue and way
Then there was Nicolas,
so much like his father, James, who
looked as though he could take on the world and would still come
out on top with his leader-
like demeanor.
Next was Tristan with his ridiculously handsome smile,
the
Prince of F
lirt in the family. Alice wondered how many females
he had
bedded already and how many hearts
he had
broken along
the way.
The same went for Logan with hi
s very charming smile and
devil-
may-
care manner.
if he had
bedded at least a dozen women within the past
few months.

A Secret Kiss
31 Hayden, the h
andsome Prince of Rebel,
with features inherited
from their
e family, had that rogue look about
him that any good girl found extremely hard to resist. This was

He looked like a bloody pirate
a very handsome one
and
Alice was
her mind being captured by him
and imprisoned in his bed.
Then there was the handsome, mysterious Darcy. Again, her
heart decided to do an unwelcome somersault,
which caused her
to grit her teeth in annoyance

.
Darce! My Darce!
The sound kept echoing within her head.
Alice suppressed the urge to scream out just so the little voice
would stop bothering her.
Yes, the Prince of Darkness was staring at her now without
recognition, as if he found
help staring back at him. God, his hair was long and very black,
even blacker than she remembered. And those unique eyes of his
that had always fascinated her, those eyes
he inherited from his
legendary great-
great-
grandmother, St. Helena Princeton, who
had married the famous Luke Princeton. Darcy had that aloofness and
darkness about him that any intelligent girl knew to avoid but
anyway.
Then there was nice, sincere Conrad. He had a cute, boyish,
friendly smile any female
Then it hit her.
Oh Gosh!
Darcy had changed so much
grown so
much that the mere sight of all of them together took her breath
away. Not to mention her neck was beginning to hurt because she
had to tilt her head back
to glare at them, conveying she was pissed
with them. But none of them seem
ed to register that
the fact, however,
and Alice began to grow more annoyed. Then there was the way
in which they looked
ed at her,
which caused her to shiver. There was
this bizarre sensation rushing through her.

.
The dog barked
ed back at her.
32 Alexia Praks
has asked.
Toby barked
ed again, which annoyed
ed Alice even more. When
they got home, she thought
that
succumbing to the enemy was not something one should ever do
to one's
allies.
, frowning at the dog for being disobedient
Toby ignored her as Sebastian started
ed scratching his head.
eyes glazed
over as he stared

d.
Tristan came forward and offered
sure
you can get home
Alice turned to him. The thought of sitting next to them in a
car didn't
, reaching out for Toby. She
took the dog from Sebastian, turned on her heel, and began to
walk away from them.
, disappointment echoing in his
voice.
Darcy watched her go, his eyes intent on her slender form.
There was
quite a place, and
why his heart was still thumping so hard and so furiously within
his chest was
beyond him.
Sebastian narrowed
his eyes
suppose since I
was responsible
,
she pulled her around gently by the arm.
Alice gasped, and before she could protest, she was being
lifted up midair
and into
the arms of her adopted brother.
He
smiled calmly, heading back to the car.
I can walk home
I
Sebastian refused to respond to her logic
or argument and
headed
straight to the
car.

A Secret Kiss
33
He didn't look at anyone in particular.
He
-of-fact
Just
shut up a
moment to Tristan.
Alice watched the brothers,
who were still staring at her. She
just
None of them
remembered
who she was.
Not one of them
. And here she was this
close to the
disappointed or
pleased with that realization.
Actually, she had decided. She decided to run away as soon as
Sebastian put her down.
When he did put her in the back seat, however, Conrad quickly
slid in beside her, followed by Logan. Hence both of her exits were
blocked, and she wanted
to scream.
Nicholas got into the front seat followed

Outside, Tristan chuckled merrily and slapped Darcy on the back. Darcy narrowed his eyes dangerously at Logan, who had stolen his seat in the car. Logan, however, didn't even flinch. His younger brother gave him a look because he was too busy trying to please their new acquaintance.

Conrad harmfully once Sebastian started the car. Alice panicked. Oh God! What should she tell them? She couldn't possibly tell them she was living at Princeton Mansion where they were heading, could she? Well, she could, but she refused to let them know she was Alice, their adopted sister that they had entirely forgotten ever existed. Suddenly, she realized all four of them were watching her, waiting for her answer. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

34 Alexia Praks
she began
on the narrow road. Then
when you get to the intersection, turn right and then left and then
Conrad cocked his head
Princeton with double meaning and started the engine.
asked, moving closer to her.
Alice glared
Logan laughed and Conrad said
your neighbors
Alice wanted to shout at him that she knew that. But of course she didn't
, and she refused to pay them any more attention.
Toby looked up at her, sensing her unsettled emotions. He started whimpering at her and licking her hand.
,
ed
she retorted
ed
I feel when all seven of you refuse to leave me alone and are now
The moment she had said those words, realization dawned on them.
ed under his breath.
Nicolas, always the calm and levelheaded one, turned to her and said
on brother, I take full responsibility
you. However, I guarantee you none of us meant you any harm.
Both Logan and Conrad nodded
furiously.
Alice went quiet once she saw the sincerity

He reminded her so much of Daddy James,
and she
but relax. The brothers smiled when they saw she had accepted
s apology and promise. Toby stuck out his tongue then,
pleased.

A f
ew minutes later, the car turned at the intersection as Alice
had told them, but it also surprised them when the black car

A Secret Kiss

35 behind them turned as well,
instead of going straight to Princeton
Mansion.

under his breath.

Logan
laughed
Nicolas sigh
ed

Alice did
a clue as to what they were talking about
and pretty much did
d about now was whether

Ned wa
s home or not. If he was, then she hoped
out her name or, worse still, greet the brothers and tell them all
about her.

are there more cherry

Conrad comment
ed.

Alice gazed out the window, watching the beautiful clouds of
pink flowers in the air.

.
blossoms are
ed

Alice wanted to laugh.

Really? Not one cherry tree up at
Princeton Mansion?

, eyeing the small cottage
ahead of them.

It was a picture-
perfect cottage with a pretty English garden full
of roses, lavender, and honeysuckle.
ed in awe.

nt
None of them paid
any attention to the meaning of her
word

s,
however, and they all got out of the car. Conrad took care to aid
her even if she did

Tristan and Hayden got out of the car as well since they did
want to miss the chance to talk to Alice again.

Darcy stayed back, pretending to be busy with his tablet, which
, and stole peeks at the beauty who had caused his heart
to beat too fast for his
liking.

Who is
she?

Why did she look
at me so

36 Alexia Praks
intensely back on the road?

Her chocolate-
brown eyes stirred

something deep within his soul, awakening him from his slumber

this frustrated Darcy greatly.
Outside, Sebastian frowned at Tristan.
you
ight get into an accident again,
ed.
as though
ossible at
to Alice then, giving her a dashing smile that
Alice cock
ed her
. Then before
even opting to stay for afternoon tea,
because she knew they
d want
to, she went
on.
Sebastian was about to stop her, but she was quick and walked
briskly away.
Alice hoped
got to the door
becaus
home or not and
whether the door was locked or not.
Logan
whistled
, smiling pleasantly.
Conrad! You like h
.
if she h
ed
, boys,
, opening the door.
The brothers took their leave without ever seeing Alice ente
r the house. In fact, she had disappeared around the corner while
they
d been
busy negotiating who got
to ask her out on a date.
A Secret Kiss
37 Coffee & Cherry Blossoms
Sebastian
was forced to eat
his
own
words when they
stare
d wide
-eye
d in disbelief at the sight befo
re them. The
Princeton Estate was
in full
bloom
with
cherry blossom
s. Clouds
of pink f
lower
s stretch
ed endlessly beyond them, and
the road
leading to the house was
carpeted with pink petals.
came in full

, smiling.

,
Nicolas remarked.

ing. Then a gust of wind swirled past
, releasing a myriad of flowers from the trees, petals raining down
on the car, some landing on the windscreen. He was too stunned
to turn on the wiper and continued
driving
until they reach
ed the
front courtyard of the two-
hundred-
year-
old stately mansion,
which most foreigners liked to call the Grand Castle of St. Joseph
Island, mad
e of massive gray stone that had stood up against many
winters.

The estate was immaculately
maintained with lush,
green lawn
and neat, pretty flower
beds their father loved. The grand water
feature of cupids and fairies, their fat
, stood

38 Alexia Praks
proudly in the middle of the courtyard for them to admire, though
the brothers didn
it as they drove
past.
d the moment he was out of the car.

-
, remembering the hangover he
had
yesterday.
Just then the housekeeper,
Beth Faber, a plump woman with a
stern look on her face, came out and scream
ed

The brothers turn
ed to look at her, surprised
by her voice.
greeted
really have to get all your room
Tristan chuckled
ven of you, mind you,
The brothers start
ed filing into the house,
causing the two
maids, who were busy carrying trays of savories into the drawing
room, to come to a standstill. They were shocked and at the same
time pleased to see them. Th
the
handsome seven brothers were back. It was going to be an
interesting and entertaining spring,
all right.

Hayden nodded at them, Logan winked, and Tristan blew
them a kiss. Nicolas just shook
his head
nature and follow
ed them into the drawing room, followed by
Conrad,
who gave the maids a friendly wave and smile

the world
look
nearly sent the girls to Nirvana. He glanced at
them
s to flutter with joy and their
knees to turn into jelly.
massive freckles
on her face,
said dreamily, her voice quivering with delight. The
other maid, Helen, nodded in agreement, her eyes large with love
as they followed Darcy
strolling
into the drawing room.

Sebastian was the last to enter through the immense double
door. When the girls saw him, they nearly dropped their trays

A Secret Kiss

39 because he was
so gorgeous, just like an archangel with blond hair
and blue eyes.
Sebastian didn't
pay
them. He headed straight into the drawing room to see his mother,
Brenda Princeton, hugging and kissing her sons.
, tears in her eyes.

,
llins, the bride-
to-be, said
have been that
She turn
ed

That was fast. Sebastian eyed T
ristan,
who winked at him.
mildly.

d loudly from the other side of the room.
to answer for if you did hurt her
Tristan said.

your br
, coming over
ow give me a kiss,
she demand
ed, tiptoeing so
her cheek could reach his massive height.
Princeton said at the door. At nearly sixty years of age, he
still

looked
amazingly handsome,
with
a tall, lean body and charming,
aris
ocratic demeanor. His eyes were still as sharp as ever and his
wit even sharper.

He sat on the sofa near the window and grinned. Nicolas came
to sit next to him. Side by side, they look
ed almost identical,
except

Nicolas was a younger version,
and James had more lines on his
face and a head full of gray
hair instead of blond.

Finally, trays of savories arrived. The two maids nervously put
them down on the coffee table. A moment later, Beth came in with
coffee.

James looked none too pleased at the coffee. Brenda chuckled

40 Alexia Praks
Mr. Princeton,
this afternoon
about the coffee. I
half-
bad.
for dinner tonight,
Brenda announced
to her sons.
I better inform Alice to pr
Beth muttered to herself before she left the room. No one was
paying any attention to her mentioning the name
Alice
as they
continued to enjoy their afternoon tea.
Mary put down her cup of tea and turned to look at her cousin.
They were almost a mirror image of one another,
with brown hair
and cobalt-
blue eyes. Except their facial features were different.
While Hayden was very handsome with
a tall, straight nose, deep-
set eyes, firm lips, and
face was rather
soft and round. One could say Mary was pretty,
but not at all
memorable, even with the blue eyes and dark hair.
a flirt.
her older brother.

.
, smiling.
Dad,
an
arents will be here next Wednesday,
Mary said
the weather is going to be nice on my wedding
Logan waved her worry aside with a flick of his hand
fine. By the way, why spring? Why

.
from where he stood near the
window, his eyes fixed on the countless cherry tre
es
get married
A Secret Kiss
41

.
girls want to get married in summer when the
e turned
to look at her cousins
I have to blame it on my dear
off when we were in high school. Always going on about how
beautiful it is here in spring. Then when I saw it a couple of years
ago, I knew I just had
at that moment he
had his back to everyone, they didn
t see
his face soften with
understanding, nor did they see the slight smile on his lips and the
peaceful look in his eyes as he gazed at the clouds of cherry trees
outside.
Yes, he loved them, for they brought forward a sense of
joy that he desperately needed. The beautiful sight and exotic scent
reminded him of something lovely, something wonderful,
something warm yet something painful as well. For the life of him

or how. Though
he knew it was right here on St. Joseph Island.
The moment he said that, his brothers turned their undivided
attention
to their mother.
Brenda cocked her head to one side at the sudden interest from
.
after
taking a sip of his bland coffee.
C
coffee. So did his brothers when the
y realized their parents were
looking at them oddly.
42 Alexia Praks
Hide & Seek
Alice decided it was all
that
she had
to take the long way home. If it
for
them,
she would have
been home by now.
Tired, thirsty, and her body aching something sorely, she still
had to walk through this tiny pathway via the woods to get home.
mind, but this time she really did mind. After
all, she
d been hit by a car. And yes, that was entirely their fault
too.
She grumbled to herself and cursed them again. Oh yes, she was
sure
very comfortable indeed right now, sitting in the
lounge and drinking that horrible coffee Beth would have prepared
for them. Not to mention her very own mini-
sandwiches, scones,
muffins, and slices she had made this morning.
prepared.
Once she reached Princeton Mansion, she sneaked into the
kitchen
bump into any of the
brothers
when she was greeted with a,
Mr. Princeton was looking all ove
A Secret Kiss
43
Why do
you
two maids became useless the
to herself.
Alice knew very well what she meant. Any female, aside from
her, would become useless the moment she set her eyes on the
brothers.
Alice said, giving the housekeeper a sunny smile. Toby rushed
past her feet and raced to his water bowl on the other side of the
kitchen. He thirstily licked the water to his heart
s content.
Alice, too, was dead
ly thirsty. She opened the fridge door and
poured herself a good cup of apple juice. Once she
d finished, she
Beth opened the oven door and pulled out the tray of chocolate
biscuits that had just been baked.
popped the hot piece into her mouth and sighed with pleasure.
Alice chuckled

th a
no-nonsense
tone.
back on the road flashed before her eyes.
. Princeton wants you to meet them. Not that you
see them now. Hand
right along in a wee bit, Beth. I just need to clean
44 Alexia Praks
She took a step forward for Beth to see her, since after all she was
in quite a mess,
with sweat and dirt from walking through the
woods and all.
What will
they say when they see you in such a state
? All right then, but
be too long
tray in her
Oh, by
Alice sighed.
Of course.
Once the housekeeper was gone, Alice made quick work of
her escape. She took out the extra pounds of pork, marinated it
with her special marinade and then scribbled on a piece of yellow
Post-
it note the cooking instructions for Beth. Then she grabbed
a large tray and tossed on some chocolate biscuits, mini-
sandwiches, muffins, and an apple and a bunch of red grapes. After
that, she grabbed a bottle of apple juice and a glass and then rushed
off to the back stairs where she was sure no one would see her.
Toby followed closely behind.
She hid in her room that night, working on her photos and
putting them up for sale on her website. Now and again, she
munched up her snacks to
them all raiding up the stairs onto the second floor.
Holy smokes!
She
bedrooms were on the same floor as hers.
Her hands froze before the keyboard as her heart continued to
pound outrageously fast. She turned to stare at the door, hoping
s by accident. Surely, dear God, they
remembered their own bedrooms and
randomly walk
into hers, which of course was at the very far end of the house.
she
heard Logan
say.
pork.

A Secret Kiss

45 She sensed they were getting closer and closer to her room.
Something
. Her body tensed up. She glanced at Toby,
who was looking at her in confusion, wondering what was wrong
with her.
Woof! She
wanted to die.

ure going senile

H

Alice put a finger to her lips, telling Toby to be quiet. Toby
cocked his head to one side, still confused.
Suddenly, she heard footsteps coming toward her door. Alice
swallowed. And before all hell broke loose, she raced to the door
and quickly locked it. An instant later

if someone were trying to open it.

A few moments later, the hallway was quiet again, and Alice sighed with relief.

About half an hour later, she heard them leaving their rooms one by one to go down for dinner, and it was only then she was able to fully relax.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when Brenda knocked on her door.

Brenda queried from the other side.

Sorry,

I'm feeling sick.

46 Alexia Praks

something up for you. You know you should look after yourself more. You should just relax. You

make as much money as soon as possible if she wanted to travel to Japan and find her birth mother. After all, she had no idea when her travelling would end or how much it would cost.

how much you want to go to Japan, but you still have to look after yourself,

Brenda said as if she were reading her mind.

Alice bit her lip.

I know.

ait until tomorrow to greet them, tonight

e them in town tomorrow,

suggested happily.

gave her a peck on the cheek.

door and went to take a long, hot bath.

Some ten minutes later, lying in the big tub with warm water and bubbles up to her neck, Alice stared up at the ceiling, thinking.

re eating my

she glanced at Toby, who obediently sat there waiting for her to finish. She sat up and reached out to pat him

they choke

A Secret Kiss

47 Princeton Brothers & the Wood Nymph

The brothers loved it. They

absolutely loved the roast

pork

and of cour

se none of them choked.

Tristan,

Logan, and

Hayden

down

the delicious

, soft morsel

and then grabbed for more.

, smiling.

more

Molly, their grandmother,

said.

Hayden nodded his head, his mouth full.

st take Beth with us.

and Dale, the brother
grandfather, laughed.
Beth cleared her throat and said,

,
the one who prepared that roast.

Although,
I sort of did,
since the
person responsible happened to be sick all of a sudden. But that

,
have decent food
to eat. Not that yours
that good, Beth. Your baking is the best
in the world. I especially love your chocolate brownies.

48 Alexia Praks

favorite

, frowning.

James

again, I suppose,

.
James sighed in resignation at the answer. Sebastian and
Nicolas glanced at each other, wondering who this new chef was
and why their father was so against standard coffee.

James, on the other hand, blamed his seven sons for showing
up three days early. If it
for them, he would be having his
delicious coffee after dinner. He knew exactly why his adopted
daughter Alice refused to come down. It was because of his sons.

He knew

d never felt comfortable around them,

and the

brothers had never really acknowledged her as their sister as they
had with Alaina and Tara. At first,

he was afraid his judgment had

been wrong, that he

d adopted a criminal into his house. But after

months of trying with his gentle words and kind smile, little

Alice had come out of her shell one rainy night after she

d scr

eamed in her sleep. Sebastian had alerted him, and he rushed to

her bedroom to find her whimpering in the corner of the closet. It

still broke his heart even now to think about that night.

had asked him, tears in her

eyes.

Gently, he had drawn her into his arms and hugged her tight.

She had looked up at him, her small lips quivering. As if he

d said the golden word itself, she

d tightened her small arms around

him and cried her w

sisters, I mean. I do not want to see them get hurt because of me.

the orphanage

. Byrd. I really

A Secret Kiss

49

Thank you,

she

sobbed.

It had been much later when he found out the meaning of

Alice

words. His own children, Tara included, had been

treating Alice unfairly. The little girl believed that if he and

sign of love toward her, then her new

Of course, James would

separate from such malicious behavior from his children and had

them he
take such nonsense from them and was indeed
very disappointed. They were the Princeton
s, after all,
and should
set good examples
to the public.

James had known his sons were smart, and true to his thinking,
by the end of the month,
hed decided the lesson was very effective
indeed. Perhaps it had been too effective because the boys began
to ignore Alice complete
ly, to the point that she no longer existed
in their lives.

James put down his knife and fo
have to talk with Alice later tonight
well hide away in her room for the next few weeks when everyone
was here preparing f

He turned his attention to his sons, eyeing them from one to
another. They were all enjoying their meal to the max, and of
cour

to who had been responsible for preparing their meal.

After the dinner, they retired to the drawing room where Beth
served them standard coffee and tea. James looked as though he
was about to balk as Beth gave him a cup, and the brothers wanted
to laugh.

half-
sip.

s looking forward to the coffee,
and Molly shook her head.

It was a bit later that the brothers decided they needed a walk
to work off their big meal and headed out to the pond to the north
of the house near the woods. It was amazingly beautiful as the

50 Alexia Praks

brothers took in the scenery. The pond was surrounded by cherry
, magnolia, and other trees native to the island. The moon was high
above on the horizon, reflecting on the glassy water. The air was
warm and breezy, and now and again, native life stirred in the
distance.

said softly,
gazing up at the moon.

He realized then that this was the place he
wanted to be, the place he belonged. Yes, he needed peace and
quiet. He needed solitude.

Nicolas remarked.

autiful scenery. I

back

said

hat was the

shouted out into the

night, stretching his arms out

as i

f he were on top of the world.

,
the night stars above.

for yourself.

h,

said suddenly.

f concern in his voice

shoot them a text or something.

suggested.

said and pulled out his BlackBerry

:
what happened to your girlfriend?

off.
,
egged his brother
on
brother and
brother as well as his
best friend and therefore felt it only right he tell him what had
A Secret Kiss

51
yourself stupid? To celebrate your single life again
asked none too gently.
Tristan managed to look rather sorry for what he
Really sorry about those paintings, b
thing else
to say.
about that girl today,
The brothers knew instantly whom he was talking about. It was
hard to get the image of the young woman out of their minds, for
ian and Darcy since they
d been
the ones
who had the most interaction with her.
-
the sparkling
water.

.
. The brothers went quiet,
and then they heard it. It was a dog
barking, again and again, and getting closer and closer. They
searched all around them, and then out of the blue a little West
Highland white terrier
appeared.
The d
stopped. He dropped
something onto the ground, stood on his hind legs, and stuck his
tongue out at Logan.
Logan crouched down and stroked
what he meant, and instantly they circled around Toby, who
seemed to be enjoying being the center
of attention.
Nicolas picked him up and chuckled.
are you doing here
at

,
52 Alexia Praks
the musical voice they expected to hear came.
grounded, m
They waited expectedly for the owner of the dog to appear, but
She was dressed in a lacy pink nightdress
flimsy and short
showing off her very fine figure of beautifully round breasts, small
waist, slender legs, and small feet. With her tre
sses down and wet
and her feet bare, she looked like some sort of wood nymph that
they happened
upon in the night.

T
the middle of the night and in the woods near the house too. She
was too shocked to say anything. In fact, she was too shocked to
do anything. Then,
when she was aware they were staring at her
and she was in a near-
naked state, she hastily turned on her heel,
intending to run back. But because she was confused, shocked

she stumbled and fell flat on
her face.

The brothers
except for Darcy
act

ed in accordance to their
manly behavior. They rushed to save the damsel in distress. Since
Sebastian was the closest to her, he got there first. He pulled her
into his arms and asked her if she was all right. Alice, however,
was too shocked to reply. Logan helped her legs out of the vines,
finally allowing Sebastian to lift her up.

Alice wanted to die rather
than live through the humiliation
of all seven brothers seeing her in such a state. Sebastian laid her
down and Toby rushed to her, barking loudly.
Sebastian, who looked rather concerned about her well-
being. She
turned to Nicolas.

queried.
Darcy stood rigid, watching the scene before him, his heart

A Secret Kiss
53 fact that his brothers were showing too much concern and interest
in the girl before them. He had the urge to barge in, scoop her up
in his arms, and take her far, far away.

It was a stupid notion, of
course, and Darcy had never been stupid.

Alice felt her heart beating way too fast for her liking
to be

surrounded by the brothers again. She hugged Toby even tighter
against her chest and bit her lip. Oh God! She needed to get out
of here.

Now!

She hastily got up and
ran back the way she cam

e. They watched her go, unable to hide their disappointment.
particular.

rwise,

He left

the sentence unfinished because,
up with an explanation himself.

The brothers decided they
d had enough for the day and started
to wander back to the house. Conrad picked
up the thing Toby
had dropped and found it was a memory stick.
this belongs to her

.
, smiling broadly.

54 Alexia Praks

Elusive Dream

Darce! Darce! Laughter. Darcy could
hear beautiful

laughter singing and echoing all around him, calling out to him.
The

voice was soft and musical, and it sent
a nice, warm sensation
throughout his body. In his state of haziness, h
e could see long,
black
hair dancing i
n the wind, th
e strands brushing gently on
his face.

small
hand
s within his
grasp
, tightening
as if the
owner of that lovely hand
. He was in a dream, Darcy realized, and he was lying down on the
ground, his long, lean body
lap. It was a very comfortable lap. Above him, he could see millions of
cherry blossom petals raining down on him from a massive tree of pink
cloud. Some landed on his face. They were feathery soft and cool on his
skin. He could smell the light, beautiful scent, and it reminded him of
spring. Oddly enough, he felt at peace. He felt happy. And there was
something else, too. Yes, he felt loved. So much love.
He turned to look at the girl who was now stroking his hair. He
frowned

,
her face seemed to become. Who was she? Why did she make him feel
like this? Why did she make him feel so much warmth and so much
love?

A Secret Kiss

55
do cherry blossoms fall
he words came out of his
mouth before he knew it.
He gazed long and hard at her, trying to
make out her features, but it was to no avail. She was faceless to him.
She turned to look at him. Though he couldn
t see her, he knew she
was beautiful. He could also sense she was smiling at him. It was as
though she were amused at his stupid question, and rather than
annoyed
, she was pleased.
y are the tears of spring, Darce
lied
as she
gazed up at the swirling flowers surrounding
them.
Darcy felt satisfied. He nodded and closed his eyes, intending to
return to his slumber.

Then h
e sensed it, her face slowly descending
toward him. A second later, he felt her warm breath fanning o
ver his
skin, and he knew she was smiling. He waited longingly, his nerves
jumping in anticipation. He felt her soft, warm lips pressing against
his cheek, causing tingling sensations to rush through his being and his
world to burst with bright neon colors.
Darcy flashed his eyes open. He came to see only darkness

.
tree around nor was there a girl near him.
For a moment he panicked.
lost her,
he thought with dread.
Where did she go? He felt his heart thumping loud and hard
within his chest.
He sat up, frowning, confused, and then he
realized it was
merely a dream
an elusive dream
he could not grasp. Gently, he
touched his finger to his cheek,
and his frown deepened

The word kept echoing within his head.
Snow!
What is snow? Why snow?
Then something struck him,
and he rushed out
of bed. He went
into the walk-in closet and raided his luggage. A moment later, he
found what he was looking for.
It was a poster
his poster he had made a couple of months ago.
And why he had brought it along with him to St. Joseph Island
was beyond him.
He unfolded the large paper and laid it out on his bed. There
it was,
a digital artwork
of a dark knight and a maiden. She was a
56 Alexia Praks
beautiful creature all right
with blackest hair, palest skin, and
reddest lips.
She was Snow White.
understand
the connection between the dream
hed just had and this artwork
hed created a few months ago
. Perhaps it really meant nothing at all, and he decided to brush it
aside. Perhaps it was just seeing the cherry trees here
on St. Joseph
Island that had triggered the dream. After all, there was that
massive cherry tree in full bloom of pink flowers in the background
of the poster. Yes, that was probably it.
And the girl in his dream?
She
must be Snow White from the poster. Of course it had to be,
and that made tota
l sense.
But why did he feel so lost when he
d woken up to find Snow
gone? Why did he feel as though he were missing half of his soul?
He stood, picked up the poster,
and hung it on the wall
opposite his bed. He had just finished and was getting back int
o bed when he heard noises from outside along the corridor. It was
Alaina and Tara, who had just returned from their nightclubbing
. Only for two weeks, he thought,
loft in New York, spending his precious time working on his game
design. He glanced up at the poster again before closing his eyes,
the image of the dark
knight and Snow bright in his mind.
* * * * *

want to see most, Tara and
Alaina, finally arrived at half past four the next morning, waking
Alice from her ver
y weird dream. In the dream
, she was
surrounded by seven faceless men. Of
course, these
people were
always faceless in dreams, though her gut instinct seemed to know
who th
ey were.
had to dream about the brothers. What was wrong with her? Not
to mention the fact that one of them had kissed her. She thought
it must have been Sebastian. Could it have been Conrad?

57 That
is totally stupid,
she told herself firmly. I
, however, because it was only a
dream, and she was determined not
to think about it any further.
She closed her eyes and tried to get back to sleep when she heard
Tara and Alaina giggling across the hallway and singing loudly
before finally getting into their own rooms. Alice was pretty sure
the two women must be pretty drunk since they both loved to
drink. Once the house was quiet again, she was able to slip back to
sleep. This time there was no dream,
and she was glad.
About two hours later, Alice found herself lying there in her
double bed, staring up at the chandelier, her stomach flipping and
her heart racing uncomfort
face
the brothers,
since Daddy James had made sure of that. He
d found her in the library at just before midnight last night, once
everyone had retired. He scolded her that she should have been out
there having dinner with her grandparents and brothers,
not
feigning sickness.
Damn him,
she thought.
He had known all along.
Ah! Brothers?
Brothers,
remember h
recognize
her when they were
that
close to her?
Her stomach flipped again at the thought of what happened
yesterday afternoon. She
that way. Then she remembered how Darcy had looked at her,
remembered his eyes boring into hers. She shivered at the image
and shook her head.
today, Toby? W
The dog barked at her excitedly. Then the door flung open,
and
Mary marched right in.
,
night, but
thought
it should be fine

58 Alexia Praks
d and he had a crush on you years ago and now yo
, h
going to be the center
party, Mr
.
the Princeton
family.
A
. T
. Ten minutes later, Alice was back and Mary began blow-
drying her long hair and then curled it.
Good
enough
to eat
.
last

g
back
brothers again today after all, since the birthday party would
probably last until late evening,
and then after that,
some excuses to go and stay in town for a few nights with
on his business trip and
be back until Friday,
so it
to have her around.
A Secret Kiss
59 Hmm? What kind of excuse,
though? The café is short-
handed
and they need her help? Yes, that sounded rather good. That meant
-owner of the café, a call and
tell her to play along.
Fifteen minutes later,
she was done. Alice looked at herself in
the mirror one last time before heading out.
Alice admitted she did look rather nice with her hair in big,
loose curls,
and the pretty lilac cotton and lace dress fit her body
to perfection though she thought it showed a bit too much of her
skin.
zing
breasts ever. Do you realize most celebrities would kill just to have
those? I mean, they have to go under the knife at least three or four
times to get them to that perfect
ever perfect. Her mind had always been too occupied with other
interesting thing
s.
pulling Alice along
by the hand.
They both came into the kitchen,
and Brenda greeted them
with an,
my
,
looks
Mar
after she
d noted they looked as though they were conspiring about
something.
.
60 Alexia Praks
re heading
e said
and poured herself a cup of tea.
g
to phone Peter,
.
Alice waved to her friend to leave. She knew Mary was
missing her fiancé already.
It must be nice to be in love,
she thought
with a smile. She grabbed a scone and began to munch.
But maybe
not as nice as this delicious scone
.
married
as she came into the kitchen.
Alice nearly choked on her pastry.
She was teasing of course. They had

investments.

Hence the elderly couple decided to stay the night rather than drive back into town. She came to hug Alice and

Ok

kitchen where her fancy coffee machine was already warmed up for the day.

Alice chuckled and began grinding the coffee beans. A few minutes later, four cups of delicious coffee were ready for enjoyment.

take a sip of hers,

and she

sighed in pleasure.

,

. Tell me which of your grandchildren should get married first

breath.

A Secret Kiss

61

the bird told me you and Mark are

going nowhere. If we are going somewhere, I

am ahead of

Molly and Brenda took their cups and headed out

of the

her

coffee. But then again, she had been trained as a barista professionally and had worked in cafés during her university years, gaining a lot of experience to qualify as almost an expert in the field.

Alice continued to enjoy her light breakfast as she contemplated what Molly meant when she said Alice was a step ahead.

A step ahead in what?

before Beth stormed into the kitchen again,

shooing her out and telling her to go

to Toby away from the pond

before he had the chance to drown himself. Alice quickly put down her cup of tea and rushed out the door.

62 Alexia Praks

Awakening of the Past

Sebastian

such wonderful

sleep for

a while

.

in New York

at all, just what

she had always wanted.

Quiet.

Peaceful.

And he

he wondered why he had left

home in the first place. When he woke up this morning, it had been to the sound of birds chirping outside his window and

then

soon after that the voices of

girls talking

. He

he was pretty sure

it

Alaina or Tara. The maids perhaps?

Now fully awake and refreshed after his shower, he sighed in his brother's morning sun in their pretty courtyard with cherry and magnolia trees in full bloom surrounding them.

Wendy W

smokes
himself to be.
The dog appeared from the direction of the pond and dashed
straight at them. Toby stopped by Tristan and greeted him by
and let him sit on his lap as he fed the dog his bacon.
A Secret Kiss
63
d here, doesn
Conrad said.
e should return Toby and the memory stick to her after
breakfast,
, feeding Toby yet another piece of
his bacon.
Logan, who was sitting beside Tristan, stroked Toby
. The dog was obviously enjoying being the center
of attention
and
stuck his tongue out in delight.
Darcy reached out, got himself another perfectly cooked,
golden-
brown toast and was just about to sit down when
he saw
her. His heart, to its own accord, did a good somersault at the sight,
and naturally the toast decided to do a somersault of its own as
well all the way to the marble
thumb seemed to have lost their
gripping function.
She was in
their
felt another hard thump in his chest.
The brothers turned their eyes toward the house, and sure
enough, the girl they were talking about was there. Not to mention
the fact that she looked amazing in that lilac dress and heels, and
yes, talking to James
their dad
in a most intimate way.
the girl into his arms and kissed her on the cheek.
The brothers stared at the scene before them in shocked surprise,
confused,
as millions of questions ran through their minds. A
moment later, she pulled back and rushed out the open
ed French
door and right into the courtyard.
Alice nearly fell off her three-
inch Jimmy Choo
pumps
when
she came face-
to-face with the seven brothers again.
This i
snt happening,
Just
away with it. She thought they
would still be in bed until midday,
and she therefore
have
to face them.
At least not this soon.
64 Alexia Praks
Well, at least she was decently dressed this morning and in a
better position.
Woof!
ne
hand holding his coffee cup and one arm wrapped around her

confusion.

brothers

Alice, a cheeky smile on his face.

The brothers blinked,

and then Darcy said, none too quietly,

Sebastian shouted.

Hayden asked in disbelief, pointing a

finger at Alice. It had to be a joke

a very big, fat joke that none

of them liked.

James cocked his head to one side

a gesture they all knew very

well that meant he was disappointed and was indeed very serious

with the whole situation.

He glanced from one of his sons to the

other, his

Shocking. Most shocking.

A long silence followed. Alice knew James was doing this on

number her. She

knew he knew

that them again. She knew he

took pleasure in shocking his seven sons by introducing her to

them with such weird timing.

He pressed his head against her legs to say he was sorry. She bent down to pick

him up. The view was too enticing not to notice and the brothers

simply stared at her

enchanted.

James noticed his sons staring and coughed loudly to bring

them back to Earth.

A Secret Kiss

65

held her by the shoulder, rather a bit

breakfast with your

brothers

He emphasized the word

brothers

again.

James was having none of it and made her sit in the empty chair

between Nicolas and Logan. Then he left to get more food,

muttering to himself he really needed another cup of coffee

because

, and a certain person refused to offer

him another,

as too much was bad for his health.

James secretly smiled. Ah! Just the exact response he needed.

Once at the door, he had a quick glance at his seven sons and saw

the sour expressions on their faces. Ah! Yet another satisfying

response.

Daddy James,

indeed.

Alice placed Toby on her lap in front of her as if to form some

sort of barrier between her and the brothers. Logan reached out to

pet the dog. Alice got very annoyed when Toby rubbed his head

he lectured.

handle the brothers staring at her in silence any longer and was

Alice gritted her teeth and her cheeks turned a becoming pink.

-ku-

She thought she really needed to get that important

information out for them to understand. She really did hate the

name Sally. It rhymed with silly, a

Silly Sally.

Alice was

Alice

Full of

p
the nickname
t also sounds rather like silly. Sally
The brothers shuffled uncomfortably in their seats as though all
of a sudden memories came flooding back.
this beautiful girl was Alice, their
adopted sister from years ago. The girl who Tara and Alaina had
always picked on and made fun of. She was the girl he had secretly
liked to watch from afar because she interested him. There had
wanted to remember, and when he started boarding school, he
d pushed all of those memories out of his mind and locked them
deep within him. Eventually, he
d forgotten all about her because
hed never seen her again
that was until yesterday and then today.
Again he felt that odd pain
throbbing within him, oddly hard
to control.

James reappeared with another big tray of scones, savory
muffins, fried eggs, and toast. He placed it in the center of the table
and sat down in the empty chair next to Sebastian.

,He began.
them wanted to talk. James reached out for toast and began to eat
it. The silence continued.

Darcy gritted his teeth at the odd throbbing pain that
continued to pound deep within his heart. Now he knew why he
d felt that odd, aching sensation back when he
d first sighted the
island. It was because of her, Alice, his adopted sister. He
d wanted to forget about her and in fact had done marvelously well
for the past years. Not even a small thought of her had ever
occurred to him. That was until today. Now every fragment of
memory about her rushed back to him knocking him over like a
blast of ice-
cold water, making him almost breathless. She was the
Alice he used to care about, used to like
used to love even

. But
that particular incident thirteen years ago had changed everything.
A Secret Kiss

67
phoned last night,
Alice looked up. The brothers turned their attention to their
dad then. James could tell curiosity was eating at them, and he
grinned rather pleasantly.
quickly. Anything to get out of staying
at home with these men.

, running
, I suppose
anyway, so
to the lab
his son who was watching Alice way too intensely, which of

s
Sebastian turned to his father and blink
Alice knew where James was going and quickly
sure he already has
Alice frowned at James. Her adopted father laughed at her
sour expression.

blood,
The brothers were quite shocked that Conrad had managed to
voice, as if it were absolutely natural for him. But then again,

68 Alexia Praks
Conrad had been rather young when Alice had been adopted,

him.
Sebastian nearly stopped breathing when she smiled. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. It was the same, of course, for once again.
James, on the other hand, suddenly realized that not only did all his sons like Alice, but they were smitten with her. In a million years he never imagined that could be possible. Now he wondered the moment she was outside.
at you guys, taking my precious stand behind her friend, and after greeting her seven cousins good morning, she pulled Alice up and tsked seriously that they were Lauren Simpson, Mr.
, was only a few years younger than Conrad himself. He remembered her back in elementary school as the girl with golden-brown hair and warm-brown eyes who always talked and talked and talked.
y said.
Alice, who was only too glad to be taken away, into the house to get their bags.
The brothers watched Alice go each had his very own odd expression on his handsome face.
A Secret Kiss
69 Birthday Party & Champagne
, eyes on the peaceful scenery of lush
, about them much
. Alice stared at the long, straight road ahead as they made good speed along the motorway toward Mr.
se in town.
even tell me you were
s adopted daughter until I actually found out myself. And that was because Uncle James thought he came to visit me. That was really emb
Alice
I should have told you, but
that you were Uncle James adopted daughter, those bitches
70 Alexia Praks
Alice knew whom Mary was referring to. Those bitches were their ex-classmates from high school, Kate Anderson, the hot cheerleader, and her throng of worshipers.
back to those times in high school. It had been tough and very unpleasant especially if you got picked on your first day by the prettiest and most influential girl in the school.
And she had been right. They had continued to bully her even after they had found out she was adopted and had no blood relation whatsoever with the Princetons. Hence, they argued that she was not a real
Princeton and therefore had only thought of her as a little parasite that clung to this powerful, wealthy family in order to have a good life.

Alice sighed, and Mary began another unwelcoming subject.

It was Mark Chatsworth.

viously, Mary.

eally liked me, he

ask

ed

,

said

do that stuff.

interested in me. And I told you before.

ty-three

t now,

A Secret Kiss

71

,

and I totally respect you for that. But come on

Sex is like the

and all, especially

, I

ve only ever done

Prince C

Alice

can we

You know how much I want

along with you and Mark. But

I know for sure that he really likes

Alice laughed. Mary was Mary. She could never stay out of

. Once the girls arrived at the Simpson mansion in South

Hampton some twenty minutes later, they got busy helping out

setting the scene

Alice with the food and drinks and Mary with

the decorations. By twelve

arrived,

and Alice was quite pleased to see James and Brenda amongst

them but not so pleased when she spotted the brothers

all seven

of them

making such

a grand entrance as to cause all the young

girls to gasp in awe and

break

into fits

of girlish giggles.

watching a flock of girls rush up to them and surround them,

begging for their undivided attention.

. Simpson called out.

72 Alexia Praks

Alice turned to see Mr

.

trophy wife. At only

forty-

five years of age, she looked way younger than she was with

the fine features

of a small nose, large brown eyes, and dark brown

hair. She was also very nice, as expect

ed of her for being the wife

of the city mayor. Except most of the time she was very cheap, and

that was why she and Mary were here helping out since only three

waitresses were hired for the special occasion.

ed toward the Princeton brothers near the

entrance now almost engulfed by young females.

of your waitresses.

She wondered why it had to be her who had to

offer the brothers their drinks and not one of the waitresses

now own a café.

. Simps
straight face. She wanted to tell the woman that if she were to
spend a bit more money and hire more waitresses,
then they

,
to deal with the brothers.

I
Oh, thank you, darling.

Y
god
. Simpson said
and then sailed off to greet James and Brenda.
Alice poured c
hampagne into seven glasses, placed them onto
the silver tray, and expertly carried it with one hand as she headed
to the brothers. Now she felt like a freaki
ng waitress again, and of
course the brothers
oticed her presence at all
with the massive flock of females swarming around them. It was
only a moment later when she realized Lauren, the birthday girl,
was one of them. Lauren, it seemed,
herself noticed
by the brothers either.
itedly, her eyes bright and shi
ny.

to
A Secret Kiss
73 wedding, but for them to come
here
this. Oh, they
of years older
Alice sighed. This was getting even more complicated than
because she was wearing these blast
ed high heels she found rather
difficult to walk
in. Then there was also the fact that she still had
to offer these glasses of c
hampa
gne to the brothers, which she
d already promised Mrs.
Simpson
thought struck her. Of course, if Lauren wanted to get introduce
d to the brothers, then she should.

you
girl,
and
you welcome your guests,
d, shoving the silver tray
,
,
urged, practically pushing the tray to Lauren now.
With hands that shook, Lauren held tight to the tray, praying
or on anyone,
for that
matter.

just as she was about to turn, she nearly fainted when she saw
74 Alexia Praks
Nicolas, Sebastian, and Darcy behind Alice, standing there
looking very handsome and taking her breath away. Sebastian gave
her a smile, and she froze, her heart pounding hard within her
chest.

breath fanning against the skin of her neck.
Lauren jumped, sending the tray flying in midair and the champagne splashing on Alice, her dress soaking wet. The tray landed on the marble floor, spinning a couple of times before it finally laid to rest. The glasses at the same time smashed into tiny pieces.

Alice sighed, and Lauren froze in shock.

Alice managed to smile, though inside she was rather pissed.

for surprising the girl, which had caused her to jump and send the tray crashing.

ted

Lauren and gave

, Lauren.

Lauren blushed as she gazed up at him, speechless.

d her

Conrad cocked his head to one side and moved over to Alice.

to take her h

He wrapped his hand around her arm and was ready to lead her out when Logan pulled Alice to his side.

A Secret Kiss

75

others were doing. What was going on here? Why were they all of a sudden treating her like this? She was totally confused.

Sebastian asked his brothers.

Because she looks uncomfortable, champagne,

gne,

closer to Alice and inhaling cheekily.

Alice scowled at him and

myself, thank you very much. I have a car, and

I can drive perfectly

No one was listening to her, however, as they continued their debate.

Tristan was having none of it. He caught Alice by the wrist

. L

st stop the fuss already. She can just change here.

Tristan stopped just as he was about to step his foot out the door. Alice pulled back and said

stion.

sure Lauren has something she can borrow.

added with a smile.

Alice was getting very annoyed. She freed her hand from

T

she could get away

from all of them

. The brothers, however, were blocking her exits from all directions

. They were surrounding her now

a giant, tall wall of masculine

bodies in jeans and formal shirts that made Alice catch her breath and made her head spin. She was thinking of escaping through the door, but when she glanced behind her and saw Tristan nodding his head and giving her that flirty smile of his, she kicked that

76 Alexia Praks

thought out the door first. The front, on the other hand, was

blocked by Sebastian and Nicolas. To her right stood Logan and Conrad, and her left, Darcy and Hayden.

Oh God! What is going on?

All she wanted to do was to get away and change, for
uren said from somewhere behind
lots of
The brothers turned to look at her, which caused Lauren to
blush considerably for gaining their undivided
attention.
dresses wi
her regarding
what she wanted to do with her wet dress. This pissed her off even

,
She wanted to box his ear when he turned to her and order
ed her to,
Instead of doing as she was told, which she was very bad at, she
glared at him, telling him to go and order someone else around.
Sebastian understood she was standing her ground. He sighed
d Alice frowned. W
hen she realized he was gazing at her breasts,
she glanced down. Instantly, she went bright red. The thin
material of her dress was soaking wet, clinging to her skin and
clearly showing the shape of her breasts and nipples.
She covered herself by crossing her arms across her chest, her
frown even darker as she glanced at the brothers. Tristan and
Logan were hiding their smiles. Darcy
Nicolas shoved his glasses up the bridge of his nose. Conrad
blushed. And Hayden tried to keep his face as straight as he could

.
stairs, her head held high.
as they climb
ed the stairs.
Logan
whistled.

A Secret Kiss

77 These remarks were of course rewarded with a dark scowl from
Sebastian
and a hard shove from Conrad to Tristan.
This quieted
Logan and Tristan. Conrad sighed.
Alice, on the other side, wanted to die from humiliation as
she headed up the stairs, unaware that her seven adopted brothers
were admiring her slender legs
they

d seen her breasts
well, the shape of them anyway.
Once they were on the first floor and in Lauren
very pink and
very large bedroom, Alice sank on the cozy king-
size bed and
groaned.

Alice sat up and watched Lauren, who was standing in front
of her gigantic walk-
in wardrobe fi
lled with designer-brand clothes
, holding up a few of her dresses. And yes, they were party dresses
all right

. Frills.
Lots and lots of frills and lots and lots of pink. And
yes, lots and lots of dresses with no straps.
smokes
ed by the
color
pink.

.
couple of times.
Twenty minutes later, Alice stood in front of the full

mirror,
believe she was wearing this. It was a cute dress
for a sixteen-
year-
old girl
and she was no sixteen-
year-
old girl.
, baby blue,
not pink, thank God. There was some very pretty draping to the
side of her waist,
and it had a tutu-
like skirt. The only thing Alice
really opposed was that the dress was designed in such a way as to
push one
s breasts up and
voilà!
I look
ed like you. You look so
78 Alexia Praks
Yeah. Alice had heard that many times before. Sometimes she
liked
it. Then other times she really hated it because of the way she
got treated.
en made a face that showed she was awed as
Yeah.
n the dress
That was when it dawned on Alice. She realized Lauren
wanted to see her adopted brothers again.
Or is it just one in
particular?
tay for dinner
or something,
she suggested.

.
.
out
those eighteen candles
door, and Lauren happily
followed.
When the girls reached the ground floor again, the brothers
were still there waiting for them. Conrad grinned like an idiot.
Nicolas nodded appreciatively. Logan whistled. Tristan winked.
Hayden cocked his head and said
Darcy
either that they had to be there,
witnessing her awkwardly descending the stairs in her heels and
short skirt.
do
look great? I wore that dress on my sixteenth birthday. Do you
s
on Alice.
birthday
back in New York
, her eyes bright.
Conrad blinked and then laughed uneasily, remembering no
such thing.
-year-
disapproval in his voice.
A Secret Kiss
79
first time either, as though he were really cherishing it.
Darcy
turned on his heel and headed toward the drawing room

turned and left as well.
behavior thus far. Oh,
shed heard him all right when he said she looked like a sixteen-
year-
old girl.
-year-
sake.
She was also pissed with Darcy, who had said she wanted to get
laid. Yes, she was a virgin, but she never wanted to look like she
wanted to get laid
ever!
his hand and led the way to the drawing room. Conrad laughed
uncomfortably as he trailed behind her. Alice, Nicolas, Logan,
Tristan, and Hayden followed them.
It was jam-packed with guests in the drawing room, and before
long, Mr.
Simpson gave a good, long speech for
eighteenth birthday. Then when it was ready, the cake was brought
in, and a
appy Birthday
followed. Lauren happily
blew out the candles that stood on top of the biggest and grandest
cake Alice had ever seen. So that was what Mrs. Simpson had
splash
ed her money on
the cake!
everyone was cheering loudly.
Alice turned to see the boyishly handsome Mark Chatsworth
thanks,
Some twenty minutes later, James came over to his sons,
wondering why they were looking so serious at a party. When he
turned to observe the object of their interest, he grinned.

80 Alexia Praks
Dr.
This was of course followed by sighs of relief from Logan and
Conrad.
.
,
led his
sons
toward Mark and Alice, knowing very well they were dying
to know who this guy really was in relation to Alice.
Oh, shut
Conrad snapped.
Alice turned and gave her adopted father a grand smile.
the brothers,
who looked as though they were ready to pick a fight
with their defensive stances and serious faces.
you
is
 , I believe you owe Alice. How about repaying
 , I believe,
is the same age as
Nicolas shook hands with Mark
tightly
 . He also made sure his
hand was on the top, which pleased him and his brothers mightily.
.
Mark shook hands with all of them, p
When the brothers all nodded, Mark clasped his hands together
A Secret Kiss
81
All of them?
Volunteering for the research?

ut,
,she
cut in.
None of the brothers had lunch yet either, and they were quite
upset
especially Conrad.
s
farewell to the hosts
Mark chuc
anything to delay going to the lab with the brothers. God! She had
to take their blood
was an expert at venipuncture, having had excellent experience
working in the hospital as a lab scientist, and as part of the job
description she had to bleed patients as well. It was just that now
it was the brothers.
It was an hour later when Alice reluctantly wished Lauren a
happy
birthday and told the girl
she had to leave. Then she found
herself sitting in the back seat by herself while Conrad sat in the
front seat next to Mark,
who was driving the car. Behind th
em,
Sebastian drove the silver Mercedes with Nicolas and Logan as
passengers, and Tristan drove the black one with Darcy and
Hayden as passengers.
Alice was even more uncomfortable to be surrounded by eight
very tall men in the small lift as they headed up to the fifth floor
of the public hospital where the main lab was located. She held her
breath until they got out, and by then her lungs were starving for
oxygen and her whole body was aching because s
hed been so tense.
Sherry, the lab assistant working under Mark, greeted them as
they came in. She was quite shocked to see the Princeton brothers
with Alice. She blushed profusely when they smiled at her,
and
her hands shook uncontrollably when she handed them each
questionnaires
a little while later.
82 Alexia Praks
well-
being
done, Alice
The brothers got down to it, answering questions about their
diet, medications (if they had any), daily routine, and exercise
regime. Tristan and Logan, as usual, treated it like a competition
and raced through the questionnaires. But it was Sebastian who
finished first and headed out
of the small reception area to
the lab
behind. Tristan muttered under his breath as he watched his
brother go. Nicolas put his pen down and chuckled.
Once he stepped into the laboratory area, Sebastian was taken
aback by the scene before him. There were massive machines
running tests everywhere,
some as big and as long as the length of
the whole room and connected together like trains. There was
quite a number of staff on the floor,
working, putting test tubes
filled with blood through the analyzers.
He spotted Alice in a small office on the other side of the lab.
He headed for her, and once there he saw she
d put on a lab coat
and had her long hair tied back into a ponytail

She turned.

He almost forgot how to breathe once his eyes met hers. She looked really sophisticated and professional in her lab coat.

Not to mention as sexy as hell.

He swallowed.

And then he remembered how to breathe properly.

He cleared his throat, which had gone dry all of a sudden. too busy looking at her.

Alice cocked her head to one side, wondering what was wrong

A Secret Kiss

83 Sebastian blinked. It was the first time she

d called him by his

name, and it caused his blood to tingle deliciously.

he was too busy looking at her and that off her.

she suggested.

He nodded and went to sit down on the comfy chair, his large frame overpowering the sofa.

Alice bit her lip and told her heart to stop beating so fast. It

. Nothing more. But why was her heart beating so fast,

and why

were her hands shaking?

She came round to look at his arm up close. Her fingers gently touched

against the skin of his forearm, feeling for his vein.

Sebastian suddenly stopped breathing for a second. When he

breathed again, his heart was beating so fast he thought he

going to make it. He could smell her wonderful scent

the very

same one from when he

d first met her

and it made his head

swim in delight. He could feel the heat of her body against his, and

his whole being stirred

in pleasure.

Sebastian could feel the warmth of her breath fanning over

his

skin, which

sent pleasure rushing through his body.

more to

reassure herself than him,

of course.

She stood up straight and prepared the tubes and needle. She

wiped his skin clean with an alcohol swipe and then put a

tourniquet around his arm. She told him to fist his hand to pump

out the vein. He did as he was told, all the time watching her

closely.

84 Alexia Praks

Alice felt quite nervous by the fact that he was always looking

why, but she had the feeling

hed done

that before when they were children. There was something in the

way he was staring at her that made her nervous. Something that

stirred her on the inside, making her restless.

, and

then she slowly inserted the sharp needle through his skin and into

to his vein.

the

needle going into his skin at

Alice hoped he was only staring at her
to see the needle,
like most people do,
and so he concentrated his
attention on something else. But it would have been nice if it was
the painting on the wall or the rubbish bin to the side or,
even
better yet, the computer screen in the corner of the room
not
her face.

She quickly and steadily inserted a tube.
ood easily
rushed out from the needle and spurted into the tightly vacuumed
tube.

As
dark lashes that were curved upward at just the right angle that
enhanced her eyes. Then he moved his eyes down to her lips
plump, luscious lips ready to be kissed and sucked.
Sebastian unconsciously closed his eyes, feeling his blood
stirring knowingly
almost painfully. His fingers itched to touch,
to feel those soft ruby lips. When he opened his eyes again, he
found himself staring at her chest. Since she was leaning toward
him, and the fact that she was wearing that stupid doll-
like

strapless dress that barely cover
ed her upper portion, he had a very
good view of her lovely,
round breasts thrusting out toward him,
almost begging him to fondle, to kiss, and to
take this anymore,
he thought and scowled darkly, his
whole body fully alert with desire.

Alice glanced up at him and their eyes met. He stared at her
for a moment, lost
in the depth
of the
brown.

A Secret Kiss

85 Alice quickly glanced away, her stomach flipping and her
After taking another tube, she undid the tourniquet, loosening
it around his arm and then slowly took the needle out and at the
same time,
placing
a cotton bud on
she told him.

Sebastian pressed his finger on the cotton bud while Alice
labeled

the tubes with his name and date of birth.
He noticed and said,

She gave him a smile and said

Then she added,
real

Sebastian saw the look on her face he
d seen so many times

when they were children. He suddenly felt that protectiveness over
her again. It nearly broke his heart, and he had the sudden urge to
pull her into his arms. Just as quickly, he realized that was a stupid
thing to want to do,

and so he abruptly got up, leaving the room
in haste,

which confused the hell out of Alice.

Just then,

Conrad hurried in, and as per the

Hayden, Logan, and Darcy were behind him, waiting by the door.

Nicolas

Sebastian

sudden bad mood as he walked out

eagerness, which of

course pleased Conrad mightily. Nicolas, on the other hand, thought the youngest of the brothers was the first to break into it as well.

Sebastian and Logan weren

could pick up the needle, she was being pulled around and found up, and saw him looking down at her not her face,

but her

chest

which she minded very much.

She also minded very much that he was so close to her and the fact that he was touching her again

without her permission

The brothers were all watching Sebastian with interest, wondering what

86 Alexia Praks

was inappropriate for him to be doing this, however, and he pulled tight across her front, covering her exposed chest

from prying eyes. Then he buttoned the coat up for her

one by

one

very slowly, all the way to her collar.

As he was doing this, Conrad blinked several times, confused.

Nicola

s secretly smiled as he immediately knew why Sebastian was

in such a foul mood. Logan and Tristan shook their heads,

knowing very well they were going to miss out on a very good view.

Darcy scoffed. And Hayden chuckled.

he was her real brother and worried about what she looked like wearing such a revealing outfit. She took a step back and glared at him once he was done.

out the door again.

replied through

gritted teeth and swore

in

front of his brothers.

And indeed,

she did take her time as she slowly and

meticulously bled the rest of the brothers. Conrad c

losed one eye

and sneaked a peek with another as Alice inserted the sharp

needle into his skin. He jumped and gasped, which caused Alice

to giggle at his reaction. That of course pleased Conrad nicely, and

he was indeed rather sorry that the process finished all too soon.

Tristan was the manly one. He sat and relaxed back as he watched her work, his eyes always on her pretty face, a nice smile playing

about

his lips.

on his face, disappointed that the procedure ended all too soon.

he teased.

en waiting

shoved his brother from the chair.

rry up,

will you

though he impatient

A Secret Kiss

87

you to rush such
to his brother to tell them he was right.
A dark scowl from Sebastian greeted him. Hayden looked
heavenward. Conrad was confused why Sebastian was so pissed.
Tristan chuckled. Nicolas shook his head. And Darcy looked as
impassive as ever.
When the needle went in, Logan kept his face straight and even
rewarded her with one of his charming, handsome smiles
for not
hurting him too much. Alice was pleased indeed that when it was
Hayden
a
s turn they were being very nice and
polite as they simply sat there quietly while she did her job. Once
they were done, she sighed with relief and thought
it
after all. Her joy
when Nicolas finally
got out of the chair and
ly, our Darcy
Alice nearly dropped the test tube she held in her hand. She
swallowed and suddenly felt her whole body
go tense. She saw
Darcy take
the seat
and nearly stop breathing altogether.
Was it just her, or was the room suddenly very hot?
Calm down,
Alice.

J

ust calm down
she told herself.
s only Darcy, your
adopted brother.
With her mind still on the man sitting near her, she prepared
the needle and was about to jab it into his skin when she realized
something
. Holy Mother
of Jesus!
She nearly forgot to
clean his arm.
She put the needle down, picked up the alcohol swipe,
and
turned to him. Honest to God, she really did try not to look at
him,
but
met his. Instantly, she was drawn into the deep pool of the mauve-
gray color. Her heart, of its own accord, pounded like it had no
tomorrow.

88 Alexia Praks

Darcy held his breath as he gazed at her, taking in the exotic
beauty who had stolen his interest since they
d met again yesterday
after so many years. Then it all came back to him
the light scent
of cherry blossom, the warmth of her breath, and the delicious
sensations within his being when she was near.
And that kiss
in his
dream last night?
It was from her when they
d been children

realization
knocked the wind out of him,
and he felt as though
he
Breathe, Darcy, breathe!
the voice in his head shouted at him.
Alice quickly look
ed away, feeling her heart aching within her
chest because of the way he was looking at her. This wasn
t the
same Darcy she
d known back in childhood. This Darcy hated her.
This Darcy was disgusted with her. And she had to keep that in
mind and stay as far away from him as possible. Thus she turned
her attention to bleeding him
instead.
She made quick work of it and was indeed very glad it was
finally over. Hence when Mark was busy giving the brothers a tour
around the lab and going to extreme lengths to explain why his
research was so importa
nt, even showing them how the analyzers
worked, Alice hid in the bathroom, freshened up, and tried her
best to regain her composure before coming back out to face the
brothers once again.

A Secret Kiss

89 Confrontation

Alice tried not to breathe
or move
, for that matter
since she was being squeezed in
the back seat
like a sandwich
between Logan and Conrad. Honestly,
she thought, why did she
her off? Why had Mary taken her car away without telling her?
Why
, oh why?
s large jacket
the one he had
unceremoniously dumped on her person the moment she
d taken
off her lab coat back at the lab
across her front tighter. Then she
folded her arms across her chest, trying to relax. But how could she
relax when Conrad kept staring at her and giving that dazzling
smile of his? To be honest, she found it rather funny since he
reminded her so much of Toby when the dog was trying to please
her. She wondered if Conrad was trying to do the same thing.
Alice wanted him to stop bothering her and thus gave him a
good scowl.

90 Alexia Praks

welcomed a quick suspicious glance from Sebastian through the
interesting, apart
they be interested in her life now when they
d never given a damn
before? So she kept her mouth shut even though Conrad was quite
persistent in his endeavor to make conversation with her.
ve it a rest, Co

,
Conrad stopped his questioning then, and Alice sighed with
relief.

Once they got back to Princeton Mansion twenty minutes later,
Alice quickly escaped from the car and rushed into the house.

Alice laughed and bent down
she said.
Toby barked excitedly and licked her cheek.
a voice expressed
Alice froze and automatically hugged Toby against her chest
protectively.
headed across the corridor toward the stairs.
When she thought she would escape unscathed, Tara emerged
from the drawing room.
ever with her platinum-
blond hair, tanned skin, and tall, lean
figure.
Tara immediately spotted Sebastian standing by the door
looking very handsome indeed in Calvin Klein jeans and
a blue
formal shirt. She wondered where he
d been and without inviting
her along, too. Then she noticed Nicolas, Logan, and Conrad
standing beside Sebastian, all dressed semi-
forma
l as well.

A Secret Kiss

91

Tristan, Hayden, and Darcy happened to walk through the
doorway at that moment. Tristan was laughing about something,
and Hayden was giving Tristan a friendly punch on the arm. Darcy
just shook his head at his brothers. Of course,
theyd been talking
about women again and the best method to get them in the mood
for
sex.

They all came to a complete stop at the corridor when they
noticed their brothers were still standing there awkwardly. Darcy
wondered why and knew instantly once he had spotted Tara before
them, standing there as if she were posing for a photo shoot for
some hot magazine.

Tara

eyes lit up the moment she spotted Darcy, though he
her presence. Alice,
on the other hand, chose that moment to leave quietly. If only
without anyone noticing her. But the dog did bark, and Tara
finally turned her attention to Alice.

Tara stared at her for a long moment, as if trying to recollect
who she was. Then her eyes seemed to blaze with blue fire, and her
hands fisted tightly at her sides.

to destroy

our family again? Who invited you here?

The brothers held their breath at the sarcastic statements fired
at Alice. The scene suddenly took them back to their childhood
when Tara had unleashed her temper on little Alice, who
been able to do anything except endure the bullying and then ru
n away to hide and cry. This reminder, of course, made the brothers
really worried because they no longer wanted to simply stand by
and watch passively, ignoring the whole situation as if nothing had
happened.

Sebastian narrowed his eyes dangerously. Nicolas pushed his
glasses up the bridge of his nose
an gesture the brothers knew

92 Alexia Praks

very well

which meant a serious action was about to be taking
place. Darcy scowled and fisted his hands tightly by his sides.

Hayden

Tristan

faces became serious. Conrad, who had never encountered this faceoff between Alice and Tara before, was very shocked by the despicable tone of voice toward Alice. He said loudly. Tara ignored him and continued glaring at Alice. Alice cocked her head to one side and then gave Tara a lovely fake smile. With her voice soft and calm This, of course, surprised the brothers beyond belief as they stared at her with something akin to shock. Little Alice, after all, had never answered back before. He cried. He said aggressively, which caused Tara to stumble back with fright. Toby kept barking and barking and then growled at Tara, who swore at him in anger. His deep, commanding voice echoed through out the hallway. Tara gasped in fright and automatically turned to look at Nicolas, confused. For years, he had never used such tone of voice toward her. In fact, Nicolas, who was very much like his father James, had never used that particular tone of voice toward anyone except for when he was very upset and had to set things in order. He said, his eyes narrowed dangerously. across his massive chest.

,
A Secret Kiss

93

,
stated matter-of-factly.

Alice was completely shocked that the brothers were on her side in this unexpected confrontation. When they were young, they just pretended it never happened.

she thought.

They have grown

.
Toby started barking aggressively at Tara again. Alice stroked his head, telling him to calm down. The dog obeyed her and stopped barking. She turned her attention to Tara and said, think binge drinking and sleeping late causes your headache, Tara, not my sweet Toby. Tara toward way, you really should lay off those cigarettes and alcohol because they really do give you she headed up the stairs without a backward glance. Toby took the opportunity to growl at Tara once again, telling aggressive behavior. Toby really did protect his master all right, as any good dog should.

The brothers were speechless. Alice had grown both outside and in

and now nothing could faze her. Conrad c

Tara glared at him as he left, her chest heaving with anger. Then she turned to the other six brothers.

Darcy was able to relax and released his tight fists once he noted Alice had disappeared from sight up the stairs and was saved

from further onslaught of bullying.

brothers.

94 Alexia Praks

Darcy ignored her outrageous question and headed past her up the stairs. He

was with a bitch who was half-

drunk and harassing her own adopted sister.

Nicolas

You are still a Princeton, after all, and should behave accordingly.

Tara bit her lip, her hands fisted tight on her hips.

Princeton,

my ass

, she thought sourly.

She never considered herself a Princeton.

She was only using the name to secure a high life.

He warned coldly, nudging his glasses up

the bridge of his nose.

He didn't reply

as she stood there, fuming.

up the stairs.

Tristan, Logan, and Hayden all headed into the drawing room

. None bothered to pay her any attention.

Finally, Tara turned to

Sebastian, who

looked as though he was

ready to murder her. His

face was dark, his eyes narrowed, and his stance was tense.

behavior. She softened her face and asked,

Though she had been adopted by the Princetons, Tara had never gotten used to calling James and Brenda Mom and Dad. She hated calling them by those endearments and had refused to

submit to their gentle urging

, had never cared,

even if it hurt their feelings. For her,

Melissa Byrd was her only

mom, the woman who had loved her and had sacrificed so much

for her to get her this far. Her dad, on the other hand, was someone

care if he was dead or alive.

past her, ignoring her. Then, before he disappeared down the

corridor, he turned and

A Secret Kiss

95 Tara blinked in confusion. She cocked her head to one side,

wondering why she had the sudden feeling that every one of the

brothers was ignoring her. She watched Sebastian walking away,

his face impassive.

* * * * *

Alice collapsed onto her bed

once she got into her

room. She sighed in exhaustion and could still feel her body

trembling from the encounter.

Oh,

God!

She just stood up to Tara. She

She knew she was no longer afraid of people,

of what they thought of her, or of her displeasing them. But to see

Tara again right in the face and fighting with words with her was

truly an experience.

She touched her chest, feeling the hard thumping of her beating

Woof

Toby barked aggressively and growled.

Again, Toby barked aggressively and growled.

dog even further,

Toby gave her a friendly bark and then stuck his tongue out.

Woof! Woo

f! Followed by tongue stuck out,

and he licked her

cheek.

Woof! Woo

f! Followed by a roll over and little legs wiggling in

midair.

96 Alexia Praks

Toby rolled over, sat up straight, and gave her the wettest lick

on her cheek ever.

she noted that the dog had enough tickling, she got

up and said,

ress.

And you, mister

She patted his head.

Stay out of trouble and

Toby gave her an understanding bark.

f the bed and headed toward the

bathroom.

Woof! Toby gave her another bark to get her attention. She

turned to him and saw he was gazing at the door.

you, but

and annoy Tara and Alaina, okay

The dog barked again.

The dog ran over to his basket and made himself comfortable,

afterward closing his eyes. Alice headed into the bathroom, filled

the tub with warm water, and poured in some lavender essential

oil to hel

p calm her nerves and relax her tense muscles. Then, after

stripping herself naked, she hopped into the tub and thoroughly

enjoyed her long bath, nearly dozing off at times. It was a while

later when she realized she had to get out because it was getting

d

late for dinner, and Daddy James might think

she was avoiding

her adopted brothers once again.

She put on a pair of black skinny jeans and a simple white T-

shirt. After moisturizing her face with night cream and blow-

drying her hair, she headed out, wondering where Toby could have

within the house.

She headed down the stairs to the first floor, noting that the

barking was getting louder. As she was crossing the long corridor,

she realized it was coming from within the library

hers and

A Secret Kiss

97

favorite place in the house, especially in winter when she

read to him out loud. Toby seemed to enjoy her soothing voice as

she read to him near the fireplace and him snuggling cozily on her

lap. This time, however, she surely hoped

d the door.

No reply.

She moved in a little farther, narrowing her eyes against the

bright glaring evening light that entered the enormous room via

the floor-

to-ceiling window from the west side of the house. She

blinked a couple of times

to get used to the lighting, and that was

when she saw Toby with General. The dog was lying on the floor

time, all right, and oddly enough, Alice found that quite pleasing. Toby must really like Conrad very much to allow the brother to unless he knew he was safe with that person. his ears pricking up. He rolled himself up to his feet and barked her a happy greeting. her surroundings and only had eyes on her dog, she tripped on a pair of feet and fell forward, free- styling toward the floor. Luckily, corpse. Instead, she landed on a large, long, lean body. Puff!

Alice was breathless and sprawling on top of a rather comfortable, warm, masculine being below her. Nicolas got up and hastily looked at what damage his long legs had done.

Alice opened her eyes and looked up to see a pair of blue eyes watching her. Her heart missed a beat and started up again very

98 Alexia Praks

fast

. Oh, God!

She could feel his warm, hard body beneath her. She wanted to die.

Sebastian, still a bit dazed that a soft female body suddenly landed on him, wondered how he could get himself off Alice when it was she who was on top of him. But then again, she felt just right where she was, as though she belonged there.

H

feel the need to remove her from her current position. Not to mention the fact that her face was only inches from his. They were nose to nose and lips to lips; they could be kissing.

God,

he thought,

she has beautiful skin

. She looked so fresh and

innocent without any makeup on, and it stirred something deep within his being. Something that made him want to protect her, like he

d wanted to do all those years ago but had been too afraid to do so.

Alice blinked and then hastily pushed herself up, her cheeks from Sebastian when Toby jumped into her arms and started barking happily, as if inviting her to play with them.

-hard belly, saddling hi

m like a horse as Toby continued to hyperactively bark in her arms.

God, she could feel the firmness of his six-pack abs beneath her

s were heating up and

turning into mush. Her whole body was quivering with reactions.

Sebastian too could feel the heat that was radiating from her body to his and hastily moved up slightly so as to ease her from him. It was, after all, getting rather too comfortable for his liking, and he knew he was stepping on dangerous ground. He certainly and in the

presence of his brothers

too.

little bottom to slide down his tummy and land right on his crotch.

his breath, almost breathless at the contact.

A Secret Kiss

99

were going to come at

for
Sebastian could only close his eyes and rub his fingers and
thumb against his forehead as he tried very hard to control himself
from the massive buildup of desire coursing through his body.

. Y
Shit! Shit! Shit!
If she were to move herself up and down him,
or even worse, wiggle her cute bottom while she was on top of him,
, and
his pride and joy would surely make its appearance.

Nicolas laughed
Then to help, he
scooped Alice into his strong arms and gently lifted her up and
away from Sebastian.
Once Alice landed on her feet on the soft carpet, she finally
managed to calm Toby down. She gave Nicolas an appreciative
smile before noting the dark scowl Sebastian wore on his face. She
knew he was upset she
d landed on him. She also knew he really
disliked

her,
and this encounter must
have
really piss
ed him off.

ac
Sebastian watched her standing there above him, his heart
pumping irrationally. He really wanted to pull her back down and

. T
her hard
on her luscious lips and take that cute T
-shirt off her so
he could witness her beautiful naked body. Then
amazing breasts of hers and then
Then she rushed away and out the door, leaving Sebastian lying
there, wanting and craving what he was forbidden to have.

, God
d under her breath the moment
shed gotten out of the library. She closed her eyes and leaned her
head back against the door, wondering in mortification if her
adopted brothers thought she was some sort of stupid ninny.

What
she get up the moment
shed landed on top of Sebastian? And furthermore, she
d even sat

100 Alexia Praks
on top of him.

On top of him!
On top of his firm, six-
pack that she
could so feel beneath her.

Just thinking about it now made her blush with embarrassment,
and she hugged Toby tighter against her chest.

Alice flashed her eyes open to see Tristan smiling at her
that
flirty smile of his that any girl found most irresistible. His face was
also only inches from hers.

She could feel his warm breath on her
skin.

She licked her dry lips and stammered
nothing. I

I
Tristan cocked his head to one side, not believing her one tiny
,

s flaming
hot. Then, before he could ask her any more questions, she hastily
moved to the side,
away from him,
and rushed off with Toby in
her arms.

Tristan watched her go, grinning knowingly. He cocked his
head to one side, wondering which one of his brothers was
Ah! She was blushing. A pretty blush, he thought. And her eyes,
the deep-
brown color, were exceptionally bright this evening. Not
to mention the lips. They were full and very red as though they
were ready to be kissed.

most interesting scene. Conrad, who was standing, was shouting
aggressively at Sebastian, who
was lying down on the floor.

, though. He was
dealing with his own wee problem. He had to damp
en his hot,
burning desire within him that had just been awakened by his
adopted sister,
who, he
d done.

A Secret Kiss

101

No! he thought

. T
Nicolas was chuckling away enthusiastically, and when his eyes
met Tristan

, he gave his brother a wink.

Oh,
God!

Tristan thought.

It was Sebastian who was responsible.

That bastard!

Sebastian took one look at his brother and moaned under his
Alice, who was heading back up the stairs, gritted her teeth in
But how could she when there were seven of them and they were
all living under the same roof.

Once she was sure she
d calmed down, she let Toby go. The
dog landed on his feet on the stairs. He cocked his head to one side
as he stared
up at her, wondering what was bothering his master.

,
time but
Toby stuck out his tongue and jumped about in his spot
excitedly.

But then again, she too was being a bit weird. Well, at least her
body was doing weird stuff anyway. Her heart seemed to race a lot
happening that first day they

d met
on the road.

a lesson. I told him to get off her, but

Alice froze in her spot.

Good God!

S

want to see them
again so soon. She was still too embarrassed from the incident in
yet.

She heard Nicola

102 Alexia Praks

Still on the stairs, Alice knew she had to get away. They were
just around the corner now and were not far away. Then she had

corner. She was in such a rush that going and literally ran into someone smashing her slight body against

a firm, masculine one.

She gasped and felt herself falling backward. Suddenly a pair of strong, powerful arms wrapped themselves around the small of her waist to prevent her from falling. She hastily responded by

. This was followed

by their bodies twisting around together as if they were dancing, and then she felt herself falling backward again in another direction

and then

thud

. The pain was most unbearable this time,

as the heavy body was

on top of her. She tried to breathe, but it was difficult,

as she felt

as though she were being squeezed like a pancake. She had to admit, however, that even though the huge body on top of her was hard

She opened her eyes to see mauve-

gray eyes watching her. She

caught her breath at the back of her throat as Darcy whispered,

gazed down

at her. His heart was beating so fast that his chest was aching

aching with familiar angst and familiar delight because she was in

his arms. She smelled beautiful too, of lavender, and it caused his

senses

to float with wonder.

She was warm and soft under him, begging him to do more

than just lie still on top of her. He wanted to kiss her, like he

d always wanted to kiss her and take her into his arms when they

were children, even after he

d started to believe the lies Alaina and

Tara told him about her. Even after that awful incident at the tree

house when he thought Alice had wanted to kill Alaina and he

A Secret Kiss

103 hated her so much and treated her so badly, he had still wanted

her. He hated himself for that. Hated himself for falling in love

with the girl who

d wanted to kill his

twin sister.

p himself and smiled at her. Yes, it was both

painful and pleasurable to be with her. The feelings that had

tormented him a long time ago were now returning with a

vengeance.

times and then began to race hard. She blinked and licked her lips,

wondering why he was smiling at her. She knew he still had a

grudge against her since that awful incident years ago at the tree

house. That was why he

d never talked to her again and had treated

her so coldly. She

d never blamed him for that, of course, knowing

very well that he was just being very protective of his sister.

ou

he said logically, not at all displeased that her soft

arms were wrapping around him like a lover

.

Alice widened her eyes in shock when she realized she was

hugging him tight. She hastily removed her arms and looked away,

her cheeks even redder now.

position on top of her. He could feel her soft body beneath his,

and it was making his being respond with desire. Her face, fresh

and beautiful, was only inches from his

Because it
was wrong.
Very wrong.
Slowly
reluctantly
he moved back.
Alice breathed in relief, and before she could bring herself to
stand up
er
waist,
pulling her to him. Their bodies were so close to each other
that they might fuse as they stood up together.
Standing there with Alice in his arms, Darcy was hurting
himself. He knew he was leading himself down a dangerous path
t take, but it was just too damn tempting. He
104 Alexia Praks
wanted to kiss her.
No!
He not only wanted to kiss her, but he
wanted her to forgive him for doubting her innocence. He wanted
her to forgive him of his horrible treatment toward her when
they
d been children. He wanted her and her forgiveness so bad
that it hurt inside.
Alice hastily moved away from Darcy, blushing profusely.
Darcy gritted his teeth and shut his eyes for a moment to regain
control of his emotions. Yes, he needed to appear cool and in
control in front of his brothers. He d
brothers
just how fragile he was emotionally, especially where this
young woman was concerned. After all, he
d never shown his
brothers anything other than the cool, collected, and arrogant
Once he
d gained control of himself, he turned calmly to
Conrad and Nicolas,
who were watching him, waiting for his
answers.
id. Then before they could ask him any more
the stairs.
at her for running into him. She was also relieved that,
for the first
time, he had smiled at her. Perhaps, just perhaps,
hed forgiven her.
t them toward the stairs as well,
Toby trotting after her happily.
Nicolas cocked his head to one side as he watched them go. He
pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, his eyes narrowed.
down your guard, b

A Secret Kiss

105 Remembrance of the Past

James was pleased that Alice
had decided to join them
for dinner this evening. He gazed
at
her across the dining table,
noting she
surrounding her as she had been this morning.
Mary, who
kept
up
a constant chatt
er, was sitting on her right. To her left
was Conrad

snaffled
that particular chair before anyone had
a chance to steal it
from him.

Tara and Alaina, who were sitting on the far end of the table,
the same room as her. Alice, on the other hand, paid them no
heed. She continued to enjoy her meal and now and again gave
some chicken to Toby who was sitting on the floor behind her.

.
S
by the pond will
hy I waited until spring to get married. Alice kept
telling me how beautiful cherry blossoms are in spring,
replied enthusiastically.
about some stupid cherry trees,
put in, stamping her knife and fork down loudly on the table.

106 Alexia Praks
James frowned and said,
disagree.
beautiful in full bloom, like lovely pink c
louds in the air,
and they
aware of this, and her temper flared.
cheery trees being pulled out in the
middle of the night too,
James managed to blush at the reminder.

idea,
hundred cherry trees with her own money and planted them
,
another piece of chicken to Toby.

,
it
anymore
too.
James frowned at his daughters
rude behavior and then looked
over to Beth. He noted
plump face and tightened his fingers around his cutlery. He said,
you been away from home for so long that you forgot how to show
some appreciat
could hear her. She turned her eyes to the housekeeper, who was
wonderful chicken for us, Beth
Beth nodded at her in appreciation.

she
thought,
always there to help when anyone needs
help.

A Secret Kiss
107

her adopted
brother.
Conrad was quite pleased that Alice involved him in her solo
conversation a

,
Perhaps I will bake some chocolate cake tomorrow.
How does that
Marvelous
cake. And your
chocolate cake is the sweetest on the island
The housekeeper
chuckled at his remark.

Alaina was fuming. She
d had enough of this stupid
conversations. What the hell did they have to praise the housekeeper

and then stalked out
of the room, her temper hot. Tara stood up
as well, gave out an outrageous puff as though to tell everyone they
should be ashamed of themselves,
and then left the room.

James and Brenda looked at each other.
Up on the second floor of the mansion, Alaina slammed the
Tara turned to look at the pretty girl she
d been manipulating
since they

,
frowning.
Please,
she thought darkly,
not Sebastian and Darcy. Not

,
d looked like
a boy in love. But he was only twenty
years old and so technically
not yet a fully matured man. Alice, on the other hand, was
108 Alexia Praks
twenty-
three.

Aside from the age difference,
they were also
siblings
even though adopted and not at all blood related, but
still.

I want to go and stay at the hotel,

.
pped. Of course, there was no way
and Darcy,
were under the same roof as Alice. She had to be
there to prevent certain things
from
happening. Then her heart did a somersault as a sudden thought
struck her.

What if Sebastian fell in love with Alice?

Or Darcy,
for

that matter?

What would she do then?

she despised most take the men she loved away from her.
u know how much I hate her

,
Shit!

She really must
calm the young woman down
again
if she wanted things to go her
ave her here by herself.

That just meant
fall on.

Furthermore, Alaina was very close to both James and Brenda and
hence a very good card in her hands if she needed help in her little
game.

Tara moved over to the other girl and put her arm around her.

First it was James

brother. Then who would be next?

Darcy?

d said the name

ever so softly so Alaina understood what she meant.

Tara knew Alaina was very protective of her brothers, especially

Darcy since they were twins and of course this worked out to her

Iaina whispered.

A Secret Kiss

109 Alaina chuckled

s.

110 Alexia Praks

Mono No Aware

The moon was bright and

high above th

e dark

gray

sky. It

was qu

iet and peaceful, and

Sebastian

stood there gazing

out

of his

bedroom window

, deep in thought. I

n the

distance across the

garden

, he could see the slight figure of a woman.

It was Alice,

and s

he was walking along the dragon

bridge that stretched across

the pond

. Her gait was slow, as if she

were

strolling through a park,

enjoying and appreciating the scenery.

Then o

nce she got to

the

middle

of the bridge,

she stopped and turned her eyes to gaze up

at the moon. A

moment later, she leaned both her elbows on

the railing

of the bridge and gazed down at the pond instead. He could

ace fro

m this

far, and he imagined

just how beautiful

His heart glowed

with delight

at the thought

. He noted it was quite breezy outside,

with petals of cherry

blossoms floating around her, and Sebastian felt his blood warm.

She looked so at peace, and he felt his heart radiate with love

toward her. Then before he changed his mind, he turned on his

heel and headed out the door. In an instant, he was outside and

rushing down the pathw

to her

.

A Secret Kiss

111 He stopped at the base of the bridge, his heart thumping

hard

not from the rushing,

but from the sight of her before him.

Alice was enjoying herself watching the many com. swimming

and by instinct she turned.
this time of night too. This was after all her sanctuary, a place
her of her birth, of the woman who had given her life, and of the
name she
d been given.
her.
side.
He stopped only inches from her
his tall, masculine body
overpowering her small frame. Alice took a step back, her heart
suddenly pounding in her chest.
Up close and at this time of the night,
under the bright
moonlight
and with the pink glow of cherry blossoms around
them, Sebastian realized that she looked even more alluring than
ever with her black hair, flawless skin, luscious lips, and brown eyes.
Sebastian reluctantly moved his gaze away from her
breathtaking face to look at his surroundings.
oting the bright cherry blossoms
that hung so low they almost touch
ed the glassy water of the pond,
the bright moon in the distance, and of course Alice herself
standing there before him. She blended into the scenery perfectly,
almost as if she were a part of them, born within them.
always come here
when I
She reached over to pick a branch containing a few flowers and
then gave it to him. Sebastian glanced at her, and when he saw she
nodded, he reached his hand out to her. As he took the branch, his
finger
s

brushed hers.

112 Alexia Praks

Alice sucked in her breath and hastily moved her hand back.
He brought it to his nose and inhaled
his eyes on her. Then
his pupils dilated at the sweet scent rushing into his being. It was
then he realized it was the same sweet scent he
d smelled on her
that first time they
d met at the road.
flowers
from the long, thick branches
to her.

Alice sucked in her breath and became tense. She could feel
the heat of his body radiating to her. Suddenly she felt all warm
and tingly and lightheaded.

He chuckled, and Alice tilted her head back to look at him,
noting his hair was glowing like white gold and his face shadowy
dark under the moonlight.

,he said

He r

eaches out and
stroked her hair back
gently

. Then he inserted the flower on the

Alice blushed and cast

her eyes do

thin

her stomach fluttering intensely.

You said it means cherry

back to get some space between

them, but it seemed

She noted that he was waiting for her to elaborate on her answer.
She cleared her throat, fully aware of his closeness and the fact that
her heart was pounding hard within her chest.
whether he liked it or not. Not that he could blame her after that,
of course.

A Secret Kiss

113

sakura symbolizes
the transience of
life

the extreme beauty and quick death, which in turn represents
our own immortality. Our life could be taken away just like that,
like in the old

en days when sakura also represents the life of a
samurai, ready to be sacrificed for his master in a blink of an eye.
mono no aware

She cocked her head to one side, wondering why he was asking
her so many questions. Why he wanted to know. Why he was so
interested.

Mono no aware

in Buddhist teachings means that one should
be aware of the transience of things. Once you realize that, you
appreciate it more, and it evokes within you a gentle sadness once
astian said softly, his warm breath
fanning the top of her head.

.
She widened her eyes at him.

sakura

He said the wor
stomach to flutter deliciously
ore than

one

Silen

celong, dead silen

ce as they both stood there, motionless,
as the breeze and cherry blossoms danced around them. Suddenly,
Sebastian moved fast. Alice felt his hands cupping her face
gently

. She held her breath as she gazed up at him, her heart
pounding away like some noisy steam train.

114 Alexia Praks

Sebastian moved his face closer to hers. They were almost nose
to nose and lips to lips when he said,
Alice blinked, confused, lost, and totally not in control of her
she think? What did he mean?

Oh, Lord!

His lips were so sensual.

And those sky-
blue eyes of his.

She could feel the heat rising within her womanhood, and she
softly groaned.

apologize for my incompetence
in protecting you when we

, I will never let anyone

or anything hurt you

Alice stared up at him, long and hard. Suddenly she was in
full control of her mind once again, and that was when everything
about the younger Sebastian Princeton flashed before her eyes.
close distance, not presenting himself before her, but had always
been there nonetheless. He

d secretly helped

Had

it been he

who had stood there watching her enter in the

d had that horrib
who had called upon Daddy James to come and comfort her?
Yes, she remembered that, remembered him standing there at
the door, a small figure of a boy, watching Daddy James soothe
her with his kind words and gentle hands, watching her begging
Daddy James to pl
want her new siblings
to hate and hurt her.
Alice closed her eyes, tears burning within them, threatening
to pour out with a vengeance. Her mind flashed back to that day
the day she nearly died

. * * * * *

Water! It was all around
her, suffocating her, wanting to
kill her.

Her body
, small and weak, was washed about in the dangerous,
A Secret Kiss

115 herself. She wanted to scream for help, but when she opened her mouth,
water rushed in and suffocated her. She shook her head, tears burning
in her eyes, her heart intense
with pain.

She was scared. Her heart raced. Her body ached. And she knew
would take her far,
far away. She knew it would please her new brothers and sisters a lot.
She closed her eyes.

Then she stayed still. She felt her small body floating there in the
deep ocean, her eyes half-
closed. As she sa
nk deeper to the bottomless
pit, she glimpsed rays of light flickering beautifully from above. Then
slowly

very slowly
she saw a small figure of a boy reaching his hand
out for her, the azure eyes large with fear,
and his small boyish face
pale with dread.

though no sound came out of her mouth.
She reached her hand out to him, but it was to no avail as he too
began to struggle in the water. He was drowning. Just like her. He was
drowning with her.

Why would he want to save her when he himself was struggling
against the angry sea?

She was tired
so tired.

She closed her eyes and felt herself go.

* * * * *

Alice fluttered her eyes open,
and without
her
knowing it, tears flowed down
was crying.

Sebastian moved then, taking her into his arms. His lips were
against her forehead, and before he could stop himself, he kissed
her there, his firm lips warm against her skin.

Alice closed her eyes and felt weak and warm inside. Her
about that day for so long.

116 Alexia Praks

When Sebastian took a step back, she tried to breathe normally
but found it rather difficult. It was even more difficult to control
her mind. She tried, honest to God, she really tried not to think
about that day. She needed to clear her mind. She needed to get
away.

Ca instead of accepting his apology and confirming his posess

thank-
you or
begin anew
, she
him, her whole body shaking.
Sebastian watched her go, wondering if he
d done the right
thing by apologizing to her and, God,
of all things, kissing her.
But surely
hopefully
she understood that it was a brotherly kiss
and meant nothing other than that. He
d made sure he kissed her
forehead and not her lips as he wanted to, which was of course very
tempting indeed.
He stayed there a few more minutes, taking in the beautiful
scenery before h
breath, cherishing it and loving the sound of it between his lips.
When he got back to his room, four of his brothers
Nicolas,
Tristan, Logan, and Conrad
were there waiting for him, ready
to pound on him. He didn
them
all out.
growled at him.
Sebastian had no idea they
d seen him from the house. Then
again, it
t surprise him because he himself had seen Alice
from his bedroom window.

.
Sebastian realized he had to explain himself to his brothers. He
or more importantly he did
interested in Alice. And now here he was, competing with these
really big, bad, handsome wolves to get the girl.
Sebastian sighed and went to crash himself on the sofa near the
hearth.

A Secret Kiss

117
across his chest.
scolded darkly.
apologized
because of what had happened back in their childhood days. The
other
brothers, however, understood perfectly.
apologize
Nicolas came to put his arm around his brot
I am too partly to blame. As the eldest brother,
I should have done
something, but
instead
I
stood by and ignored
ve hurt her in some way.
the brothers said in unison.
you hurt her and wants to apologize
u do
something about it
were me, I
apologize to her right now,
a hug and a ki

from his seat and pulled his brother back by the collar of his shirt.

olas said

a brotherly kiss. I am, after all, he

118 Alexia Praks

ed him

shall give Alice brotherly

nd one by one, the brothers

left his room, leaving Sebastian alone and wondering how the hell

he was going to keep his brothers away from Alice. How the hell

was he going to protect her from them? And then he wondered at

just how the hell he was going to protect her from himself.

A Secret Kiss

119 Cake F

lavor? Alice, Please!

Baby-blue eyes glar

ed at her

accusingly

, and that pretty

face scrunched with disgust.

nine-year-

old Alaina hissed.

Ten

-year-

old

were squeezing hers so tight it was painful. She wanted to tell the girl

to stop hurting her and let her go, but Alaina only sneered at her.

asked sarcastically, her head

cocked to one side, her eyes narrowed darkly.

Ten

-year-

old

Very slowly, Alice watched in horror as Alaina unwrapped her

ing Alaina as she slowly fe

ll backward from the tree house, her small body flying down toward the

ground as if she were falling from a cliff edge down to the angry sea

below.

Alice screamed, her eyes wide with fear,

as Alaina was about to

hit the hard ground below. Suddenly, it was Alice who felt her own

body falling

down, down, and down.

Splash!

120 Alexia Praks

The hungry water was everywhere around her, engulfing her,

wanting to eat her alive. She struggled and tried to scream for help.

She was dying, and she knew s

Blue eyes. A pair of beautiful, sky-

blue eyes were watching her.

A

s

were

reaching out for her.

he seemed to be shouting. His voice, however, was muffed

by the water as his hands desperately reached out for her.

Alice woke up with a start, her body hot and sweating and her

ed hard within

her chest,

and her head

was spinning out of control.

She closed her eyes again, told herself to calm down because it

was only a dream.

No!

A nightmare. A long-

ore nightmare, she

d forgotten, but in fact
it had lain dormant deep
within her mind.
She turned on her side and tried to sleep, but it was impossible.
She kept seeing those blue eyes, wide with fear, as they stared at
her.
gazed at the bright
moon that shone through her opened curtain.
She touched her
hand to her chest where she felt the pounding of her heart
Soon she closed her eyes again and returned to sleep. This time
though
there was no nightmare.
The next morning, Alice felt like a zombie. She was so lost in
her own thoughts that
d reached the dining
room.

.
her the moment she stepped
when he instantly had his strong arms around her person and gave
her a really tight hug.
Alice wanted to tell him of course not. She had a nightmare,
if he wanted to know the details. But instead she watched in horror
as Conrad moved his face toward her, his lips coming down fast
A Secret Kiss
121 toward her forehead. She closed her eyes, wondering what Conra
d wanted to do, when she felt strong hands around her slender arms
and then a hard, swift pull of her body, releasing her from
, his hands tight around her,
her face only inches from his massive chest. She could feel his body
heat radiating, causing her to feel warm and dizzy at the same time.
She tilted her face to look at him and saw he was gazing down at
her, his eyes deep and intense. She felt her tummy flutter and her
head started to spin. Perhaps it resulted from her tiredness due to
her lack of sleep last night. Well, at least she hoped that was the
reason,
. Without knowing it, her knees weakened and she lost her
stance. Darcy swiftly tightened his hold on her, bringing her closer
to h
im
Alice wanted to tell him she coul
because
shed been up all night thinking about many random things but
especially about that nightmare and Sebastian and his kiss last
night.
She managed to get hold of herself and shook her head to tell
them she was fine. When she glanced over at the large dining table,
she noted all the brothers were there, sporting rather concern
ed looks
on their faces,
y be pleased
she was suffering?

.
he moved away from
came to sit down at the end of the table as far
away from the brothers as possible. Conrad would have none of it,
however, and dragged her around the table to sit next to him and
Darcy.
sked, and
Tristan nearly fell off his chair. Sebastian flashed Conrad a
watch
look. Though Conrad had seen it, he decided to
122 Alexia Praks
ignore it and hide a smile. Tristan laughed, and Nicolas, Logan, and

omewhat
all of a sudden.
What she
Yes, of course she could take care of herself on most things, but
Chatsworth,
whom the brothers had agreed was a wolf and out to
snaffle Alice away.
Alice grabbed some toast and proceed to spread some
strawberry jam on it, wondering where Daddy James and Mom
Brenda had gone off to.

,
sensing her questioning look.

.
She blinked and then took a bite of the toast.
he prompted.

,
as she came in to sit beside Conrad.
Alice smiled the moment she saw her fri
fill, my bride-
to-be, cause
to be a day filled
she said, grabbing another toast and giving it to Mary across
Conrad.
. How
nice you put it. I shall indeed eat my fill afore you condemn me to
an eternity of labor
Then they both laughed.
The brothers were interested in their odd behavior. It looked as
though Alice and Mary were very close friends.
labor
ed his standard coffee.

-to-
A Secret Kiss
123
-to-be, the maid of
honor,
Katherine, and of course,
the very lovely bridesmaid
a bridesmaid

. His tone of
voice indicated that he was none too pleased.
Alice was take
best friends. Of
The brothers nodded
were best friends nor that Alice was going to be a bridesmaid.
Hence,
they wondered who the groomsmen were and wondered if
the bridesmaids and groomsmen had to dance together.
as if sensing what
all his brothers were thinking.

s
Mary said.
The brothers seemed to sigh with relief. They knew Jack
Donaldson was already married, and therefore, Alice wasn
t in
danger there. And of course,
and
was a family member,
which meant no danger there either.

. Then she thought to
This was followed by guilty looks and an uncomfortable cough
from Tristan.

y
flavor

that
 late. I just need to choose the flavor
 Mrs. Wat
 the table.
 All his brothers eyed him with suspicion.
 ,
 mayb
 favorite
 glanced from one brother to the others, wondering why they
 wanted to help out, and tasting cake of all things.
 , half-
 standing. She
 help
 The brothers nodded in unison.
 Alice could only stare at them.
 Say no! Please say no! Mary,
 please!
 he Dessert Room
 going to be a long day.
 Not long after that, she found herself in
 behind her neck. Mary was next to her, going through the cake list
 in the brochure she had earlier, and Logan was sitting next to
 Conrad
 on the back seat.
 chocolate, but
 m
 berries
 A Secret Kiss
 125
 Mary put the pamphlet down and turned to look at Conrad
 ip
 ip
 , come on. Tell us about your br
 erves
 I
 ed at
 Alice, who was
 too busy looking at the road ahead.
 ,
 re all still single.
 rned to look at the
 scenery
 he said, again
 moment I me
 to offer this gir
 Mary turned to look at Logan and Conrad behind her again.
 he teased.
 Conrad folded his arms across
 It was Logan
 turn to
 This welcomed a surprised,
 weird stare from Mary, and she
 I
 sister? I think Alice is anything
 but
 126 Alexia Praks
 Alice tightened her hands on the steering wheel
 what Mary had just said that bothered her. It was because Logan
 had called her
 my sweet
 sister
 .
 head to one side, pretending to search his brain for Mark
 mouth and asked

Mary laughed
so long and
so damn hard. I know in my guts that Mark likes Alice, but she
won
budge
Mary. I told you
-hot
about
Conrad was momentarily d
-hot breasts. He wondered what
they looked like
and
Mary shouted.
Logan frowned d
Mary
harrumphed

,
A few minutes later, they arrived in town.
It was a picture-
perfect little town with beautiful old buildings dating back to the
eighteenth century. Most of the shops and eateries were set up by
the waterfront. Hence they had an excellent view of the beach and
the blue ocean beyond. In the far distance,
one could almost see
New York to the west if one had a good imagination.

A Secret Kiss

127 Alice parked the car along the side of the road, and they all
got out. Logan stretched out his long legs and arms and inhaled
the fresh air.
Mary said, pulling him by the
fun,
Logan responded.
Conrad rushed up to walk beside Alice when he saw that his
brothers were getting out of the other car parked not too far away
and knew
he decided.
nchtime by the time we finish
ing up at him, wondering what he was
on about.
could go. We could get to know each othe
Alice smiled up at him, her eyes twinkling. She wondered if
he wanted to be friends with her and perhaps get to know her a bit
better as adopted siblings. Or perhaps she wondered if he was
playing tricks on her. But then again, why would he? He was a
grown adult. No one had time for that sort of bull now, and to be
frankly honest, neither did she.

.
,he almost begged her, his eyes large as he waited
expectantly.
Alice thought he reminded her of Toby and coul
,she
accepted a date with him.
By that time, all the brothers had caught up with them. Alice
turned around to have a look. Her heart skipped a beat as she gazed
at the brothers, and it did a triple skip once her eyes met
128 Alexia Praks
Sebastian
. Oh, God!
Why was her heart beating so hard? W
hy was
she finding it so difficult
to breathe properly? Not to mention her
stomach kept flipping again
and again

an awesome sight, she thought. They looked like they were advertising for Levi or something, with their long legs and tall frames. Oh my God! If she had her camera photos of them and post them up for sale. Lots of commercial companies would buy them for their advertisements.

,
put in.
just had breakfast,

.
-six

,
-of-
Alice sighed, wondering why they were fighting about lunch and who was going or not. Surely they were all going, right? Finally they reached The Dessert Room, and Alice was very stood before her and practically begged her to taste their choices of cakes not that they were much different since they were mostly chocolate.

said.
Mary nodded
A Secret Kiss
129

which
He moved and
is similar to the color of your eyes. Deep, dark, and dangerously teration to describe chocolate and , the man was from Alice, who blushed intensely.

almost tw
Mary turned to Darcy,
Next
color
s
at her.

Sebastian said,
Alice, who at that moment decided to lick the last of the white, fluffy cream by popping her finger into her mouth and sucking. All the brothers were watching her, their eyes fixed on her sensuous lips and the slender finger that slowly moved out of her mouth.

Her innocent action was so erotic that the brothers were actually panting, and their bodies were heating up knowin

g. Mary, with her head still down and jotting notes, finally asked her like little pups who wanted to be petted.

Alice blinked and turne
Conrad b

e chuckled uncomfortably.

130 Alexia Praks

Nicolas was the first to regain his wit and coughed loudly to distract his other brothers from the trance. Sebastian managed to get himself out too and

, then,
Yes, it
, off to

awkward all of a sudden.

There was something in his vo

ice, it was within her. Actually, all the brothers were eating a bit

e, too.
he headed after Sebastian. They both walked out the door side by side.

He gave Alice a quick glance and then walked out the door.

Sakur
a noticed him looking at her. She thought there was something in his eyes something secretive and almost painful.
happily.

m to your women,
he practically dragged Tristan out the door.
game. If I keep going,
to

before leaving the shop, he dragged Conrad out with him by wholeheartedly.

Alice cocked her head to one side, wondering what the heck was wrong with them.

n away when they lose interest

A Secret Kiss

131 Coffee, Coffee, & More Coffee

asked Darcy, getting rather annoyed at the insistent ringing of the cell phone.

company

The ringing stopped, and Darcy sighed in relief. Oh, he knew very well

it was Kate Anderson, his ex-girlfriend, who had called him insistently. That was pick up. She

d been

texting him too, since the first night he

d arrived on the island,

apologizing to him

have been so rash to him

back there and

that she

wanted to get back with him. She

was full

of bullshit,

of course, and Darcy was frankly sick and tired of her

insistent text

messaging and ringing.

He relaxed, resting his weight on his elbow as he stared off into the distance across the beach, enjoying the view.

132 Alexia Praks

g,

.
island, though

St. Helena Beach, b

s,

added

.

Yes,
he thought.

T

hat was what he needed

solitude

. More

importantly,

he needed to get away from Alice. He needed to

keep some distance between them, both for his peace of mind and for his heart.

It was an hour later when Mom called

the
sand
The brothers got up as well and made their way
to where the
two girls
were waiting for them.
Sebastian noticed Alice standing there with her long hair
dancing in the wind and her floral skirt fluttering about her slender
legs. She looked like a beautiful heroine standing by the cliff
edge
,
waiting for the return of her lover who
d gone off to war. His heart
skipped a beat. He gritted his teeth at that.
s your adopted sister
, he told himself.
They reached her, and Conrad quickly got to her side like a
loyal pup. Sebastian
behind her. He could smell her beautiful scent again, which he
simply loved. Not to mention her long hair kept flirting with his
face, which he also loved.
They came to a small café a couple of blocks farther
. It was
facing the beach and had a very good view of the ocean. It was also
jam-
packed with costumers.
She glanced behind her at the seven
brothers.
Sebastian was impressed with the café. It was medium-
sized
with very nice, warm décor of earthy color
s which made one feel
A Secret Kiss
133 immediately cozy. In fact, he was surprised there were so many
tourists there right now.
wever, when a
boy of about eight
years old rushed up to Alice and wrapped his
arms around her waist, giving her such a long and tight hug.
Alice tousled his dark hair and chuck
ss
biggest, fattest grin
on his face.
miss
Just not that much,
if you must know, Michael, I did
The brothers, by this point, wanted to know who the boy was.
The boy sucked in his breath and froze in his place as he stared
up at Nicolas.
so
The brothers took the opportunity to laugh at Nicolas. The
eldest brother
behavior and gave them a
good scowl.
s son, the oldest
one
Michael stared wide-eyed
you are here!
Come on,
With that the
table by the window that had a great view of the ocean beyond.
The brothers took their seats around the table while Michael made
sure Alice sat next to him.

and Conrad muttered something under his breath. Just then a pretty brown-haired and green-eyed young woman came to their table. Alice got up and gave her a hug, which caused the brothers to wonder who this woman was. The woman replied. Then she moved over to hug Mary. "Yes, Peter and Mary nodded. Then she turned to honor, also short staffed that, she got up and headed toward the kitchen as if she knew what she was doing. Running after her friend. Alice saw no other option once they were left alone. No one was going to take their orders, so she stood up and asked the brothers what they wanted. Mary asked. There was a surprised one of those cute uniforms like the rest. But not today. I This totally shocked the brothers, and they, especially Tristan and Logan, grinned cheekily. Sebastian knew his brother A Secret Kiss 135 were wandering off into their fantasy worlds involving Alice and a sexy uniform and This managed to retrieve his brothers back from la-la land. Logan had the courtesy to cough to hide his sneaky smile. Tristan sighed with a happy expression on his face. Hayden chuckled. Conrad blushed. Darcy shook his head as though they were beyond help. And Nicolas managed to laugh uncomfortably. too had managed to lose himself to such an imagination with a simple suggestion. n open steak and a n open steak sandwich as well, thank you Conrad was about to tell her his order when Michael interrupted him loudly. please. Oh, and I want a cute teddy bear on my hot chocolate. Indeed, you Then she turned to Conrad, who was smiling and frowning at eight-year-mochaccino and pasta, Alice nodded, and one by one the brothers told her what they wanted. They were very surprised to see that orders down and went straight to the point-of-sale machine behind the counter to order everything herself, as if she owned the place. They were even more surprised when she went to the coffee machine and expertly began making their hot drinks. When fifteen minutes later she returned, it was with two silver trays carrying their orders. plac

One by one, Alice gave the others their drinks they
d ordered.

ing to sit beside Michael,
hot chocolate for my dearest Mi
cup in
front of him.

136 Alexia Praks
hael shouted and bragged to the
brothers by shoving his cup to them, pointing at the picture of a
bear on his hot chocolate.

,
added
sourly.
?
e pretty.

.
she asked, looking at th
e brothers, remembering when they
d been children and how they
always preferred pretty Tara over her
the quiet, shy, ugly Alice
who no one wanted to be friends with.
d, wondering if she
d deliberately
sabotaged their drinks. After all, how could she know how to make
proper coffee?

Mich
Cause
really good
at making it
Michael blinked and
he turned to the brothers
and noted they looked as if they were afraid to drink their coffees,
except for Conrad,
who was enjoying his tremendously. She
wondered if she should have put salt in their drink just for the fun
of it. But then
again, she
The brothers,
excluding Conrad, looked down at their cup of
coffee as if there were poison in it. Nicolas picked his up and slowly,
while all his brothers had their eyes on him, took a sip. The
brothers waited, watching him. Nicolas closed his eyes. He tasted
the smooth blend of the coffee bean. It was beautiful, amazingly
A Secret Kiss

137 delightful in his mouth. He flashed his eyes open and took another
sip.

asked.
Nicolas nodded. Logan, knowing if it had passed Nicolas
stamp of approval it had to be very good,
quickl
some more.

One by one the brothers drank theirs and sighed with pleasure.
They all agreed it was one of the best coffees they
d ever had.

said, and the brothers laughed.

138 Alexia Praks
Hayden Princeton, Prince of Rebel
The brothers
had decided that
Alice was in great
danger where Richard Collins was concerned after all. The man
was a flirt

and they
knew
he had his
sight
set
on Alice the moment he laid eyes on her. He looked
like he
d just seen a
n angel descending from
heaven.
Yes, the brothers decided they no longer liked Richard very
much. Not that they had ever liked him very much before anyway.
They
d always considered him a bit of an oddball and rather fishy.
Of course,
after they
d seen how he hugged Alice for a bit too
long and how he had his arms around her as if she belonged to
him, and
of all things
gave her a peck on her left cheek? That was
the final straw. Their expressions were fouler than the northern
storm that was raiding the Scottish sea as they watched Richard
taking advantage of
their
Alice. Sebastian was all but ready to pull
the man away from the helpless girl and throw him into the ocean.
Darcy was thinking of
giving him a good knock to the face.

?
ce rather
dangerously at Richard. Conrad gritted his teeth in annoyance.

A Secret Kiss

139

ing
arms. She chuckled uncomfortably and
blushed intensely. She surely hoped the
them. O
ne glance in their direction, however, told her a different
story. They looked as though they were ready for war.
ce I last saw you,
remarked
, as
though he were caressing every single word with his tongue.
The brothers noticed this, and it bothered the hell out of
themespecially Tristan, who scowled darkly. He decided that
that, especially when used on Alice.
Alice cocked her head to
s been
a rather
a long time,
Nicolas decided the hug was long enough and interrupted them.
no see,
he said. He extended his hand so
Richard had no choice but to move away from Alice to do the
manly, friendly handshake.

,
responded
Then he turned to wave at the other six brothers who all gave him
a cold greeting. He turned back to Alice. He was about to give
her another peck on the cheek when Sebastian saved her by pulling
her to his side.
said, leading her away.

Alice was released and was saved from the embarrassment of

to Sebastian and gave him an appreciative smile.

Sebastian decided to return her smile with

a cold scowl and said

-nonsense tone

of voice.

Annoyed at how he was treating her, she shrugged her arms free

from his tight grasp to tell him

d with his behavior.

140 Alexia Praks

Then she stomped past the brothers and

headed straight to Mary,

who was busy hugging and kissing her fiancé,

Peter

,
seen him for centuries.

Tristan asked, interested.

,
naïveté. Really, he thought,

Sebastian needed to hang around women more to understand their

behavior. Nicolas nodded, telling Sebastian that he did indeed do

something wrong. Darcy, however, agreed with Sebastian and said,

Richard came up behind them as they started heading toward

th

s

She was so

in th

d been rather quiet

and painfully shy when she was young, but he

d always noticed her.

She

d always been there, quietly observing them, quietly going

about her business. But

hy he

d forgotten

all about her for those past years. Perhaps it was because he

d never

seen her again since she left for boarding school. Of course,

hed also been busy with studies at high school and then university. Not

to mention friends, work, and the occasional girls who came and

went.

Her existen

ce just kind of faded out

of his mind.

e to bring her out of her shell.

continued.

Katherine, and I.

My three little darlings, out and about doing all sorts of mischief.

Mind you, I had to look after them. Alice has always been my

favorite

control. So much spirit in her and very wild too

A Secret Kiss

141

cousin was waiting for Alice to grow up so he could what?

Sebastian had a good idea what Richard wanted and decided

the cousin would have to get over his dead body first to get Alice.

g the one who always

took the bull by the horns

Richard la

-

Nicolas nudged his glass

es up the bridg

,

,

ed about her welfare?

Hayden said
Richard, very wrong
s, c
ous
in
an slapped Richard on the
shoulder so hard that the man nearly went sprawling to the ground
. Then the seven brothers all walked ahead, leaving Richard
standing there looking rather confused about
the whole situation.
Alice, who was standing on the other side, wondered how
they were going to get home with only two cars when there were
now eleven of them. Then she decided perhaps she should ring
home and tell Daddy James they needed a lift. Or perhaps she
could wait and go up to the house with Katherine when her friend
finished work at the café.
will have to stay behind or else ride in the trunk
up to the house t
142 Alexia Praks

It was decided then, and Sebastian took Alice by the elbow
their car.
he said.
you guys today
Peter, who found the whole situation a bit weird, finally had to
put in a word.
be enough
room in that car for everyone
The brothers looked at one another.

Conrad and Sebastian led Alice to theirs.
gs had gone so far. First
there was Sebastian, who
believe that after last night, after he
d said how he had wanted to
begin their sibling relationship anew, he would go this far. She
decided to glare at him to show him
or any of them for that matter
to interfere
in her life like that, especially when they
d never given her a
thought before.
Sebastian nudged her gently to get her into the car. She
harrumphed loudly, and before she decided she
d changed her
mind and wanted to go home with Katherine after all, she was
being pulled away by an
arm.

A Secret Kiss

143 She gasped in surprise as she felt a strong hand wrap tightly
around her slender wrist and none too slowly drag her to the other
side of the street, her feet stumbling behind two long, powerful
legs.
She glanced up to see Hayden laughing merrily as he pulled her
along with him.
on the other side of the street.
The brothers stood there watching them in shocked surprise. A

hat was going on until they
d reached a
couple of blocks away. She had to catch her breath and wriggled
release his hold on her, however, though he did stop to let her
catch her breath.

watched her, amused. He came to stand in front of her, blocking out the afternoon sun that was glaring down on her face. When she opened her eyes again, she gasped and caught her breath at the back

of her throat. Hayden was standing so close to her that she could

feel his warm breath fanning her face.

.He chuckled, grinning at her.

Alice was still heaving. When she finally stopped, she gazed up at him, confused and dazed.

What i

s he doing?

Why had he

taken her away from everyone else all of a sudden?

Hayden moved his face closer to her

s, as if he was about to kiss

her. Instead, however, he chuckled softly and gently blew air in her face to get her attention. She blinked.

Alice blinked again and cocked her head to one side. Hayden?

Asking her to go sightseeing?

She wanted to laugh. Of all things,

he wanted to take her sightseeing?

Yes, she remembered him asking her

144 Alexia Praks

No, not ask. Hayden had never asked. Hayden had basically

dragged her with him, as he

d just done moments before.

Yes, from her very early experiences, sightseeing with Hayden usually meant sneaking out of the Princeton Estate and doing something dangerous and illegal, such as stealing a motorcycle, for

example.

She still remembered those days so clearly. He

d dragged her

out with him late in the evening into town and then had stolen a

Harley-

Davidson motorcycle that he

d had his eyes on for ages.

After the thieving, he

d taken her riding with him for a good hour

or two

, of course. He said it was

thrilling

even more so with a girl

. And she had to be

that

girl. Of

course, this had gone on a couple of times until he

d crashed one

of the motorcycles. Naturally, Tara and Alaina had found out and had sneakily told Daddy James what happened. Hayden had been grounded for months, which pissed him off so badly that he turned Alice turned her attention to the earring on his left ear then.

She remembered him pressuring her to pierce his ear for him after that particular incident. He told her that since he

d been named

the black sheep of the house, he might as well go all out and pierce his ear too to get that perfect bad-

boy image. She even had to pick

him an earring and paid for it with her own money since he said it

had been her fault from the start. When she

d given him the pair

needed one. To this day, she still had that earring kept safely in her secret box.

Alice jolted back to reality. She raised her brows at him. Since when had Hayden ever asked her for her decision? She leaned back

ose

lose

you to

my dear brothers,

now

A Secret Kiss

145

and

wondered why he looked so wounded when she shrugged her

It was forty minutes later, after he

d shown her the mega yacht

thoroughly, that he proudly presented

to her his Harley-

Davidson

motorbike.

like a peacock.

Alice turned to look at him. She knew nothing about

motorbikes, and she was certainly not a motorbike fan, so what

did he expect her to say?

A moment later, after he realized

any more out

of her, he made her put on a helmet and told her to sit behind him.

Yes, they were going to ride his motorbike home, and hopefully

. But then again,

Hayden was now an expert

motorcyclist, so the chance of them crashing was next to zero. Yet

this was Hayden, and he liked to live dangerously.

Alice felt rather nervous and hastily tightened her arms about

his waist. Hayden secretly smiled behind his helmet, pleased with

their close contact.

started the engine. After engaging

the acc

elerator a few times to get the mood going, he released the

break and they were off.

Alice gritted her teeth the faster they went and her arms

the highway and had the road to themselves, Hayden glanced

behind him and saw that Alice was resting her head against his

back

. He liked that. He liked that very much. It brought back

memories

both happy and painful memories.

A few minutes later, he pressed his foot on the brake, causing

the motorbike to come to a complete halt in the middle of the road.

Alice stiffened and wondered

why he

d stopped all of a sudden.

146 Alexia Praks

Hayden switched off the engine and took off his helmet. He

turned around, and without her consent, pulled her helmet off as

pretty she was with her hair a wild mess and her face flush

ed red.

Alice cocked her head to one side, wondering what he was

, without further ado,

made her sit in front of him and told her to start the engine.

,she

ve never

h you. Here, turn this on and

voilà

The motorbike hummed, and Alice was rather pleased,

feeling a certain type of thrill rushing through her body.

driving the motorbike very slowly along the road. She was having fun and laughed out merrily. Hayden smiled, his eyes twinkling. It was a while later, just when she'd gotten used to the speed and the wind fluttering against her face, that she hastily stepped on the brake before she had the chance to crash into what was clearly a holdup in the middle of the road. Alice pulled off her the sight she beheld before her. The brothers looked like they were posing for a Calvin Klein photo shoot in the middle of the road and in the middle of nowhere. Conrad was standing on the roof of the SUV as if he'd just conquered Mount Everest. Tristan was half-reclining on the hood of the car. Darcy was posing very nicely to the side near the front of the car. Sebastian was resting his weight against the car, his hands in the pockets of his jeans. The moment she stopped, they made a move. Sebastian was scowling again. She wondered if he would ever stop scowling at her. Tristan slid off his rather comfortable recliner, and Conrad jumped down from the roof of the car.

A Secret Kiss

147 Alice could
She blinked, and just to piss him off, she smiled at him sweetly. wrapping his hand around her arm.
Hayden took off his helmet
allow the Prince of Rebel

,
So it is Sebastian again,
Alice thought in annoyance.
What is
wrong with him? Why is
he being so overbearing right now?

,
gently.
Just to show Sebastian he
tell her what to do,
she refused
to move an inch from the bike.
Sebastian, however, did it for her by scooping her into his arms
and carr
ying her
with the helmet still in her hands
toward the
car.
Sebastian refused to listen to her. Alice grumbled under her
breath and glared at him.

.
le,
around to the car as well.
her voice ice cold.
ian said
matter-
of-factly.
Tristan butted
in.

eldest right now since I was born a full six minutes before him, so

148 Alexia Praks

Sebastian finally put her down. She brushed down her skirt and hair and muttered under her breath. Sebastian opened the door of the car for her, telling her with his stance to get in.

over
me. After all, I am twenty-
three and not a three-
year-
old
Sebastian folded his arms across his massive chest, almost in
But to hell with him!
Who did he think he was? He had never cared
about her welfare before, so why now?
hooose how she wants to get home,
Hayden butted
in, giving her a cheeky smile.
. How
do you want
Alice knew he wanted her to ride home in the car. Well, h
e could go home with his brothers without her. She held her head
Alice felt bad. It was even worse when Conrad gave her the
puppy-
dog look. But she hardened herself against her tender heart.
,
upset.
moved to Hayden,
who
was smiling at her with glee.
Sebastian watched her go, his face impassive
s
Tristan knew Sebastian was pissed
showing it, and when Sebastian was pissed, his driving was affected,
which could lead to the passengers experiencing a roller-
coaster
-type ride. Frankly none of them wanted that right now. What
bastian to go up to
A Secret Kiss
149 Hayden and say
take Hayd
asking.
All Hayden could do was look at his older brother, stunned.
Sebastian put on the helmet and got on the bike. Alice was so
shocked
that her mouth hung open in disbelief.
stian decided for her by nudging
her to him and made her sit behind him.
engine and drove off so fast Alice had to quickly wrap her arm
around his waist so she would
. Once she got her composure,
she glanced behind to see Hayden getting into the car and Darcy
staring after them, his face a hard mask.
Honestly, she thought this man in front of her was being very
unpredictable. She really had to give him a bit of her mind once
they were home
Sebastian deliberately missed the turn and headed straight toward
the beach on the other side of the island.
Alice tugged at his jacket to get his attention, to tell hi
m hed missed the turn. He answered her by ignoring her, and soon they
came to a nice clearing near the beach where he finally decided to
stop.
off the helmet, and confronted him.
ve you did that
gosh!
Who do you think you are? You deliberately missed the turn
,
you deliberately waited out in the middle of the
road too.
last night? Is it? Is it because we agreed to start over? Is that what

too busy admiring her sensual I
overreacting,
though. After all, he
d only wanted to protect her
from Richard
and Hayden, of course.

150 Alexia Praks

She finally stopped ranting when she realized
under
her breath.

Alice sucked in her breath.

Oh, God! Oh,
God!

He was smiling

at her. And when Sebastian smiled, her heart started to do a disco
dance. She realized then just how handsome he was when he
smiled. He was so charming, especially with his pale blond hair
that was a bit too long and his azure-
blue eyes that were twinkling.

Not to mention the dimple on his left cheek.

Suddenly he pulled her to him, his arms wrapped around her
ost too gently
for her liking.

What
the heck is
wrong with him?

out of me, Sebastian. I might have to
tell Daddy James wha
me. Like I always did when

He chuckled
telling Dad? Not a chance.

Alice frown
ed in confusion
you a lot when we

He looked
have be
en a child back
e said

, and neither
he confirmed, nodding her
head.

not interested.

She shut up immediately and blushed.

A Secret Kiss

151
and
unconsciously played with the pendant of her necklace, nervous all
of a sudden.

he asked suspiciously.
you

re old enough to go wherever
finally, disappointed, his heart beating painfully.

I want,
removed her hand from the pendant to put on her helmet.
Sebastian had a good look at the pendant. It was beautiful, in
the shape of the cherry blossom

wearing that, since she was a child? It must have meant something
to her, and he

152 Alexia Praks

Calamity

Jame

warily and wondered

where Alice had gone off to. He needed her delightful, full

not this tasteless

, muddy
-black water
that

deserve

to be
called
coffee.

Beth saw the sour look on his face and

.

Brenda, who was sitting beside him, knew her husband was
having
control yourself.

Y

James

e sound of that. Dinner was still four hours

away, too long for him. He tur

ned to Mary, who was busy going

through the many suitcases that Richard and Peter had brought

along from New York. Katherine was beside her, also searching

through the mountain of interesting contents that were for the
wedding.

A Secret Kiss

153 Mary glanced up in time to see

she said, shrugging her

. She

James glanced over at his sons

attention. He seemed to be lost in his own world as he stood there

by the window, gazing out as though he were expecting someone.

Conrad was sitting on the sofa, also facing the window.

He is rather

quiet today,

James thought with concern. He wondered what was

Nicolas was on the other side of the room, chatting with

Richard and Peter. Little Michael, who had taken a real liking to

Nicolas, was with them.

Tristan, Logan, and Hayden were on the sofa to the left side

near James. Logan was eyeing the coffee with distaste. Hayden was

biting his fingernails. And Tristan looked as though he were pissed

about something but

tried very hard to hide it.

James was very concerned indeed, because his sons were

behaving very oddly. First, Hayden only bit his fingernails when

he was upset or worried, and this was the first time in years James

had seen his son bite his fingernails. Second, Logan had always

been the happy-

go-lucky type, but this afternoon he

happy-

go-lucky at all. In fact, he looked worried. And thirdly,

Tristan was the dev

il-may-

care type, and now he too looked

worried.

Only Alaina and Tara, who were sitting on the other side of the

room sipping their coffees, seemed their usual selves.

reality.

ked.

.

Tristan scowled then

darkly

as if her very name bothered

ew, Alice was with

Logan scowled

153

Alaina Drake

d managed to compose herself, she muttered under her breath.
Alaina glanced over at her adopted sister with concern.

t the
door.

Darcy watched from the window as the motorcycle and its
riders came to a stop at the front of the house. He fisted his hands
as he watched Alice taking off her helmet. She was about to walk
to the house when Sebastian caught her wrist and pulled her back
to him. He was still holding on to her hand as he spoke to her,
which really bothered Darcy. What was even worse was the fact
that Sebastian was smiling as he was talking. From Sebasti
stance, the way his brother turned his torso toward Alice, Darcy
knew Sebastian was interested in Alice personally. What really
bothered Darcy was the fact that Alice was responding, even if
ooks of things, the two had

come
to what?

To an
understanding? Something more?

Dear God,
Darcy thought.

His heart was going to be ripped into
two pieces if it kept beating like that
so hard, so fast, and so
damn painful.

Calm down, you old beast. Please calm down.

From where she sat, Tara had a good view of the two people
outside and really wanted to scream until the house tumbled down.
Sebastian and Alice? No. No. No. How?

Oh, God help her. She
was going to go crazy in a second.

Finally Alice walked away, and a moment later she was in the
house along with Conrad.

ichael shouted the moment she stepped into the
drawing room. He got off his seat and raced to her, hugging her
around the waist. Conrad
el a bit jealous of
little Michael.

,
akura
said
warmly.

come up to the house with us.

erm
A Secret Kiss

155 Hayden, who
d suddenly stopped biting his nails, turned
around and
r away, and then Seb stole her away
, looking up at the brothers

.
Alice away for yourself or else protecting her from someone else.

It confuses
the hel

The brothers, in their own thoughts, came to the realization
that Mary could be right. Yes, they were trying to take Alice for
themselves, and yes, they were also trying to protect her from each
other.

,
attention to Alice.
bridesmaid
all we go
and try on our dress

atmosphere within the room. She was quite surprised that Mary seemed to be oblivious to it. But then again, Mary was oblivious to most things.
up then, and he rushe
Her stomach fluttered the longer they gazed at each other. There was something in his eyes that begin to describe, and it really affected her in an odd way. Oh, God! She was getting dizzy again. Maybe she was dehydrated. Yes, she was dehydrated from the ride, she decided, and that was why she felt dizzy. Not because of the way Darcy was looking at her. Definitely not.
She quickly glanced away, feeling a bit confused.
leaving Conrad to stand there all by himself, looking at Alice
with a sad expression on his face. Katherine was following behind them, chuckling at Mary

.
156 Alexia Praks
Some half an hour later
, Alice watched in
awe as Mary posed herself in front of her and Katherine.
It is perfect!
The wedding dress was perfect for Mary:
the off-
the-
shoulder sleeves, the delicately decorated beads, and the long train
that fit Mary that perfectly.
of
gown. Yes, the color was a beautiful pastel pink, and the silk material was so soft and smooth it was literally caressing her skin.
The problem, however, was that the A-
fit her.
Period!
It was far too big on her person.
, watching
Alice holding on to the material of the dress that was threatening to fall off her any moment now.
skirt and turning herself around to look at the full-length mirror.
When she saw herself, she wanted to shriek in dismay. She looked
Mary asked, suspicious.
did lose weight,
s
ing to do?
The wedding is only a week
hand so the dress sculpted
showing off her hourglass shape.
Alice nodded, understanding what her friend meant.
we find our lovely Beth and see what magic she can
Katherine chuckl
off your wedding dress
Approximately fifteen minutes later and in her own bedroom

,
A Secret Kiss
157 and Katherine, on the other hand, left once again after informing her they had to help Brenda prepare dinner since Alice had stolen Beth away from the kitchen. Alice chuckled and said loudly
fault. Yours, Mary, yours!
Alice hid a smile as Beth pinched the silk material out from the side of her waist.
and w
d
murmured.
Beth stood straight

. Otherwise,
Uh-ho! Here we go again.
,she
e Beth looked up to her
She frowned

,
158 Alexia Praks
re actual
B
old, but I
m not senile, my girl.
Conrad seems to be taking a liking to you, but then again,
young. Now Sebastian, that man is to die for. If you have your eyes
on him, better make
make you an excellent husband. A perfect husband, no doubt, who
Dark
ever lay his
yes, he will lo
Alice shook her head. She wanted to tell Beth there was no
way she was going to fall in love with any of the brothers. First off,
they were supposed to be siblings, albeit not blood related.
Secondly, she knew
like her, let alone love her.
Deep down inside, however, she was beginning to have doubts.
Why had they been so nice to her since their return? She was sure
there would suffice. Then there was also the fact that her emotions
were beginning to play havoc with her
lately. She
d been feeling
very restless since the day they arrived, and her mind kept
wandering off thinking about them. Not to mention she kept
eespecially Sebastian and
Darcy. Was it because seeing them again brought back so many
unpleasant memories? Or was it something else?

like
Alice teased.
A Secret Kiss

159 Beth frowned at her and pulled the material a bit too tightly to
listen to your elders, my
Alice laughed.

finds
the one
n, on the
other hand, w
wild
, none
of them have found their so-
call
ed

Beth thought about that for a moment. Then she stood up and
harrumphed
ng down. They
he looked at Alice
closely. She wondered if the girl the brothers had all fallen for was
in fact their adopted sister.
, wondering why Beth was looking
at her so weirdly.
of the dress this way and that again and Alice along with it. A
Alice nodded, and the woman left. Alone, she sat down on
her bed and sighed with relief. She hoped when Beth returned she
Out of the blue, her mind
of its own accord
started
wandering off to lo

thoughts

first.

Why was he being so overprotective of her all of a sudden? And he did say neither he nor his brothers were stupid. Had they known all along that it had never been her who had been telling on them when they were children?

She was so deep

in thought that s

. When she heard it closing again, she expected Beth to return and hastily got up, readying herself for the woman to do her magic.

160 Alexia Praks

an

Alice knew the moment they stepped into her room that they were there to hurt her. She braced herself for the oncoming bullying

my house,

so I go into any room

. You

Alice decided

to one side to show them

she was no longer afraid of them. And to that she added a smile as well,

I have been

living here for the past few years,

bull and slapped Alice on the cheek, causing the girl to swing her face to the right.

Tara smirked from behind, obviously pleased with what was happening.

Alice felt pain burning her cheek. She closed her eyes and plode and retaliate.

only be here for another week, and once the wedding was over, ce again. Yes, she could

do this.

espond to that. She simply glared at Tara, who was sniggering behind Alaina.

,

knowing the other woman hated it when people reminded her of her real last name.

think you are? Living here like you own the place. And of all things,

A Secret Kiss

161

m

think? Not suitable for her at all. Mary would be ashamed to see

Oh,

God!

She knew these women

too well to be ignorant of what they were implying. Without delay, she braced herself by lifting her skirt up and rushed out the door as quickly as possible.

?

t listening. Oh, she knew they were going to ruin

her dress all right, a

She raced across the corridor and then toward the back stairs

that no one ever used except for her and the maids. At the same time, she held tightly onto her dress, afraid

it might fall off her

person. Even worse,

though, she might topple on the long skirt,

fall down the stairs, and break her slender neck.

She gathered up the thick, long material of the skirt and hugged it against her chest as she raced. Oh, dear God! She could hear them coming after her, laughing merrily like they used to when they were children. God!

g the same old route, my dear S
Alaina shouted after her from the top of the stairs. Tara giggled as if she were really thrilled at the thought of chasing and hunting down Alice.

that
fear again like
shed always felt when Tara and Alaina were harassing her. Oh, the drawing room and accuse Tara and Alaina of wanting to hurt
162 Alexia Praks
her in front of everyone, especially now that they were all grown up.

She finally opened a door and found herself in the large indoor pool area on the ground floor. No one was there, and she decided She hastily closed the door and collapsed against it, breathing heavily, relief sweeping through her body.

Her relief, however, was short lived when she heard both Tara and Alaina laughter not too far away, and only moments later the door was thrust open from the other side, throwing her off balance.

Alice, who was
After all, that dress is awful
ly pretty on you
her ground.

, her voice stronger now as she stood
there, her head held high and her whole body stiff a
I never said this to you before, but you two are bitches. So if you
Tara cocked her head to one side

we
up, S
know
Alice gritted her teeth. Her heart was pounding hard as she glared at them, her hand fisted tight.
and pulled Alice by the arm. Because Alice was smaller, she dragged along. Alaina helped by pulling at her gown, ripping out the beautiful, expensive material from her shoulders.

A Secret Kiss

163
move, dear sister.

Y
she slapped Alaina in the face, sending her staggering backward. Alaina touched her cheek and sent her hand smashing o
cheek. Tara held on to
Alice, allowing Alaina to slap her again.

ed
her eyes on the deep pool just a step away.

Alice
eyes widen

ed
words
sank in. She shook her head, fear rising within her chest.
Tara felt pleasure rushing through her veins once she saw the

maniac, which also pleased Tara.
believe that. After all these
Alice felt her heart thumping faster and faster.

Oh,
God!
They
were going to throw her into the pool like they had years ago, throwing her into the sea. If

Daddy
she would have drowned and died back then

pool.
Alaina shook her head and her lips turned downward, as if she were
. No, please
on Alain
Alaina chuckled
Alice and forcefully shoved her back.
her hands reaching out for them to help her. A
ll she could see
, however, were Tara and Alaina standing there, smiling as they watched her struggling in the water.
164 Alexia Praks
Alice felt suffocated, the water pulling her down, dragging her to her doom. She tried. Oh,
how she tried to scream for help,
but she was tired and her body was weak. She closed her eyes, knowing very well that this could be the end of her. Yes, it was the end of her.
for her mother, the woman she
d never
met, the woman who had given her life. This was it. She would never meet her, and she felt rather sad about that. She closed her eyes and her body sank toward the bottom of the deep pool.
A Secret Kiss
165 Savior
supposed to do?
Hang up!
That was what he was supposed to do.
Darcy, sweetheart. Please
Darcy tightened his hand around his cell phone as he stared at the number on the screen.
Kate Anderson
. It was her again
his ex-girlfriend
. T
he ex-girlfriend whom
hed never had any feelings for,
the ex-girlfriend who had cheated on him. Now she expected him to go crawling back to her?
Just like that?
Did she consider him
stupid? He would never go back to her.
Not now.
Not ever!
Hed never liked her. In fact, he
d never understood why he
d gone into a relationship with her in the first place. Well, to be honest, the relationship had always been one-sided, and that was
her side. H
e had gone along without realizing
it because Tara and
Alaina had been pulling him along since Kate was their friend.
166 Alexia Praks
He gritted his teeth
. S
hit!
She was still going on about her

tired
of it and quickly switched the phone off, cutting her off
midsentence.
He stood up and threw the cell phone onto the sofa with so
much force and frustration that if it were the wall it would have
been smashed to pieces.
He needed to be alone to think clearly, to get Kate out of his
mind. And, yes, he admitted to himself, to stop himself from
thinking about his adopted sister Alice.
Alice.
Why was he thinking about her? Why was he hurting
so much thinking about her? Why was he thinking about her and
Sebastian together? Why was he hurting so much when Sebastian
had taken her out ridin
his
heart beat so fast when he
d seen
Why had he held his breath when Alice looked at h
im? The expression on her face.
Oh,
God
! It really tormented him.
It had caused his breathing to shudder involuntarily and his heart
to flutter achingly. There was something in her eyes, something
deep,
passionate, and longing.
the voice in his head shouted.
She
never wanted you. She hated your guts.
e swore under his breath. He needed to get away. H
e needed to be in his comfort zone, a
zone
anymore. He needed to be somewhere else.
In a split second he was gone out of his bedroom.
He came to the only other places in the house where he knew
find peace and quiet. A place where he knew no one would
find him. A place high up where he knew he could lie down and
think.
He opened the door to the indoor pool and found that it was,
as he expected, empty. Yes, he had the place to himself and he was
glad.
He headed straight for the stairs that would lead him up high
to the diving board above. Once he reached the top, he lay down,
A Secret Kiss
167 put both his arms under his head, and closed his eyes. Instantly,
, and his heart started to beat
irregularly again, almost painfully.
whispered softly.
Why do I feel like this toward you?
Why?
* * * * *
thirteen years ago, summer
Nine-year-old Darcy opened his eyes
as he felt
something tickling his face. The first thing he saw was the clear
blue sky above him. It was a beautiful summer
day, and
he
want it to ever end.
He turned his eyes to the left
, and his
heart
Ten-

her lips. She looked like an angel. He could never get used to her beauty.

With her long, dark hair and pale skin, she looked just like Snow White in the fairytale book.

Darcy adjusted his head that was resting on her lap so he could lie there more comfortably. Her thighs were soft beneath his head, and he liked that. He liked that a lot. He only wished he could sleep on her lap every night instead of his pillows.

He reached out his small hand and started playing with her long hair, coiling the strands about his finger

why,

but he just loved being with her. She made him feel wonderful.

Alice moved her hand and ruffled his dark hair. Darcy liked that. He liked that a lot.

off into the distance.

168 Alexia Praks

Darcy looked up at her, noting her sorrowful expression, which

in turn caused his own heart to throb with pain. Of course, he

hy.

He watched her nod her head.

be your prince, Snow

She laughed.

boy, Darce

he said firmly, giving her a dashing smile. He moved his hand from her hair to touch her face, his

fingers

caressing her

skin.

e

d, returning his

smile.

abruptly, which caused Alice to gasp in surprise. He turned to

look at her long and hard, his mauve-

gray eyes intense on her face.

.

e

thought you liked

Darcy panicked.

No! No! No!

t her to be his sister; that was all. So why was she so

upset? Oh no! She was going to cry.

,he

ce

himself, but he just knew he wanted to stay

* * * * *

A Secret Kiss

169

Darcy flashed his eyes open. His heart skipped a beat.

Alice?

. Y

look very beautiful in a mi

Darcy jolted up and rushed over to the edge of the diving board.

He hung his head over and looked down. From his vantage point

and to his great surprise,

he saw Alice standing dangerously close

to the pool. Before Alice were Tara and Alaina, threatening her

. He watched in horror as Alaina marched forward and sent her

the back of her

ed
happened that last t
Darcy gritted his teeth as he realized what was going on. Tara
and Alaina were bullying Alice again.

At this age?

They were all

He felt protectiveness toward Alice surge through his being,
and his temper flared.

he heard Alice beg.

Darcy felt an uncomfortable feeling rising in his gut.

Shit!

He

rible was going

to happen to Alice.

. No, please

. T

Tara urged.

forcefully, she shoved Alice back.

170 Alexia Praks

Darcy

watched in horror as Alice screamed and fell into the
pool. His whole body froze in shock as he watched her struggling
and fighting to stay afloat. But the merciless water dragged her
down the harder she fought, shoving her back into its depths.
and ready for action.

Alaina and Tara looked up in dismay to see Darcy at the top of
the diving board. They watched, dread and fear contorted on their
beautiful faces, as Darcy, in jeans and T-
shirt, ran off the board

and expertly and smoothly somersaulted down, flying in midair.

His athletic body hit the water cleanly, and as he gained
momentum within the deep pool, he swam toward Alice,
who

was sinking

toward the bottom.

Darcy reached out to her, fearful he might lose her. He kicked
so hard and fast that the water turned into a whirlpool. He caught
her by the small of her waist and pulled her up to him, hugging
her against him tightly. With her safely in his embrace, he swam
back

to the surface.

Alice sucked in air as they emerged from the pool. She
coughed and spluttered water as she instinctively wrapped her
dear life.

Darcy, too, tightened his hold on her and started swimming
toward the edge of the pool. Once there, he lifted her along as he
pulled himself out of the water.

He gently laid her on the marble floor, her back and head
resting against his massive chest and his arm wrapping around her
protectively. His heart was pounding with dread as he examined
her face.

God! Please let her be all right. Please!

He felt his body shaking with emotions, with trepidation, as he
gently touched his hand to her pale, cold skin.

warm and his breath hot against

When he saw her responding to his soft calling and looking up
at him, he sighed with relief and wanted to cry with joy. Then he

A Secret Kiss

171 noticed she was having trouble breathing and touched her
forehead again, gently, as if he were stroking her, caressing her.

Alice, still dazed and lightheaded from the experience, did as
she was told, the fear in her heart slowly fading away. She liked
use it helped calm
her down. Instinctively, she pressed her face against his chest, her

Darcy responded by tightening his arms around her, drawing her even closer to him. He kept her within his embrace until she breathed normal until her slender body stopped shivering. Alice turned to look at him heart, for he saw the fear still lingering in her eyes. Her lips were quivering delicately. He knew she was about to cry but was fighting very hard to hold back. He touched her cheek, gently guiding her face to rest back , and tears began to pour from her eyes. She softly sobbed in his arms. raging of his beating heart, nor could he control the anger welling up in his chest. er, he needed to comfort Alice. So he sat there comforting her as she gently sobbed away while the whole time Alaina was shouting at him to leave her alone. Just when he was about to have enough of barking, the door burst open and Toby raced toward his master. Sebastian, Nicolas, and Conrad were behind him. Sebastian took one look at the scene and felt his stomach knot in dread. He rushed to Alice and Darcy without a second thought. his wee paws.

172 Alexia Praks

Alice turned to Toby. Her eyes were red and her cheeks were raw from crying. Alice nodded as she tried to control the tears that just kept on coming. d, a dark scowl on his answer.

a mask of anger. Sebastian understood immediately. Nicolas narrowed his eyes and pushed his glasses up the bridge Sebastian nodded. He and lifted her. Alice wrapped her arms around his neck and hid her face her breath. strode to the door. Conrad and Toby followed them as they headed out. Darcy stood up and headed straight to his sister, his eyes dark, his body tense.

, come on just pretending. You know how Alaina ght cheek, sending her face swinging to the left. Alaina blinked in shocked surprise. Darcy had never laid a hand on her before ever

. She touched her cheek, anger and hatred rising within her chest. She turned her eyes to look at her twin brother, tears brewing within them.

A Secret Kiss

173 Tara, who was behind Alaina, secretly hid a smile, though she managed to compose her face and tried to look as shocked as she could.

just a silly bitch! I did it for you. I did it for us. I hate her. She took you from me. I hate it when you two are together. I hate it so much

said
before if you ever la
With that, he walked out the door.
Nicolas watched his brother go, and once they were alone, he
stepped toward his sisters.
ed more
from you. I thought yo
d
looked meaningfully to Tara.
Tara knew Nicolas was becoming all businesslike again. He was
so like James in his way of dealing with things. He looked calm
and collected, but inside he must have be
en reeling with anger.
Though his way of dealing with unpleasant business looked as
following his orders were enormous. And Tara had learn
ed that
early on. Nicolas was a pleasant adopted brother to be with,
but
you wou
touching Alice again. That much is obviously clear. You know
his eyes and brought them up to the light
a gesture he always did
when he gave out orders and expected them done accordingly. He
inspected the lenses for
put them back on.
, who stared at him as if he
174 Alexia Praks
Sebastian owns that apartment of yours in New York, and from
the looks
Alaina harrumphed
ver like
to differ. In fact, he
d known all along, since they were children,
in fact, that Sebastian had always liked Alice,
though he had
hidden his feelings from his siblings well because he
d been afraid
of their disapproval.
Alaina snorted
his sister

s
behavior seems to have changed a lot since we got here. By the way
,
ull control of the
not
last
h other?
It
was true, then his words were law. She said through gritted teeth,
dragged her adopted sister by the arm
and stalked out the door.
changed a bit where Alice was concerned.
A Secret Kiss
175 Protection
Alice was humiliated and blushed
a becoming pink.
She stole a peek at Sebastian to see if he was pissed
because he had
to carry her
or if he was repulsed by her state of disarray and
wetness, which she thought would really bother him because she
was messing up his clothing.
Sebastian glanced at her and gave her a sympathetic smile.
know he felt sorry for her, but on the other hand, she was pissed with the whole

for that matter
strong woman. Well
who needed strong men to support her. Nor did she need a strong
man to carry her.

He ignored her and headed straight up to the second floor.

He continued to ignore her.

176 Alexia Praks

get his attention.

Sebastian

finally turned his attention to her.

, and your dress is too big and

My dress is too big and long?

What did that have to do with

anything?

happily.

bedroom door.

Conrad rushed up first to open the door for them. Just after

Sebastian walked in and gently put her down, Toby dashed up and

barked happily.

Alice pulled the oversized dress around to properly cover

carpet where her soaked dress dampened it.

The moment he said dress, she looked down at herself, the

marching up to her wardrobe.

late already. Conrad had the wardrobe door wide open and was

searching through it.

A Secret Kiss

177 arm and led her into the bathroom himself. Once there, he turned

on the shower.

back was to him. Then, without warning, he unzipped her dress

all the way down her back.

the big dress to fall from her person either. She screamed in fright,

then caught it in the nick of time, at her waist.

half-naked in front

of her slender

back all the way down to the curve of her backside. As she caught

the dress at her waist, he had a good view of her breasts, and, by

Jove, they made him want to weep with joy. They were the most

amazing breasts he had ever seen: porcelain white, full, round, and

Perfect in

my hands.

Alice pulled the dress back up to cover herself, barely. As in

the nature of any woman, she only covered her breasts,

so her back

was still totally exposed

to him.

Sebastian was used to seeing half-

naked women. It was just kind

of normal since Alaina, Tara, and their friends were always in their

bikinis during the summers. Then sometimes the urge came and

even

when they were naked in front of him, he needed to be worked on

in order to get going. But not this time. Not with this one. This

one was a bit different. This one made his heart race and his palms

anything. In fact, she was telling him to leave.

He took a step back, trying to control himself, trying to calm

down, trying very hard to suppress his desire for the girl before

him.

178 Alexia Praks

Sebastian heard him coming toward the bathroom, and before

his brother had the chance to peek inside, he grabbed the dress

shut

again.

Alice relaxed, thinking Sebastian had left. She gathered her

long hair, bunching it up, and let it rest over one shoulder. Then

Sebastian was hoping his desire would die down, but it was getting worse. His hand tightened on the dress.

Shit,
he thought.

He had to get out of here.

Alice was testing the water with her fingers and reluctantly turned to answer Conrad. She gasped in fright when she saw Sebastian was still in the bathroom with her.

Sebastian tried to sound as normal as he could and managed a Alice tightened her grip on the dress at her chest and glared He passed her the dress and after turning the doorknob left the room in a hurry. A moment later, he opened the door again and threw her the towel.

Once the door was latched again, Sebastian turned to look at Conrad,

who was now sitting on the carpet with Toby on his lap.

Sebastian came to sit beside him, his back resting against the bed. He turned h

instantly surprised at what he saw. He thought her bedroom would be plain with just a normal-

sized double bed, a wardrobe for her

clothes, and perhaps a study desk. But this was far from it. Her room was designed and decorated tastefully, with a soft, earthy palette. There was a featured wall where the head of the queen-size

bed rested

lovely pink cherry blossoms and golden leaves. There was a French-

Georgian style recliner, sofa, and study desk and

chair. He noted the laptop, camera, and sketchbook and pencils

A Secret Kiss

179 neatly arranged on the antique desk. He especially loved the flower arrangement sitting to the side, magnolia and cherry blossoms.

What a beautiful combination.

Sebastian glanced at Toby, who was having a nice, relaxing time

Darcy, now dressed in a pair of dry jeans and T-shirt, burst

Sebastian nodded to the bathroom.

Darcy came to sit on the other side of Conrad, folding his arms across his chest. The three waited in silence, dreading to find out if their victim would be all right after the attempted murder. A few minutes later, Alice opened the door, and they all hastily stood.

Alice was so shocked to see three men in her bedroom waiting forgetting why she was in such a rush to get out of the bathroom with her wet hair in a wild mess and her skin not yet dried properly.

Yes, once she had gotten hold of herself from the fear of her drowning, showered thoroughly, and gotten out, she realized underwear.

And why would he?

He needed any too. And here she was, standing there with only the dress on, her skin still wet and her hair still wild, looking at the three uninvited men in her room.

Sebastian had a good, thorough look at his very pretty adopted sister. That white dress was rather fetching on her, showing off her very slender figure. The top bit, however, was designed in such a way as to hug the breasts. The neckline was rather low and showing porcelain-

white skin that begged for a caress. Not to mention there were buttons in the front starting from about her diaphragm to the top.

Gosh!

Did she not think to button up properly?

He could blame the

rather thin, and since her soft, smooth skin was still bloody wet

180 Alexia Praks

from the shower, it was showing the shape of her breasts and nipples very clearly.

Oh,
bloody hell!

She was
practically begging for a man to ravish her.
Sebastian felt his whole body shuddering in pleasure.
Shit!

He
had to get control of himself
. He moved closer to her, blocking his
brothers from taking in her enticing sight. Alice glanced up at
him, wondering what his problem was since he was now scowling
step to one side.

He blocked her by taking a step as well.
He noted her weary expression and the weakness in her voice.
Damn!

Why was he being so unreasonable? She had just had a
near-
death experience, and here he was, scowling at her because
have the sense to give her underwear. And apparently, neither did
he.

he said, gently nudging her around and back into the bathroom.
anywhere.

Alice sighed.
He broke off, glancing away. His heart wrenched with pain at the
there. That just meant Alaina would be a murderer too. His face
A Secret Kiss

181

Sa
bathroom.

Once she closed the door, Conrad happily made himself
comfortable on the bed, Toby with him. Darcy sat on the chair by
the study desk while Sebastian went through her wardrobe,
searching for her bra and panties. Once he found some in a small
drawer, he lightly knocked on the door.

Alice poked her head out and quickly grabbed the underwear,
her face flaming red from embarrassment. Then she hastily closed
the door again.

Sebastian noticed the blushing but kept his face straight as he
knew she was very sensitive. That, of course, made him wonder if
she was still a virgin. She surely did act like one. That made him
know why, but he liked the fact that she was still
a virgin.

flicked through. He was impressed, noting the many beautiful
pictures of nature she had captured. The latest one was of a cherry
tree in the woods.

It looked very professional, and he liked it a lot.

As he gazed at it, something triggered within his mind. Then the
images flashed before his eyes.

The summer breeze. The dark hair dancing in the wind. The
warm smile. The small, gentle hand stroking his hair. The warm lips
on his cheek. The tree! It was the same tree he and she
Alice opened the door and came out. Darcy put the photo
album back in place and stood up, his whole being shaking
involuntarily.

Darcy felt his heart pumping a bit too fast for his liking. He
gritted his teeth.

Calm down, you old beast!

Why was it so painful

182 Alexia Praks

looking at her? But why did he feel pleasure, too? And why did he

when she
came out wearing that dress without underwear, her porcelain skin
glistening wet, and her long hair in a wild mess
he had felt surges
of pleasure through his veins and his heart somersaulting. Yes, the
pleasure and thrill mixed together was utterly intoxicating, exactly
like when he was diving
his body flying and twisting and turning
in midair before hitting the water in the pool. It was truly
wonderful, and she made him feel wonderful. But at the same time,
he felt pain.
So much pain.

door.
safe in my own
remark. Yes, Alaina was his real sister. Tara was his adopted sister.
But Alice? The reality suddenly hit him. She was also his adopted
His face was serious, and he hugged Toby tighter.
It only meant either one of two things: he was thinking deeply and
seriously, or he was hurt emotionally.
She turned to him, tears in her eyes. He wiped the wetness with
his thumb, her skin soft against his touch. Alice shoved away his
hand, furious at the whole situatio
n.

need to rest. And please tell Daddy James and Mom Brenda that
Good night

A Secret Kiss

183 She took Toby from Conrad and walked to the window, staring
out, tears in her eyes.

protected her when she was younger. He was pissed because she
had been so used to being alone and dependent on herself that she
she had called his parents Mom and Dad. Yes, technically they
were her mom and dad, to
want them to be
her

mom and dad and neither did he want her to
be his adopted sister. The reason? Because
Shit!

Could he really deny this to himself? Could he? Why
t he want

her to call his parents Mom and Dad? Why did it hurt him when
she said that she, too, was his sister?

His heart still burning with pain and his head still pounding
with confusion, he headed out the door.

Conrad got off the bed. He desperately wanted to hug her. He
wanted to take her into his arms and tell her that everything was
wanted to protect her. So he came up behind her and hugged her,
his arms wrapping around her form.

from her eyes,
and her whole body trembled once again. Conrad
stood there hugging her while she hugged Toby in her arms. When
she had finally used up all her tears, she turned to him and gave
him a weak smile.

Your brothers ignored me, pretended
different. You knew I was here. You secretly played with me when

184 Alexia Praks

She managed to laugh, and he liked that. Yes, he made her smile
and that was enough for him.

For now at least.

said, you need to look p

her hand and led her out the door.

A Secret Kiss

185 Nightmares

Alice managed to compose herself

the dining room. She was relieved that everyone was too busy chatting to notice her coming in behind Conrad. She tried to free her hand from his grasp

er go. He led her to the far side of the dining table where James and Brenda were. The rest of the brothers, who had already found out what had happened, noticed the hand-holding. Darcy tried to keep his face composed, but it was hard. Sebastian scowled. Lauren, who was busy chatting away with Richard, Mary, and Peter, rushed over to Conrad the moment she had seen him. She made herself comfortable in the chair next to his. Conrad managed to give her Alice turned to Lauren and managed to give the girl a weak after

186 Alexia Praks began chatting away animatedly, to which Conrad secretly groaned in despair. Mary and Katherine, who were sitting on the other side of the table across from them, noticed the change in Sak

ur been her friends since they had been young anything, they knew they had to find out what had happened. Young Michael was once again sitting next to Nicolas, asking the man so many questions it caused Peter and Richard to laugh wholeheartedly. and Michael smiled up at him with delight.

When the maids brought in dinner, everyone ate and chatted, enjoying themselves. James, however, noticed that Alice was rather quiet. He also noticed that Alaina and Tara were behaving oddly. They kept staring at Alice as though they would like to hurt her. Protectiveness surged in his blood. He knew without a doubt that something had happened. Of course he had known that something like this would happen when they arrived. He had also thought, however, that they would have changed since they were now grown adults.

It was halfway through the meal when Alice just gave in. She earlier. She really needed to lie down. She leaned over to James and told him quietly that she wasn't feeling well. He nodded at her to leave. She smiled at him gratefully and then quietly got out of her chair and left the room. The brothers noticed. Darcy wanted to go after her,

b ut it was Conrad who got there first. He announced that he was full, and after thanking Beth politely for the meal, he left the room, leaving Lauren in midsentence and staring after him in disappointment.

Conrad caught up with Alice in the corridor.

A Secret Kiss

187 favor he letting him stay in her room or something so they could spend

d
Good night
Conrad nodded and with the dress in his hands reluctantly left
the room.
Once she was alone, Alice sighed. She eyed Toby, who was
already sound asleep in his basket. She went to kneel beside him
Good night
went to brush
her teeth and change
into her
pajamas.
ayfair
sleep shirt of gray and white ribbon stripes and a cute pair of boxer
shorts. Feeling nice and comfy, she switched off the central light,
leaving only her bedside lamp,
and then got into bed.
She lay there fully awake. It was quiet in her room, and in the
distance she could hear the noises from downstairs. Lauren was
pretty loud, probably talking animatedly to Conrad. Then there
was the noise of Katherine, Mary, Peter, and Richard laughing and
chatting away enthusiastically. Of course Alaina and Tara joined
in the laughter, as if nothing had happened earlier at the pool. It
was odd, however, that she didn't
hear any of the brothers joining
in the conversations. She was pretty sure Tristan was always loud
in this kind of affair. So were Logan and Conrad. This evening
, however, they were awfully quiet, as though they were in
mourning.

188 Alexia Praks
humming of human conversations floating through the ceilings
had fallen
asleep either, and when she did, she had a nightmare.

* * * * *

thirteen years ago, summer
nine-year-old Darcy said softly,
his eyes on
touching her silky black
tress
es. He moved his fingers to gently caress her cheek,
then
stroked his fingers across the length of her lips. He grinned, feeling
his heart beating faster and faster and his pulse throbbing
irregularly.
Rays of bright sunlight shone
making her even more
seen her in a year and now look at how grown up she
d become.
Ten-
year-
old Alice opened her eyes, fluttering her long, dark
lashes that so fascinated him. She adjusted to the brightness of the
room, and once she saw
him she smiled. It was a beautiful smile,
e
r so
too long.
He grinn
ed and held up a
instead
She noted that the book was old. She smiled when she saw that
it was
Romeo and Juliet
by William Shakespeare.
d taking the book from him. In an instant

A Secret Kiss

189 Alice looked up to see Alaina and Tara standing before them, glaring down at her.

Tara pulled Darcy away so hard that it caused him to fall back

and land on his backside.

you gone away for so long

s

rowning at the girls. He got up

how y

, picking up the book.

Alaina snatched the book from him,

then started ripping out

the pages in anger.

.
ted, furiously ripping the book

even faster, venting all of her anger and frustration. Once she was finished, she threw the torn book at Alice, smacking her

in the

face.

Alice was sore. She bit her lip and held back tears that began

to well up in her eyes.

Why

did you do that

and Dad away from us. You have

no idea what vile things she did

when you were gone. Mom and Dad practically hate me now. She

. Please

me, ask

and

190 Alexia Praks

Darcy looked over his shoulder at

Alice, who was now hiding

her face by hugging herself into a small ball, her body shivering

like a leaf

in an angry storm.

As he walked farther away, the world around him faded and

turned pitch black. A split second later,

when he saw light again,

he saw Alice in a tree house.

,
aina shouted at her, smacking her fist against

dare you

call our daddy

Daddy James

ours

screamed.

jump off the tree house. Just kill yourself already. The world would

be better

off

Alice blinked back tears and gently rubbed her sore cheek.

,

ot?

. Go and hang

shirt and pulled her forward.

dragged her to the door of the tree house. They tried to shove her

out so she could fall backward down the tree, but Alice was

holding on with all her might, pulling back, fighting to stay inside

the tree house to stay alive.

As they were struggling, Tara noticed Darcy running across the

Obviously, he was looking for her.

A Secret Kiss

191 Alaina caught on instantly. She glanced over and saw her twin

brother racing at full speed toward them. She smiled at the

he chuckled to Tara.
Tara nodded, and on cue they both screamed at the top of their
Darcy raced to them and stopped at the bottom of the huge
Tara chose that moment to take action.
This is it,
she thought.
her back into the tree house,
causing Alice to tumble and hit against the wall.
Alice fell and landed on her backside, confused that she
Tara grinned like a maniac and shoved Alaina out the door, letting
her fall out of the tree house all the way down to the ground with
a thud.
Tara smiled with satisfaction as she watched her little best
friend fly down and land
the excitement within her when she saw the surprise, the shock,
Thud!
Alaina landed there on the grass, her body like a little doll, all
broken and torn. Oh how it pleased Tara. It pleased her so damn
much.
e with horror as he
picked up
Tara managed to compose herself from her excitement. She
rushed down the tree house and pretend
ed to cry her heart out.
Darcy? She
Darcy,
his heart suddenly torn
with anger and hatred, let go of
Alaina and climbed up the tree house. Once he was inside, he
grabbed the shocked Alice and shouted at her.
192 Alexia Praks
belie
ved them before, but now! Why? How could you? How could
Then, as if he were revolted by her, he shoved her from him.
Alice landed against the wall. She hugged herself into a ball,
rocking herself

* * * * *

The whimpering sound echoed in
woke with a start. He
flashed
his eyes
open
and
sat up,
his palm
against his chest, feeling the
continuou
s thumping of his beating
heart.
Thump! Thump! Thump!
Oh, God! It was painful.
So painful.
Sweat soaked his face and body. He wiped his forehead with
the back of his hand, then took
off his nightshirt. His skin was
glistening with sweat in the darkness as he sat there, his mind
playing scenes of his childhood.
the stuffiness of the room any longer, he got off the bed and went
to draw the curtains back and
open the windows.
Cool spring air rushed in, and he breathed a sigh of relief.
Why the dream?
So why now?
It hurt his heart hurt. Why had he hurt Alice when she

her so much?

Why?

Yes, he was a monster. He was a heartless, malicious monster
dered in anguish and tears burned
within his eyes.

* * * * *

thirteen years ago, summer

Thirteen-year-old Sebastian was watching

Alice

from afar, and like always,
she was alone with a book.

He suspected it must be Shakespeare. She was sitting under the
magnolia tree now, reading. Sebastian stayed back, watching her,

A Secret Kiss

193 marveling at the glossy black hair, the porcelain skin, and the ruby
lips. Every time he had managed to get close to her, he stared at
her eyes, those beautiful eyes that seemed to always pull him into
a deep, dark pool of mystery and intrigue.

He had seen Hayden dragging her out the other night, for what
Hayden would call

borrowing

a motorbike. That really pissed him

off beca

Alice into trouble. And

trouble he did get her into because he had crashed the bike and
had gotten grounded. What really pissed Sebastian off even more
was the fact that Hayden had believed Tara and Alaina

lies that

it had been Alice who had told on him. Now Hayden really hated

Alice.

Then there were Tristan and Logan. His stupid teenage
brothers had a bet on who would get to kiss Alice first. He

suspected

ses yet from those silly, eager

teenage girls from New York who would only be too pleased to let
the boys take their virginities. Sebastian knew Tristan did get to
kiss Alice, albeit only on the cheek and in which case she had
slapped him really hard afterward. Tara had seen, of course, got
really jealous, and told James,

who grounded both Tristan and

Logan for a month. This

only led to the boys despising Alice

even more, believing Alice was the real bitchy adopted sister Tara
and Alaina had constantly told them about. Though to be honest,

Sebastian was glad

his

brothers now left

Alice alone.

He watched her closing the book then running her fingers
through her long hair. She got up and slowly made her way across
the sandy beach to the rocky cliff by the sea. There she stood,
gazing across at the

ocean beyond.

Sebastian watched her, his heart aching for her

for her

loneliness and for her sadness.

d been too

Tara and Alaina

were there until they were behind Alice. Alaina had her left arm
in a sling since she

d broken it after she

d fallen from the tree house,

which he was told Alice had pushed her off. Sebastian knew it

104 Alaina Broken

lied
He made his way across to get closer, to hear what they were
saying because he was curious. He
also felt as though something
why, but
he had to. It was stupid to
spy on your own siblings,
but he just had to.
poor Alaina out
of the tree house,
at Alice.
, moving backward as they advanced
toward her, her legs inches from the edge of the cliff.
better off dead anyway,
Sebastian watched in horror as Alaina pushed Alice back then,
with all her might, shoved Alice into the sea
she screamed.
Alice
and
herself falling backward.
Splash!
Her body hit the water, and she began to struggle trying to
climb back,
but she
, and no
one was going to help her.
Without thinking, Sebastian ran from his spot. He raced past
Tara and Alaina and
threw himself into the ocean.
Once his body
hit the water, he pulled himself together and swam.
Within the deep, murky water, he tried his best to find his way
to help Alice. But she was nowhere in sight,
and he panicked.
No!
He had to find her. She had to be somewhere
here.
He found her being dragged down to the bottom. He reached
his hand out to her, begging her to come to him, his blue eyes large,
A Secret Kiss
195 filled with dread and fear. Then he found
farther and felt himself being dragged down and about, deeper and
deeper and round and round.
The waves, they were too strong.
They were churning and whirling him from his destination.
He felt himself being suffocated.
God!
He needed to breathe. But there
was Alice. He had to save her.
He closed his eyes,
could no longer think, could no longer hold
on to his life. He knew he was dying.
A moment later, he felt himself being pulled up and up, and
then he was out
of the water. He opened his mouth wide and
sucked air into his starved lungs.
faintly against the howling
wind and smashing waves. He tightened his arms around his
to the beach
.
he shouted, his heart thundering loudly within his
chest.
replied between taking deep breaths.
reached the shore. Nicholas helped him onto the

en care that he could have just
died if
for his brother. He was more concern
ed about
Alice, so he rushed to her the moment James brought her up
from the sea. Tears burned his eyes as he helplessly watched his
dad giving her CPR.
Oh,
God!
She was so pale and still, as though she were already
dead.
Is she dead?
He wondered and blamed himself for what
happened. If only he had been a stronger swimmer. If only he had
been there before Alaina had
pushed her over. If only
Sebastian felt himself shivering from fear and his heart aching
with sorrow.
Alice! Please wake up.
! Alice,
He wanted to shout at her for being so weak, for letting other
people bully her. Oh,
God, how he wanted to shout at her.
Again and again, James blew air into her little lungs and pressed
on her chest, begging her to wake up, to come back alive.
196 Alexia Praks
heart, wake
Sebastian felt dark and hollow within his stomach. The world
around him felt cold, and at the same time, he felt angry with
ting his
eyes as his heart burned
in anguish.
And then finally she breathed again. She coughed, spurted out
loads of
seawater, and collapsed again in James
arms.
James sighed with relief, tears in his eyes.
d, tears rolling down
his cheeks
* * * * *
up. His
breathing was labored,
and his heart was thumping hard within his
chest. He sat up and rubbed his temple, realizing it was only a
dream.
The incident
he had forgotten about that incident
until now.
But did he really forget about it, or was it that the incident was too
painful for him to bear and his brain had chosen to block that
memory from his mind?
The drowning.
Yes, it all came back to him now
everything.
The real reason he had taken up swimming professionally,
the
reason he
d become so strong and so fast.
The races
. He
remembered now why he had won so many races during his
teenage years, both nationally and internationally. It had been
again, see her drowning and begging for his help.
T

himself, in order to save her. But he had never saved her, and
A Secret Kiss
197 instead he
d won so many races, so many trophies. It had never
been the trophies, however, that he wanted. It had always been
Alice. Yes, Alice was his real trophy
. Eventually he quit swimming professionally,
as Alice had
begun to fade from his mind and disappeared completely from his
memory.

What is the point?

he
d asked himself. Why was he
swimming professionally when he had no passion for it?
t save you
yet again.

That was when he heard the scream from next door. It was loud
and full of fear. Sebastian dashed off his bed and out the door in
two seconds flat. He met Darcy, who was half-naked,
in the
corridor. The brothers looked at each other, a
nd as if they
understood each other without having to speak, Sebastian opened
inside. Darcy followed.
who was whimpering with concern, into a ball in the darker corner
of the bedroom.

Sebastian rushed to her and kneeled beside her. Gently he
stroked her hair from her face,
and slowly he nudged her face up
to look at him.
Sebastian felt as though a professional boxer suddenly slammed
his mighty fist into his stomach the moment he saw her face. She
was sheet white,
and her eyes were large like a frightened child.

H
him, and he was pleased.

Alice shook her he
In response, Toby rubbed his head against her chest, telling her
he understood.

an said

her
She looked up at him
The situation was serious,
yet Sebastian wanted to laugh. If
Nicolas were here, she would have thought that he was Daddy
198 Alexia Praks
comfort her.

moving into his arms and hugging him tightly, her face snuggling
securely against his massive chest, tears in her eyes. He was pleased
because that meant she allowed him to cuddle her even though he
Oh yes, he remembered that time long ago when Alice had
countless nightmares. James had always been there for her,
hugging her and telling her everything was all right. And he,
Sebastian, would watch from the distance. Yes, he remembered
those words very well.

Do you love me?

Of course I do. With all my heart.

er voice penetrated his mind. He watched
her a

s she gazed up at him, her eyes large and glistening with tears.
I was so cold,

and you were so warm. My chest hurt. My body hurt.

There was a fire in the cave. You hugged me. You said you liked

moved her face and sleepily looked at Darcy. She whispered,

e. My Darce

e. You hate me

her face back against

Then

. Alice means cherry

to call her

okasama

. It means mother in Japanese. Yes, I want to

call her

okasama

The brothers noted that her eyes were now closed and she was rocking herself back and forward. Darcy bent down and took Toby

A Secret Kiss

199 from her. The dog groaned, wanting to go back to his master, but

Darcy was firm.

ed him.

Sebastian placed her on her bed and pulled the blanket up to her neck. Soon she was in deep sleep. The two brothers stood there,

watching the woman who had affected them so much, both

mentally and emotionally, in these past few days. She had brought

back their memories of their childhood, of the pain and of the

pleasure of being with her. Now more than ever, they both realized

they no longer wanted to forget about her, no longer wanted their

memories of her to lie dormant in their minds. No, what they

wanted now more than ever was to embrace her, to welcome her

into their arms

not as a sister, but as the woman they had always

wanted and loved.

to have another nightmare, the brothers headed out the door.

at the corridor.

leading the way with Toby in his

arms.

ll

,

Darcy nodded and gave Toby to Sebastian.

.

We h

ll

.

is almost as long as

200 Alexia Praks

First Love

thirteen years ago, summer

Darcy felt his heart throbbing

intensely as he hid

behind the door to his room, listening to his parents talking to Dr.

Young.

is an antibiotic and a

lot of rest

Darcy felt tears sting his eyes and his stomach hollowed. At that

moment

nt, he hated himself so much that he wanted to beat himself

to death.

How could he let this happen to his Snow? How could he let

Alaina and Tara push her off the cliff? How could he just stand

there in the distance and watch as she fell into the sea? Yes, he was

a coward. A nuisance. A no-

good weaklin

g

be called

a Princeton.

Ashamed!

He was ashamed of himself

cried his heart out, crying for his Snow and hating himself at the same time.

A Secret Kiss

201 He had missed dinner, and thankfully no one had come looking for him. He knew everyone was too shocked with what had happened to worry about dinner. What would Dad do to Alaina them; he was sure, which they deserved

. And Alice?

What was going to happen to her after this?

It was dark,

it any longer and got out of bed.

He needed to see her. He needed to make sure she was all right.

He was out of his room and heading

m across

the hall in an instant. He quietly opened her door and poked his head in.

He saw her slight, pale form in bed, sleeping. He noted she was having difficulty breathing, and his heart ached for her.

ed.

He s

lid in and closed the door behind him. He came around to her and touched the back of his hand on her forehead. He nearly jumped because her skin was burning hot.

e

. He reached out and took her little hand in his, holding

on to

her tight. Then he noticed that she began to whimper in her sleep, shaking her head and body as if she were having a nightmare.

She kept shaking her head and whimpering brokenly as tears fell

from her eyes down her cheeks.

Darcy knew he had to comfort her, had to protect her from her nightmare.

He climbed into bed with her and scooped her into his arms.

With her feverish

right, Snow.

ispered against

202 Alexia Praks

A few moments later, she calmed down

e

tightened his arms around her.

,she

begged.

ng out in agony, and his body shook with

much it hurts

her there. Slowly, he moved his lips down to her nose and kissed her there, too. Th

his lips to her mouth and kissed her ardently. Her skin was hot against his, and he felt himself burn with her. He stroked her face and prayed to God she would be all right as he continued to kiss her.

When he finally stopped, she groaned and her lips searched for his, begging for his touches. Darcy was pleased and fulfilled her wish by kissing her again.

This time, she responded by tightening her arms around him and whispering

e, you do

love m

She seemed to relax at his reply and snuggled deep against his chest as she fell into a deep slumber. Soon, Darcy too fell asleep, hugging her against him, never wanting to let her go.

When he woke again, it was morning, and he noted that her body was hotter than ever and her breathing was even more labored.

bed, and ran to get his parents.

Oh,

God,

he thought,

please let her be all right.

Please!

Alone, Alice groaned softly. Her chest hurt. She felt so very hot and so very weak. She

opened her eyes, and the first thing she

thought was that she had to get out of here. No one wanted her

here, so it would be best if she left. Yes, that would be best.

Without thinking, she sat up, and instantly the world spun

around her. She touched her forehead, trying to get her bearings

. Once the world had decided to stop spinning, she put her feet to the floor and got out of bed.

A Secret Kiss

203 Slowly and dazedly, she wandered out the door, down the stairs, and then out of the mansion into the hot summer outside.

Birds were chirping,

and the winds whispered past her. In the

distance, she saw the endless green land and blue sky. Yes, she

needed to go. She needed to get out of here.

, nor did she care just as

long as she was out of this place where no one wanted her. She had

thought at first that they wanted her,

that they loved her, but now

she knew better. None of them wanted her. They all hated her.

Even Darce.

It was so very hot, and she was so very thirsty. Her chest hurt.

Why did it feel like she had a ton of bricks

on top of her chest?

She coughed and the pain intensified. It was truly unbearable.

She groaned

in agony.

Why is it so bright out here?

She blinked and stared up the endless

sky. Suddenly, the world spun before her again. She sighed, feeling

awfully helpless.

At least

going to see my real mother now,

she

thought and collapsed there amongst the overgrown grass in the middle of nowhere.

It was so very dark now, and she knew then that she was going

away. Oddly enough, she was glad to leave this place where no one

wanted her, where no one loved her. That was when she saw the

light. It was beautiful and it beckoned to her, enticing her to come toward it.

and reach

ed out her hand,

begging it to take her. She could hear music,

such beautiful music.

It was like it was calling to her, telling her that it loved her,

would

take care of her, and would always be there for her. Then s

he saw

tiny petals

of cherry blossoms everywhere, floating and raining

down on her.

This must be heaven,

she thought and spread her arms

to catch the flowers. This was her place,

a place where she belonged.

from the distance

it again.

204 Alexia Praks

Alice searched around for the owner of that familiar voice, but he was nowhere to be found. Suddenly she saw az

ure eyes and a

hand reached out to her.

She felt hands touching her face. Alice blinked. In her dazed and feverish state, she felt herself being lifted and then positioned e person running,

his breathing hard

and labored. He smelled nice, of earth and pinewood. She loved his smell.

he heard him say.

d been running, piggybacking

her, nor did she know that it was getting dark. Suddenly she felt cool drops of rain on her skin. That felt nice. It cooled down her

hot skin. She sighed. Her chest still hurt,

though, and she groaned

again.

. W

Oh no! Too cold now. Too much rain. She shivered. No! Way too cold now.

She heard him swear

. She heard thunder clashing in the distance, and automatically she tightened her arms around him. She whimpered, afraid.

She felt him tighten

his hold on her as if to soothe her fea

r.

And the storm

Some more running,

and then

anymore. She felt him gently lay her on the cold, hard ground. She tried to open her eyes but found sh

d closed them

again.

When she did manage to open her eyes sometime later, she saw a small fire burning brightly not too far away. She felt so very cold.

She shivered. Her chest still hurt. Her body ached.

Where am I

? She groaned. She reached her hand toward the fire but found she was too weak to do so. Then she felt herself being moved and her body was on top of someone. The chest was bare and very warm. She sighed and rested her face against the nape of the

, inviting naked

A Secret Kiss

205 body. She felt

arms embracing her, hugging her, keeping her warm.

She turned her face to gaze up at the boy who was hugging her.

She saw azure eyes looking down at her with concern. His young face was marked with sweat and dirt.

e

pulling his jacket on top of

her as a blanket.

Sebastian tightened his arms around her as he rested his back against the cold, hard rock behind him. At least this cave would keep them dry and warm for the night. Tomorrow morning when

, and Dr. Young would treat

her fever. It was from the drowning. Too much water had penetrated her lungs, and now she was infected with pneumonia.

urvive the night.

No,

he told himself firmly

She

survive this night
Alice moved and touched her cold hand against his warm,
She bit her lip. Her
he said. In fact, everyone, except for Alaina
and Tara, was out searching for her since early this morning when
they
d found her gone from her room. They all had practically
turned the house upside down looking for her and had to extend
the search to the whole estate once
find her.

She
Sebastian swallowed. He hesitated. His hands fisted tight. His
heart trembled.

206 Alexia Praks

Sebastian slowly shook his head.
even in her state of sickness.

disappointed. She cast her eyes downward, hiding her tears.
Sebastian touched her chin and nudged her face so she could
look at him. Very slowly he brought his face down to hers, and
gently he kissed her on her lips.

Her lips were soft, and Sebastian loved the feel of her against
him. His kiss was gentle and soft and very, very loving.

So he loves

me after all,

she
thought. She was so very happy. She relaxed against him and
allowed him to kiss her deeper.

Sebastian had never kissed any girl befo
re, and Alice was his

very first. Though he was inexperienced, his innate nature knew
what it was doing. He opened his lips, plunged his tongue into her
small mouth, and kissed her deeply
pouring out all of his love

for her that he

d kept hidden within him for so long.

His fingers

dug deep into her thick hair, his thumb caressing her feverish skin.

When he moved his head back, breathless and his heart glowing
slowly closed her eyes again.

Seb
woke again. He smiled sadly and thought at least for now he had
her all to himself. He tightened his arms around her and kissed her

A Secret Kiss

207 The Best Man Wins

When Alice opened her eyes,

it was so bright she had to

shut them again. This time, she slowly fluttered her eyelids open
to get used to the sharp brightness. As she stared up at the ceiling,
she wondered why she was sleeping in so late and why she was
feeling so tired.

Slowly she brought her fingers to touch her lips, gently
caressing them

was sure, however, that she

d had a dream. What was it? Why

She continued to stroke her lips as her brain searched far and
wide for that elusive dream she was sure she had last night. Then
in a flash, what happened yesterday rushed back to her. Suddenly
she felt that heavy burden within her chest.

defend herself. She was now a twenty-three-
year-

old woman, and

Tara and Alaina had still managed to bully her. This was

She gritted her teeth.

Nah

would no longer allow those two vile women to hurt her.

Nope!

Not anymore.

208 Alexia Praks

At that thought, she fisted her hands and jumped off the bed, suddenly no longer tired. Yes, she knew exactly what to do. She would never drown again ever!

Without taking a good look at herself, she rushed out the door and headed straight downstairs. With a determined look on her face, she burst through the dining room door.

The brothers, who were at that moment sitting around the table having their very late lunch since theyd just returned from their very unpleasant hairdressing experience, looked up. What they saw nearly sent them to heaven.

Alice was in her pajamas of cotton sleep shirt and shorts. The buttons of the shirt were mostly undone from the top to midway down her chest, thus showing off her lovely flesh beneath. Since her shirt was quite long, the hem reaching down to just above her thighs, shorts, thus showing off her lovely bare, long, slender legs. Not to mention her hair was a mess, her skin petal white, her lips red, her cheeks tinged a rosy color

, and her eyes were wild and large as she gazed at them. She was hot. She was sexy. And every one of the brothers wanted to ravish her.

Nicolas choked on his coffee, and his glasses nearly fell off his fine nose as he stared at the young woman at the door. Tristan blinked and blinked and blinked yet again. Logan forgot he was pouring himself a cup of coffee and kept on pouring until the coffee was pouring onto the white linen tablecloth. Sebastian had a piece of sandwich in his mouth and it stayed there. Hayden had a piece of sausage on his fork, ready for his mouth, but now the sausage had escaped back onto the plate and the fork was in his mouth by itself. Darcy could only stare at her in shocked surprise. And Conrad grinned, his eyes large, his face flushed red at seeing her in such a seductive state.

Sebastian was the first to gain his wits, and after he finished

chewing his sandwich and awkwardly swallowed, he cleared his throat and told his brothers to quit staring.

A Secret Kiss

209 Nicolas cleared his throat also and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, returning his attention

Logan blinked, turned his attention to his coffee, and when he realized what he

had done, he swore under his breath. Tristan laughed at his brother.

Alice closed the door behind her and announced to the room, Sebastian snapped up his head and stared at her in amazement.

Darcy widened his eyes, and Conrad smiled even wider. Tristan got up and came around to her. He had a grin on his face that made his brothers suspicious. Without warning, he grabbed Alice, pulled her into his arms, and kissed her on the lips.

d uncomfortably,
realizing
hed had a haircut. She blinked and turned to look at the
brothers and noticed they all had their hair cut. Seba
hair was now cropped to just past his neck and cleanly styled,
long hair was completely gone and now the length only reached
just past his neck. He looked very stylish, like some very hot male
model in a fashion magazine. His eyes met hers, and she caught
her breath at the back of her throat.

Oh,
God!
He looked s
o different from before and so gorgeous. As for the rest of the
brothers, they had their hair professionally trimmed and styled.
They definitely looked amazing.

s
now for the morning kiss
es Within a second flat, Hayden was out of his chair and shoving
Tristan back. He pulled Alice into his arms and hugged her

s
,
210 Alexia Praks
his attention to Alice and said softly into her hair,
Sebastian and Darcy eyed each other with concern.
Yes, I
a cute smile.

Sebastian and Darcy eyed each other again. They wondered if
shed forgotten about her nightmare from last night and them in
her room.
Hayden scowled at his brother and finally did let her go,
reluctantly though. Tristan put his hands on her shoulders and his
. I

He gently nudged her toward the table.
Alice felt rather weird that he was so close to her. She grinned
favor
Sebastian choked on his coffee and coughed loudly. Darcy
frowned darkly. Tristan decided to look jealous, and Logan
chuckled.

Very hot
The brothers understood what Nicolas meant, but none of
them were paying him any attention. After all, they liked it hot
and dangerous.
The hotter and more dangerous,
the better.

Sebastian, after wiping himself clean from coffee, turned his
A Secret Kiss

211
her.
Isn
Alice blushed. The brothers knew Tristan was flirting with
their adopted sister again.

Nicolas finally put down his tablet and said to his audience,
the

e turned to
smile at Alice
Logan folded his arms across his chest and laughed loudly. The
brothers turned to look at him as if he

d gone mad. Logan shook
Nicolas cocked his head to o
Alice glanced from one brother to another, confused. Good
God! She was only here to ask for one favor and now look at where
who got to be her swimming instructor. She stood up and was
oss a coin.
rested

The brothers stopped arguing and looked at Sebastian, their faces impassive. said in a challenging voice. Conrad looked as though he were about to die. Nicolas frowned. Tristan slumped back in his chair. Logan groaned loudly. Hayden Sebastian nodded and turned his attention to his other brothers. Tristan waved at him to just go ahead and shoot him.

d trained to swim

212 Alexia Praks

go, Alice was lost. What were they on about? Why were they competing to be her swimming instructor?

One by one, the brothers got off their chairs and headed out the door. Tristan came to stand behind her, put both his hands on her shoulders, and said very c

we

Tristan said, pulling her out of her chair.

Alice reluctantly followed them out of the dining room door, and only moments later she found herself in the pool area with seven grown men.

She shrieked and nearly ran from the scene when she saw Sebastian pulling off his T-

shirt. Her heart thumped so loudly in her chest and her stomach flipped so hard she thought she was going to die of a heart attack.

Oh m

y gosh!

Sebastian looked amazing with just his jeans on.

His muscles were toned and well shaped,

not to mention his six-

pack. Alice had heard of women who liked to look at men, especially at their abs, and sigh with that odd feeling in the pit of their stomachs. She thought that type of thing would never ever happen to her, but she was wrong. She was feeling it right now.

Her body felt all tingly,

and her breathing became a bit labored.

She saw Sebastian looking at her in that strange way of his again.

She bit her lip and hastily looked away, only to see Darcy taking off his shirt, too.

Compared to Sebastian, Darcy wasn

t as bulky,

though his

muscles were as toned and well-

defined as Sebastian

abs were

very prominent and

her throat.

Oh God! Another hot, shirtless man.

Then Nicolas, Tristan, Logan, Hayden, and,

of course,

Conrad

all took off their shirts.

Oh,

God,

she thought.

She hoped they

A Secret Kiss

213

otally naked in front of her. She was about to run away to save herself from the embarrassment of seeing seven hot men naked when Tristan caught her by the shoulders and said anybody, and what are you off

Alice groaned. Oh gosh! Nicolas looked so different without

instead
sheer panic. She was panicking
because she was surrounded with seven very good-looking,
shirtless
men who were about to take off their jeans.
Breathe, Alice,
breathe
, she told herself.
the pool
with his jeans still on,
followed by Conrad and Hayden.
Alice didn't
to run when Logan chuckled and
When we want something we like, we compete for it. And it
give it our
best shot. So
any longer, he
stood up and jumped into the pool. Darcy was watching her and
noted that her feet were pale and turned almost purple. He took
off his socks and came over to her.
her.
214 Alexia Praks
Darcy picked up her left foot and pulled his sock on it.
Your
f
, his warm palms on her
skin.
Alice bit her lower lip as he pulled the other one on her other
foot. His touch was gentle, and she felt her heart flutter in her chest.
Darcy glanced up at that moment, and their eyes locked. His
heart started to thunder with
gaze from her.
Alice bit her lip and blinked, her whole being quivering
warmly at his intense stare. Then she also felt the brothers
watching them. She looked up, and sure enough, they were.
Darcy got up, and with his jeans still on, jumped into the water.
Suddenly it was like a real race as the brothers all climbed back out
and took their positions.
themselves ready.
Alice felt her heart start to thump faster and faster. Her body
tensed and stiffened
as she waited patiently.
God,
Alice thought,
they look like professional swimmers with
their tall, lean bodies all bending like so, ready to throw themselves
into the water and start the race.
Alice gritted her teeth and perched up on the seat, her heart
pounding and pounding and pounding.
Suddenly, they all dived into the water.
Splash
h!
vantage point, she noted that Sebastian had the strongest start, his
body hitting the water the farthest, followed by Darcy and then
Hayden. Nicolas, Tristan, Logan, and Conrad dived in at about
the same distance. Then they were on
head to head
their
powerful arms propelling them forward, stroking alternately, their
strong feet kicking along.
Sebastian was the first to reach the other end of the pool. He
flipped around, kicked his powerful legs against the wall of the
A Secret Kiss
215 pool

behind him, followed by Hayden, Logan, Tristan, Nicolas, and then Conrad. They did another three turns, all in breathtaking pace neck to neck. Suddenly, Conrad stopped. Alice panicked because she thought he was drowning. She watched him climbing out of the pool. He seemed to be having trouble breathing.

He puffed out. He was starving for

air,

and his chest was heaving

he managed.

Alice nodded her head and gave him a smile. Conrad nodded back, and then they both turned their attention to watch the intense race that was still going.

Conrad gave him his glasses, and after

he safely put them back

on the bridge of his nose, Nicolas sat down and watched the race with interest.

At this time, Sebastian was still in the lead, and Darcy was far behind him. They only had another lap to go,

over. Alice watched,

her stomach flipping and her whole body

anxious

. Perhaps she was in the competition as well. Although,

to be honest,

she

others won.

Then it was the final lap, and Darcy and Sebastian were now side by side, head on. Suddenly, Sebastian increased his power and propelled himself harder and faster. Darcy must have felt it and increased his power, too. Then in a split second, Sebastian reached Tristan after that. Logan was the last to finish, by a mere five seconds.

Alice was amazed as she stood there breathless.

What an

experience,

she thought. It was something she

had never expected to

see, to feel. God, she felt as though she were with them, swimming

along, feeling the power and the adrenaline. Then when they

had reached the end, she stopped breathing completely.

breath.

216 Alexia Praks

Tristan, Logan, and Hayden

climbed out of the pool,

and they

all lay down on the marble floor, trying to catch their breath.

nothing to him.

Alice was confused as she stared wide-

eyed at

powerful, handsome body climbing out of the pool. Her whole

yearned to be close to him. She wanted to run her fingers along

the length

of his toned muscles, to feel his wet, smooth skin against

her fingertips. Her insides ached, and she had to control the tremor

that seemed to rise within her being.

Oh,

God, fire.

There was fire

within her that was burning and burning

refusing to die down

until

Sebastian caught her eyes as he stroked back his wet hair. He

noticed the look on her face and swallowed hard.

Shit,

he thought

ly. Holy shit!
she know she was staring at him that way,
that she was practically
ogling him with desire?

Conrad
words penetrated Alice
muffled mind.

i

.
Sebastian glanced away, knowing very well that his body had
willingly responded to his adopted sister

, to what
those beautiful eyes of hers were implying. He distracted himself
make a fool out of us in front

God, how was he going to deal with this forbidden blaze of desire
that he was obviously having toward his adopted sister? And it
seemed, whether she knew it or not or whether she liked it or not,
she too was beginning to feel the same way toward him.

A Secret Kiss

217 He came up to her, standing mere inches from her, his massive
height easily towering over her
form.

Alice gasped involuntarily the moment he stopped in front of
her. She gazed up at him and caught her breath. He was truly an
amazing specimen. His face was gorgeous as he gazed down at her.
Those azure eyes of his gazed down at her, penetrating deep into
her soul. Because she c

she dropped her gaze and found herself gawking at his massive
chest instead. Smooth

so smooth and still wet. She itched to
touch him. Oh,

God! What was wrong with her? She shut her eyes,
telling herself to stop being so stupid.

When she opened her eyes again, she found herself staring at
his

abs.

The heat! Oh,

God!

The heat within her body.

Sebastian cleared his throat. He said to her, sounding more like
a gro

, we

door.

in all his effort like he used to,
he would have finished before any of us even
response to seeing Sebastian i

, nodding her head but still confused.

He got up and

One by one the brothers headed out the door.

Alice turned her attention to Darcy,
who was just getting

himself out of the pool. She noted that his toned, muscular body
was wet, beads of water kissing his tanned, smooth skin. As he
stood up, he stroked back his dark hair, and incidentally, his eyes
met hers. Her breath caught at the back of her throat as he gazed
at her. Her heart began to race and her fingers

tingled. Her whol

e body buzz

ed with a warm sensation, and she felt lightheaded all of
a sudden.

218 Alexia Praks

anything

since yesterday

later

Conrad came up to her and asked
So what are you going to
ing, her mind
still on Darcy.
She chuckled
here to see how I got on with the dress. I
ll have to tell them about

.
rumors about your sisters attacking me.
ding out the door.
Conrad had a sad look on his face as he watched her go.

A Secret Kiss

219 Punishment

Alaina watched in horror as
s palm flew toward
her and then
Slap!

Her face twisted to the side. Pain burn
ed her skin. Tears brewed
in her eyes. She gritted her teeth and glared at her father.
Tara gasped, her eyes wide, her whole body trembling in terror.
Oh, God! James had just slapped Alaina. That only meant one
thing. He was pissed.

Very pissed.

She held her breath as she waited for her turn to come. But it
never did. James just
scowled at her, his silvery-
gray eyes dark, his
face a controlled
masked of anger.

James narrowed his eyes dangerously at his daughter, his voice
warned you many times I do not tolerate your sadistic behavior
changed. I

ve always known you
would never accept her as your sister, but at least leave her be, for
has she ever done to you to make you treat her

220 Alexia Praks

S

at.
has taken him from
me since the first day she came into th
criminal. Everyone knows she burn
ed down the orphanage and
apologize

never bow to that

James gritted his teeth, and he never ever gritted his teeth. He
closed his eyes for a second, taking in a deep breath. He was too
old to deal with these types of things. But deal with them he must
because this was his family. He opened his eyes and sighed deeply.
Tara took a step forward, suddenly interested in what he was
trying to say.

voice.

James looked her straight in the eye

,
with
my children. Y
told me about your spending habits,
Alaina, and to be honest, I
my inheritance to her, is that it? How could you do that? You and

A Secret Kiss

221 Mom have

re giving her half of
my money

James lifted his palm and slapped her again. He felt his heart

Oh, God!
Hed slapped
his own daughter yet again. But how to discipline her? How?
Especially when she was a grown adult.
behavior
saw her stepping back and
ou do happen to take Alice to
court, I advise you to hire a very good lawyer. Let me put this
straight to you now. Everything, and I mean
everything
, will be
once,
but twice. How do you thin
ll go down with the jury
Alaina knew her father was threatening her. Good God! Her
own father was threatening her? And for that bitch!
James knew his daughter was thinking twice about her actions.
He sai
you. Since she turned sixteen, she
never asked for a cent from me or your mother. She has worked
hard all her life. She never had
He thought back to when his adopted daughter had been much
younger. Alice had worked very hard to pay for her own tuition
fees, and then after she
d graduated, she even saved up enough
money to pay him back the amount she thought it had cost him
to raise her. He
d laughed at her and ruffled her hair fondly, telling
her to give that money to charity instead. She understood him
immediately and had donated that large sum of money to their
newly built Queen Mary Orphanage in town. How proud of her
he was. If only Alaina were more like Alice, then James knew
. If this ever happens again, I will

,
222 Alexia Praks

Alai
fast within her chest that she thought she was going to have a heart
attack and die
believe her own father meant to disinherit her.
She gritted her teeth and,
without saying anything, stalked out
the door.
Tara hid a smile as she watched the poor little rich girl go. She
turned to James
and tried to look as sad as she possibly could.
She broke off, pretending to be really upset.
James saw through the act immediately. God, he was sick of
itsick of Tara, her
poor
me performance, and her manipulation
fathom why he had adopted
her into his household in the first place. No, it was because of
Alaina,
who
d begged him to take
in Tara. And
after that
he
, t
he girl
had little Alaina wrapped around her little finger, using her as
though the girl were her puppet.
-three

Tara gritted her teeth.
Shit!
He was onto her already. No,
wait!
kicked her out of the family already? Was it because of Alaina?
and cocked her head to the other side
. Tara fisted her hands and tried to control the anger that was
rising within her chest. So he was kicking her out of the family
after all.
Fine!
That was totally fine with her.
A Secret Kiss
223
like it at all. All too soon, your golden
smiled slyly, her eyes narrowed.
She rushed up the stairs and headed to A
found her friend crying her heart out.
Aw,
Tara thought,
the poor
little rich girl having a wee tantrum.
She came to sit beside Alaina and s
Yes,
Tara thought,
hate her. Hate her. Hate her.
God, that felt
good. So very good.
Alaina harrumphed.
Tara cocked her head to one side, catching
on
immediately, but pret
calls
or talk
ing to her when he happened to pick up the phone. She said
she wants him back. The stupid bitch. Darcy would never go back
to the likes of her. But
oks at
with
ll
ut I thought you never liked
probed.
, but Kate
? Besides,
more than you or I. When this is all
over, Darcy is still my Darcy and Alice can just go and die and
Alaina nodded and picked up the phone.
* * * * *

224 Alexia Praks
when Alice showed her
she
knew what had happened yesterday, along with James and Brenda,
who had a serious meeting with Alaina and Tara early this morning.
said,
from the look
on
the two
she surmised
good. Th
ey had
looked as though
James had given them a sentence worse than
death itself.
Serve
e them right

for be
having in
such a distasteful manner
and bullying Alice, even at this age.

Had
they forgotten how James and Brenda loved Alice?
tell her friends, Mary and Katherine, who naturally had already
found out. Alice just told them she
d had an accident and now
the dress was ruined.

o late to find you another
between the four of us, we could
figure something out. Maybe cut something out. I mean,
dress and mine
color alone

Alice sighed with relief that her friends, especially Mary,
the
bride-

to-
have flipped by now when their wedding was a mere week away
Then Alice realized something. Yes, after this particular
wedding, everything would go back to normal. The brothers
would all return to their own lives and she to hers. Her heart
meant.

At this
time, outside on the terrace, the brothers and their
parents were just finishing their afternoon tea. It was lovely, and
they enjoyed the meal tremendously, especially since there was
coffee made by Alice.

A Secret Kiss

225

Alice is an urgent matter. D
his wife.

Brenda nodded and
ecided to put

s leading into

Tristan eyed Conrad suspiciously. He knew the youngest had

He reached for his

cup of coffee and observed

as one by one his sons left them.

watched them disappearing into the house.

that our sons never agreed on anything

unless we make them. But recently they hang out a lot. Not that

In the house, Tristan caught up with Conrad and yelled out,

brat. Tell

226 Alexia Praks

Conrad went red as a beetroot.

Conrad clamped his lips together and marched pas
t them.

, w

Up on the second floor, Conrad sighed in relief once he realized
none of his brothers were following him. Well, at least he thought
so. Thus he rushed across the corridor and headed straight to

cough

ed loudly, intentionally.

and walked in.

ch of course

drew the attention

of the occupants from inside.

ing Alice fix

Conrad sighed, his face still flaming red as he watched his

brothers filing into

as well.

Cal

Young. Hot. Princeton. Men.

she asked none too gently.

Alice gritted her

,she

It was true. Her room was

there, there was absolutely no space to move.

,
course, since she was the bride-

to-be, James had given her one of

the biggest bedrooms in the mansion, which pleased Mary very well.

A Secret Kiss

227

,
leading her out the door.

bother to hide their scowling.

A few minutes later, Alice found herself standing before the full-

length

mirror and everyone inspecting her.

friends for help. She thought the bride-

to-be should put in a few

words.

Otherwise,

the brothers would go out of control designing

her new dress to their hearts

content. When Mary just cocked her

was

started, but

Tristan cut

her off.

short

he grabbed a bunch of the material on her and ripped off the bottom bit.

urned to look at the

other brothers, they

shocked to see the material being

ripped off from her person. Now she stood before them, her long legs bare.

took one step toward the door before Darcy caught her wrist and pulled her back.

She blinked and wanted to laugh. First, they

d forgotten she

ever existed. Second, they had a swimming competition to see who

228 Alexia Praks

got to be her instructor, and now they were fixing her dress. She

wanted to laugh at that. After all, they were men and how could

Stop! Pause right there, Alice!

she told herself. Most great

fashion designers were men,

so maybe these Princeton men could

just be onto something.

She allowed herself to be roped back into the center spot.

T

hen

the inspection proceeded.

said. All the brothers

noticed Alice had very nice shoulders and thought they were better bare.

my dress,

so I do hav

, telling him

she meant what she

decided

by Tristan, and by then it was nearly dinnertime.
The brothers went off down to the dining room with Mary and Katherine while Alice went to change. The brothers were expecting her to join them, but she never turned up.

, and she
wondered what she was doing.

A Secret Kiss

229 A Tormented Love

from across the

From across the studio, Alice glanced at the man who had usually

looking at her. He was concentrating on his painting. She knew he was teasing her because he had a smile on his wrinkled face as he concentrated on his work, moving the paintbrush ever so gently as if he were caressing the canvas with each stroke.

her head to one side, wondering if she had overdone the green leaves.

tiny brush downward.

Ah, the rose looks perfect now,

he thought

with a smile.

d clipped to the

side of the canvas. It was of the cherry tree she had taken that day before she met the brothers. She picked this particular picture because the tree stood alone with petals floating across in the wind,

230 Alexia Praks

and in the distance, there were hills and beyond that the sea of the island. It was perfect for her painting.

Ned put down his brush and folded his arms across his chest,

Alice flicked her eyes to him, taking in his silvery-gray hair,

thin face, and slight frame. He was completely different from Beth considering the fact that they were siblings. Their personalities, too, were completely different. Beth was the outgoing one with a no-nonsense attitude while Ned was the laidback one, very quiet and preferring

ing

to stay in the background.

Alice had met him when she first moved into Princeton

Mansion, and since then,

he had become a very good friend of hers

, treating her like his very own daughter and teaching her how to draw and paint. He had said that first day in the garden that painting was like meditation.

It calms you down and makes you

forget about the world. He had been right. When Alice painted, she forgot about the world, so consumed she was with her work.

Then when it was finished, it was like seeing her baby coming to life for the first time. She felt proud. That was why she loved to paint now.

Nothing is bothering me

said, gently stroking the

paintbrush against the white sheet, making another tiny green leaf. it

known you since you were a

wee girl, hiding behind the house crying your wee heart out cause

Tara hit you and the boys

tell James is beyond me. But you know as well as I that he knew what was going

on. Otherwise,

he

so far

issy, and bloody worried about you,
again, even though tha
t little brat Tara was

A Secret Kiss

231

m glad Daddy James sent me away to boarding school.

I met my two best friends,

Ned got off his chair and went to a desk on the other side of
the large studio. He took out some paper and came back to her.

Alice e

Alice put down her paintbrush and took the envelope. She
opened it and took out some papers. She flicked through them and
mother. You did ask me to help

, you

patted her head like he would his daughter.

,

e-mailed so many people,

but

admit it was easy for me because I know a lot of people in this
small town. Chasing up those women who used to work in the
orphanage was a tad hard, and,

ed had found out who her

Alice chuckled, too. Ned always said that every time she was

o cry because she was

232 Alexia Praks

hurt. No, she was about to cry because she was happy. She was

happy with gratitude.

Alice read the name on the paper. It said Haruka Tanaka.

Was that

really

her mother?

watching her carefully.

Alice put down the paper and stared at the half-

finished

Alice felt her heart quicken

she lived

s she

opening another headquarters in New

osedly the

up tha

are all there,

ready to sell. Got a sales

-ha! Made a contract with one of your patrons, I did. He

A Secret Kiss

233

Princeton, the man who was infatuated with her paintings. If he
flip and tell him to stop everything immediately.

After that,

they both returned to their paintings. Alice was so

engrossed that she

d forgotten about the time until Mary text

ed her.

,

her breath.

looking for her chick

on. It is

up her gear.

with you

he muttered.

ndeed come and waste more of your

, and left the cottage.

234 Alexia Praks

d spent her whole Sunday with

Ned painting. Although she admitted that she had thoroughly

The sun was setting on the far west of the island, and Alice the orange sky. She quickly got out her camera and took some pictures. Once she was done, she headed toward the small pathway through the woods toward Princeton Estate.

It was twenty minutes later when she sighted the stately mansion, and instead of walking in through the front door, she headed around to the back.

She sneaked into the kitchen and nearly jumped out of her skin have to be there looking after him. If you must know, of mine wants is your delicious coffee, just like everyone else. Now

and nudged her to the coffee machine that apparently only Alice Alice snapped her head up to look at Beth in shocked surprise. Beth folded her a and have her dinner with certain people, and she was making a

.

,

. You have my word

Beth said. She even crossed her heart.

Alice put her satchel down on the bench top and made her way to the coffee machine. Just when she was starting to grind the

A Secret Kiss

235 coffee beans, her phone beeped. She rushed back and picked it up to find she had a new text message. She noted there was no name, recognize the phone number either remember giving her phone number to anybody lately. Curious, she went ahead and read the message.

Where are you?

Huh? Sak

ura

ed back:

Who is this?

A second later she got another text, and it read:

Where are you?

She gritted her teeth. What absolute nonsense. Was somebody playing tricks on her? She text

ed back:

Go to hell!

She threw her phone on the bench, frowning at it. When she was just about to turn, her phone beeped again. She sighed and picked it up, determined to ring whoever it was and tell him to leave her alone.

She had another text, this time from a different number.

What?

It read:

Alice, where are you? You missed dinner. And I want your coffee with a teddy bear on it like Michael

. Please come soon.

Alice cocked her head to one side, wondering.

Con

rad?

But

how on Earth did he get her number?

She text

ed back:

, making your coffee. Yes, you

will not be the bear

She went back to making coffee, and two cups later the door burst open and Conrad rushed in.

, teddy bears
are for kids. How about

a
Alice laugh
a dragon

. Swan is good. No, wait. I want to learn how to make
He rushed around the bench and came to stand behind
her.

236 Alexia Praks

He watched her make the coffee, then she handed him the jug of hot milk.

Conrad wasn't
to what she was demonstrating
to him. He was watching her,
and he had a big, fat grin on his face.
smiling

back. She thought he looked adorable.
wiped the smudge of coffee debris from her skin. Once it was clean,
instead of moving his hand away, he touched her cheek,
pretending to clean there, too.

Instead of agreeing with her, which would be a lie, he just
nodded.

He just kept on grinning as his fingers and thumb moved to
her forehead, pretending to wipe nonexistent dirt. Then he moved
it.

in the way as she spoke.

Alice gazed up at him, her heart pounding as he came closer
and closer and then

-

Conrad jumped. He hastily turned to the door and saw
Sebastian there, scowling at them.

were

Alice thought Sebastian was talking to Conrad,
but then he
realized

he was talking to her.

Oh!

So that first unknown number was his?

A Secret Kiss

237 But how did he get her number? From whom? And why would he
text her?

Good Lord!

He looked mad. He sounded mad.

Conrad moved away from Alice

Alice returned to making more coffee as

Tristan walked in.

her. T

hen, before she knew

it, Logan and Hayden turned up as
well and crowded the kitchen.

. She just wanted to
get this done quickly and then disappear into her room.

an said, reaching out. No one was
paying him attention, however, and he stretched out his hand for
the cup. He accidentally shoved
flying out everywhere.

Alice gasped, stopped what she was doing, and rushed around
the corner.

,

her for her

on the floor. Alice saw he was about to read her very confidential report and snapped it from his hand, none too gently. She quickly folded it carefully and shoved it in her bag, her hands shaking. Sebastian noticed her odd reaction and was instantly suspicious but said nothing.

Alice put her bag farther away from them and returned to her coffee.

been doing this whole day? You just disappeared on us since early this morning, ed, leaning across the countertop.

re I can as soon as you guys leave me alone to finish this.

238 Alexia Praks

The brothers watched in silence as she expertly made their coffee. Then some twenty minutes later, it was done, all eight cups. And by that time, Conrad had finished his.

he had the gall to ask.

grabbed her bag and practically ran out the door.

Once she was in her room alone, she breathed a sigh of relief.

Yes,

living with seven

men was too much for her, she decided.

She dug her hand in her satchel and took out the pieces of papers Ned had given her. Thank God none of them saw the contents. Of course she knew they did after all.

She put the papers on the study desk and then went to shower.

Fifteen minutes later when she came back out, she was wearing her cotton pajama shirt and shorts, her long hair fresh and clean be bothered with

drying it properly, and her skin was soft and smooth after she moisturized herself with lotion. She actually felt rather tired and in fact was ready for bed when she spotted the pair of recently cleaned socks that Darcy had put on her feet yesterday morning back at the pool. Suddenly, her heart fluttered within her chest.

Darcy!

Should she go and return those to him now?

She picked up the pair of socks and poked her head out the door.

Coast clear,

she thought and rushed across the corridor to

That way she could just drop the socks off and run back to her own room ASAP,

and he would be none the wiser.

A few seconds later when there was no sound, she tried the door.

d. She turned the knob and slipped in.

ly

clean and tidy. She knew Darcy allowed no one to enter his room, nor did he ever allow the maid to clean it either. His room was his

A Secret Kiss

239 get caught red-

t so pissed with her that

he might just

She paused. What would he do now that he was a grown man want to think about it and hence turned to inspect his room instead.

The design was very masculine with a muted gray color scheme.

The large living

chair, very modern and sleek, sat near the window. If the person who sat in that very comfy chair there decided to lift his head, he would see the lovely view of the pond outside. Alice cocked her head to one side, wondering if he'd seen her many times on the dragon bridge.

On top of the desk was his laptop and digital drawing gear. She wondered if he did digital art. Then she swore at herself. Of course he did.

After all, he was one of the best game creators and designers for his

Then something caught her attention. It was a gigantic digital art poster on one side of the wall. She caught her breath, truly amazed at the artwork. To say it was fantastic was an understatement. It took her breath away the moment she set her eyes on it.

It was set in a fantasy world with a gothic castle and a cherry tree in full bloom in the background. However, what really fascinated her and what really caught her breath in the back of her throat was the central picture of the dark knight and a fair maiden. The pair caused her insides to shiver with something akin to pleasure and delight.

The knight was in gothic fantasy, medieval war clothing, had long, sinful black hair, which was tied back, and had one hand holding a dangerous-

looking long, kickass sword that gave her the

way. The other of his long, masculine hands was embracing the beyond-

beautiful maiden. Alice could only stare, wondering if any woman in existence could compare to this exquisite beauty in the poster. She had long black hair, her skin petal white, and her

240 Alexia Praks

lips a ruby-

red color. She wore a fantasy-

type medieval gown the

color of azure with gold trimming which seemed to enhance her beauty even more.

Her long hair flow

ed down to her waist, and

her slender arms embrac

ed the knight, her face soft with love as

she gazed up at him.

in a different world as she continued to stare at the poster.

Suddenly, the door opened and Alice gasped in fright, twisting herself around to witness Darcy coming in.

Oh,

God!

Darcy could only stare in shocked surprise to see his adopted sister in his bedroom.

His heart began to thump so loud in his chest,

st, like an African drum beating under the moonlight. He gazed at her, taking in the wild hair, the soft skin, the bare legs, and the bright eyes.

Holy shit! She is hot.

There were butterflies within the

pit of his stomach and his body was trembling with longing.

They continued to stare at each other in silence, totally surprised

and totally lost as to what to do.

the

bedroom door. Then a triple knock

followed.

Conrad was about to come in.
do you
printed out
some of the art
to
Suddenly the doorknob
wriggled.
Darcy took action. He grabbed the surprised Alice by the arm
and pulled her along with him toward the walk-
in closet. He
shoved the door open and hastily nudged her in.
Alice gasped when she found him in the closet with her. Then
she watched him hastily close the door behind him. She tried to
breathe normally, but it was so difficult with him literally
A Secret Kiss
241 squishing her against the wall.
Oh God!
She could feel him
the
whole length of his person against her
his long, muscular legs,
his firm chest, his chin on the top of her head, his warm breath on
her, and yes, even that private part of his as well. She blushed in
the darkness and nibbled her lower lip with nervousness.
Darcy too felt her
all of her
against him, and it brought
forward a wonderful pleasure in his being. He gazed down at her
in the darkness, wanting to do more to her than he was allowed.
Oh,
God!
She was so soft against him,
and her subtle breasts
were
squished up against his muscular chest.
Shit!
, fantasizing
e to sneak
Sa
. She wanted to laugh at
searching his private stuff and wondered if he was pissed with
Conrad. She tried to see what his reaction was by lifting her head
to sneak a peek at him. Instead, however, her head bumped against
So s
she whispered, her warm breath tingling his skin.
arcy swore under his breath. The closet door suddenly
yanked open, and Darcy thrust himself in farther, squeezing
Alice even more against the wall.
Thank God for the many clothes hiding their bodies so Conrad
Alice found she couldn
, and her face was literally
, God, she could smell him.
242 Alexia Praks
The smell of Darcy she remembered so long ago. She closed her
eyes,
and the memory came rushing back to her in full force.
It had been a rainy night, and she
d just had a nightmare about
the orphanage and the fire. She
d been crying until her eyes were
red and her cheeks were raw, so afraid and so alone. It had been
then when she heard the door open. A few moments later, she felt
face.
Alice had turned to look at him

He smiled at her and hastily settled himself between the sheets arms.

Alice had taken the chance and eagerly snuggled her face against his chest. At that moment, his presence, his warmth, and his smell had eased her fear of her nightmare and eventually she had fallen asleep, feeling safe and loved in his arms.

Now Alice felt exactly like that. His presence, his warmth against her, and his smell

they all brought back that wonderful, warm feeling she always had when he was near her. At that realization, her heart began to beat faster and faster, and her pulse

refused to calm down. Suddenly, she realized his lips were on her forehead, and in response, her insides quivered with pleasure, causing her head to spin with delight.

Darce, she whispered internally.

Please, Darce, come back to me.

This closeness was driving Darcy crazy. God, how much longer could he handle this? How much longer could he control himself from ravishing this woman before him? Suddenly, he felt her hands moving down his torso.

Oh, God!

Did she realize her movements were intoxicating him? That her light, feathery touches were like a caress, teasing him, letting him taste the forbidden pleasure he so wanted?

He himself any longer. He grabbed a bunch of her long hair in his hand and brought it up to his nose and lips.

Oh, God!

She smelled A Secret Kiss

243 beautiful. She smelled of spring. His insides ached to hold her, to control himself then? He would hurt her, and he never

ever wanted to hurt her.

He tightened his fists in anguish as he inhaled the sweet scent of her hair, his whole body trembling.

Snow, he thought sadly, tears brewing in his eyes, this is as close as I can get to you.

He tried to calm this powerful passion he had for this woman by taking deep, shaky breaths, her long hair still in his hands, unseen by Alice in the darkness.

,
s
to hide a chuckle.

s
fact, if he were to pay attention, he would have jumped out of the closet and bash

ed his brother in the face for insulting his beloved project. He was, however, too busy trying to calm himself down from wanting the woman squeezing right next to him, tempting him with her soft body and spring scent.
down at her.
move from the spot because it felt

perhaps Darcy was just dying to get out. So she cleared her throat and said

244 Alexia Praks

Darcy got his wits back and reluctantly moved, pulling her along with him out of the closet.

Her face would scare the hell out of her. Instead she picked up the socks she had dropped and handed them

Darcy wanted to tell her that she could come in whenever she wanted on his bed either, like she had when they were children.

Darcy desperately wanted to pull her back into his arms, but instead he watched her go, his

heart hurting so bad he wanted to cry in anguish.

Alone, he turned to gaze at the digital poster he had drawn of the

knight and the maiden. At the bottom, it read

Snow White and the Seven Knights

. A Secret Kiss

245 Alice & t

he Prince of Hearts

Sebastian was waiting patiently in the pool for Sebastian

akura

to turn up

for their first swimming lesson. Unfortunately for

him,

his brothers decided to tag along

to watch the show.

First it

was

Tristan who arrived, already in his swimming

gear and heading

straight

to the pool.

Tristan asked, his voice cold as

he watched his brother taking off his shirt and throwing it to the marble floor.

After all, I have nothing better to

do

then jumped into the pool. Sebastian

scowled as Tristan proceeded to swim around.

Well, diving deep under

and popping up at the surface, all wet and shaking his thick hair like a dog.

Darcy came in and slammed the door shut, muttering to

Why does it have to be

able to get to sleep last night after Alice had left his room. He

was pissed because his body was aching

aching for Alice

. 246 Alexia Praks

behind him.

Darcy ignored Nicolas and climbed up the ladder to the diving platform above.

He

proceeded to grab the remote control and open the skylight above,

letting bright morning light into the indoor pool area. Then he

pushed the button to open the glass wall as well to let in the warm spring air.

He

himself comfortable on the settee. Then he turned on his tablet.

A moment later

into the pool. Sebastian would
decided to run in the opposite direction after she
d taken one look
at the pool area. He shook his head. This was going to be a very
long lesson indeed.
At this time in her room, Alice tugged the robe securely
around her and took a deep breath.
No more running now,
she told
herself. She had to learn how to swim. With a determined look on
her face, she patted Toby on the head. The dog encouraged her
with a friendly bark.
walked out the door.
She knew Sebastian was very punctual with his appointment,
so she made sure she was fifteen minutes early
want him to get pissed with her for wasting his time. There was
also the fact that she
wanted to be in the pool before he arrived so
witness her in a swimsuit half-
naked, which she felt
rather uncomfortable in.
Her plan, however, came crashing down on her the moment
d expected
to be because there were seven men, six in the pool and one on the
settee. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves tremendously,
swimming around and playing tag like kids.

A Secret Kiss

247

Alice stood frozen in her spot, her heart pumping out of
control.

Oh, God! Oh,
God! Oh, God!

This was ridiculous. She

wanted to turn around and run.

Conrad climbed up from the pool and came over
he said. He was about to pull her forward when
she snapped her hand back.

distance.

Alice blushed. Of course she di

lessons when there were so many of them around. After all, she
Conrad came running after her, and once he was by the edge of
the pool, he did a good flip before diving in.

Alice stood frozen by the pool, wondering if she should get in
or not. They all seemed to be watching her. Even Nicolas, who
had his tablet in front of him, was eyeing her from afar. Why were
they watching her as if they were waiting for her to do something?
She took a deep breath and sat down on the edge of the pool,
dipping her feet into the water. It was warm, and she sighed in
freeze to death.

She proceed to slide forward and then
take

off

looked down at herself and blushed again. Oh,

God! How stupid

of her.

She stood, then untied her robe. That was when she felt as
though s

of them watching her. She blinked. She blushed. They looked

248 Alexia Praks

away and pretended to be busy doing whatever they were
pretending to be doing.

She took the opportunity and quickly slipped the robe off her
body. S

gasps
the moment the robe hit the
floor.
Alice was wearing a one-
piece black-
and-
white swimsuit,
fitting her body to perfection, showing off her slender legs and the
shape of her small waist and gorgeous breasts. With her hair
formed into a secured bun at the top of her head, she looked
absolutely to die for.
Oh, the brothers had seen hot babes
in swimsuits all right, but
none of those hot babes w
ere Alice, and this one definitely hit
the right spot.
The moment she realized they were watching her again, she
quickly sat on the side of the pool and slid in. Only she was in such
haste to be in
to swim. She found herself sinking right to the bottom of the deep
seem to get herself back to the surface.
There
I go,
embarrassed seven men were looking at her.
How pathetic is
that?
The brothers all sucked in their breath again, this time from
fright because they knew she was drowning. Sebastian got to her
in two seconds flat, his powerful arms propelling and pushing him
to her. He dived deep to the bottom, wrapped one strong arm
about the small of her back, hugged her to him, and pulled her
up.
The moment she was lifted out of the water, Alice sucked air
into her starved lungs, and at the same time she swung her arms
She was breathing heavily and managed to nod. She looked
around behind her and saw the brothers still watching her. She
blushed, totally embarrassed.
himself.
A Secret Kiss
249

,
that he was watching her intently and that he was pulling her even
said.
Alice bit her lip. That was exactly what she wanted to tell
them. God, drowning right in front of them was bad enough. She
Nicolas switched off the tablet screen
e left his
invitation hanging in the air and walked to
the door.
Logan sighed and
He followed Nicolas to the door.
Tristan shook his head and swam toward Sebastian and Alice.
you how to swim pr
and
then climbed out.
Darcy got up and silently walked away, too. As he was heading
to the door, he turned his head and glanced back at her. Alice
caught his eyes and felt her heart fluttering. Her body became stiff
licked her lips
and watched him go.
Hayden chuckled and shook his head. He hooked one arm over
s and dragged the youngest brother out of the
pool.
Once the door was closed and the pool was a rain mist, Alice

she
y against her. Her heart
started to race,
and her body began to tingle. She wanted to let go
of him but
pool again.
250 Alexia Praks
She turned her eyes to him and saw he was watching her
intensely. She shivered involuntarily,
licking her lips again.
Sebastian eyed those glistening, sensuous lips and felt his throat
go dry as dust.
Alice shook her head, feeling her hands slipping from his
muscular neck. Sebastian moved his hand down her back slowly,
as if caressing her. Alice caught her breath at the back of her
throat.

.
He chuckled because she looked so
Alice cocked her head to one side and tried imagining that.
Sebastian smiled. He liked her giggle. It sounded like music to
h
was his muscular chest. It was so hard and so smooth, and oh,
God,
she could feel her tummy fluttering and her fingers tingling.
Alice refused to look at his face because she was embarrassed.
Obediently, she kicked,
back and for
th, back and for
th.
sakura
closing her eyes.
meant but
, as
she was doing rather well.
What Alice meant was that she was imagining herself as a
cherry blossom floating in midair in spring. She smiled at that
thought.
Slowly, Sebastian let her go. He watched her floating before
him, her eyes closed and a serene expression on her face. She made
A Secret Kiss

251 When she opened her eyes again, she noted he was a good
Sebastian thought his heart would really burst if it swell
ed much bigger, but that was exactly how he felt. She was beautiful.
Her laughter was beautiful. She made him feel wonderful.
She smiled at him
Once he was close to her, her heart started to beat fast again.
Sebastian wrapped one arm about the small of her waist and made
ie
Alice followed his instruction.
Oh, God!
She could feel his
firm hand on her waist,
warm and sensual,
and oh,
God,
why was
her tummy fluttering again?
Sebastian gently ran his hand from her lower back up to the
on
her person. It was hard with him being so close and the fact that
her body was going haywire wanting
No!
She was not going to think about it. Sebastian was her
admitted brother, after all. But oh

him? She growled in frustration.

She wanted to te

the floating, but because of him.

He frustrated her. He confused her.

. Alice obeyed and closed her eyes while he held her there between air and water, almost carrying her. She imagined herself as the cherry blossom again, floating and floating and floating. was beginning to affect him, and he felt desire burning hotter and hotter in his blood. Her skin was so soft against his touch, and her

woman

s body was ready for him, he knew. But how could he

252 Alexia Praks

think such horrible thoughts about her when she trusted him to teach her?

glad.

Sil

adopted sister. Silently he ached to kiss and touch her, to explore her beautiful body, to feel her against him, beneath him. He ached to feel himself inside her

. Oh,

God!

He ached so much.

Alice opened her eyes, and when she realized Sebastian was no longer holding her, she knew she was floating all by herself. Her heart burst with happiness at that moment and she laughed.

she shouted.

Then she turned to her side to look at Sebastian to see if he was proud of her. When she met his gaze though, she saw something that caused her stomach to flip and her heart to skip. There was something in the expression on his face and that made her heart do a somersault. Then her stomach flipped again and her body ached,

and then

She forgot to float.

She gasped and felt her body being pulled deep into the pool.

She tried to scream, but the water muffled her voice. She reached out for help, and just before she hit the bottom, she saw Sebastian reaching his hand out to her, just like that time long ago back in the sea.

He caught her hand and pulled her to him, his hand tight around the small of her waist. She hastily wrapped both arms around his neck, bringing her body and face to his. Still floating there under the water, he embraced her, gazing down at her intensely.

God, she is

beautiful,

he thought.

back of her head and brought his face down to hers. Slowly, his lips found hers.

He kissed her deeply and passionately, his lips firmly against hers.

A Secret Kiss

253

e, her heart seemed to have stopped

working altogether,

and her whole body was floating just like those

cherry blossoms in the wind

flying and flying, higher and higher.

Sebastian made her part her lips, and she obeyed. He blew air into her mouth, straight into her lungs. She felt her body working again. Then she felt his tongue plunge into her, exploring her.

Alice felt like she was in heaven as millions of thrilling sensations exploded through her being. She tightened her arms around his

The two bodies floated there in the depths of the pool, swirling around, kissing deeply and passionately.

Then, as

if lightning struck him, Sebastian flashed his eyes open and drew back, terminating the kiss. He started to swim to the surface, taking her along with him.

Alice sucked in air once they got out of the water. Without looking at her, he guided her to the side of the pool and easily lifted her.

think that should do it for

up. He grabbed her robe an

y to

her eyes.

Alice, still lightheaded and totally confused from the experience, nodded.

Sebastian dived b

ack into the pool and started to vigorously

swim his heart out. Alice watched him moving his powerful arms

as he propell

ed himself forward, the droplets of water kissing his

smooth, tanned skin. He looked beautiful, and her tummy flipped

again, imagining those powerful arms holding her and those hands

caressing her. She felt lightheaded even more,

and her body tingled.

As if he knew she was watching him, he stopped, breathing

growled from a

Alice realized he was pissed.

With

me? Her body trembled in

response.

Fine!

. 254 Alexia Praks

, pulling her robe tighter about her and

marching out the door, her heart pumping hard within her chest,

her body still tingling.

Sebastian listened until he heard the door shut, then pulled

himself out of the water and dove backward into the pool,

splashing water everywhere. He swam hard, working his muscles

until they were exhausted, until he was exhausted. He wanted to

anymore. But that was not to be. By the time he

d done

fifty laps,

he was totally exhausted and collapsed by the side of the pool. Even

then he was still thinking about that kiss

that wonderful,

beautiful, amazing underwater kiss. It was like when

hed kissed

her that very first time back at the cave years ago. He

d felt it then,

and he felt

it just moments ago

the passion, the love, the desire.

Oh,

God!

It was so powerful. And he found he wanted more,

needed more.

Her lips had been soft against his,

and her small tongue was

utterly sensational.

Shit!

He had to stop thinking about her. He had to stop

thinking about the kiss. He growled long and loud as he lay there,

panting from exhaustion.

A Great Kiss

he Prince of Darkness
Still Sebastian lay there, staring
up at the ceiling, his
heart thumping loud and fast and his body exhausted from
before
he
noticed a pair of long, tanned
legs walking toward him. He turned and saw
Tara
coming
to a
stop only a few inches away
from him
, gazing down at him.
How the hell did she get in here without him noticing?
Sebastian swore under his breath and turned away, ignoring her.
Right now
all he wanted was to be alone, and Tara was the last
person he wanted to see.
, considering the fact
any competition. But then again, you
too old for that now. So what
is this for? To keep fit? Or
was there
something else bothering you?
Oh shit!
dark hair, her soft skin, her sensual
lips those lips he had just kissed.
He flashed his eyes open. He found Tara beside him, her face
very close to him. He scowled.
256 Alexia Praks
Sebastian gritted his teeth.
as part of the family before. So
why
now
at this moment was Sebastian. She was ready for him. She had been
ready for him for ages. Today he was here all by himself, and it was
her chance. She moved to sit on top of him, her legs on either side
of his waist,
saddling him.
Oh,
God!
She could feel his six-
pack
beneath her, and it was such a turn-
on.
Sebastian reacted by pushing her off him. Tara, however, was
quick and threw herself at him, wrapping her arms tightly around
his muscular neck.
always wanted you for so long
Very
wrong.
Sebastian was shocked into stillness.
He tightened her arms around his neck, her long
fingernails digging into his skin. She brought her lips down and
kissed him hard.
A Secret Kiss
257 No, he was wrong. He felt something all right. He felt revolted.
had stooped this low.
He pulled back, removed her arms from his neck, and shoved
her off him. He stood up and stared at her
with disgust. He wanted
to shout at her to go

of herself.

Tara sat there staring up at him as she caressed

her lips, a weird

grin on her face.

Sebastian shook his head and turned on his heel, ready to leave

her, ready to leave

, though, and stood rooted in his spot when he noticed Alice at

the door, watching him.

His stomach flipped.

Shit!

sisters

she asked.

Sebastian understood the meaning of her words immediately.

Bloody hell! No! Of course not!

heart trembling, her whole body shaking with anger, frustration,

for

he

glanced at Tara, who was now posing elegantly before them. She

even managed to give Alice a leering grin.

Alice turned her eyes to Sebastian, who seemed to have

become as stiff as a r

a little higher as she

stared at him, tears brewing in her eyes

hard to control her emotions, but she ju

her heel and headed back out the door.

.

indly ran up the

stairs to her room. There she rushed into the bathroom and turned

on the shower. She cried her heart out as droplets of water

pounded down on her. Once her tears were all used up and her

258 Alexia Praks

face raw and her eyes red, she managed to calm down and got hold

of herself.

God!

She was pathetic.

Why was she so upset just because she

d witnessed Sebastian kissing Tara? Obviously, if those two had a

relationship, then what did that have

to do with her?

She got out of the shower, dried herself, and put on a pair of

skinny jeans and a light blouse. After blow-

drying her hair and

putting on some light makeup, she stared at herself in the mirror,

d just had a good cry.

Yes,

she

thought.

She looked just fine. Maybe just a bit red in the eyes, but

that was all.

Suddenly, she was thinking about Sebastian again.

This is

ridiculous,

she thought as she stared at herself in the mirror. Why

down? She felt sick. That scene was still fresh in her mind. She

. Sebastian and Tara?

She turned away from the mirror in disgust. God, she needed

to calm down. She needed to be doing something. She needed to

get her mind out of this stupid notion of Sebastian and Tara

together.

She left the bathroom, grabbed her camera and her bag, and

headed out the door.

Half an hour later, she was deep in the woods, alone with nature.

She had already missed lunch, but that was okay because she

She paused right there.
Her phone beeped. She took it out and saw she got a text message. It was Conrad, scolding her for going off without telling him. She also got text messages from Nicolas, Tristan, and Logan, informing her that better turn up for dinner or else.
Else what?
And how did these guys get her number anyway?
Mary? It must have been Mary.
She put her phone back into her satchel and took out her camera. She tested the light, found that it was excellent, and then proceed ed to take pictures. Soon she was lost in admiring the
A Secret Kiss
259 woods and the many creatures that were living there. She took photos of a grasshopper hanging on to the tall grasses, of bees sucking nectar from flowers, of birds chirping in the trees, and of wildflowers that were surrounding her. At a certain point, she felt as though someone were following her, watching her in the distance. She scanned her surroundings but saw no sign of anyone and relaxed again. She knew she had nothing to worry about because this was the Princeton Estate and no one else had ever set foot in these woods. For years, she d roamed this place by herself.
It was in essence her playground, and she loved it that way. Hence, despite that odd feeling that someone was following her, watching her every move, she felt that she was, in actual fact, very safe.
In fact, Alice did not know that Sebastian was following her. He had spotted her heading out into the woods when she left the house and had desperately wanted to go to her and explain what happened back at the pool have the guts to talk to her, anything to do with him. Thus, he stayed back, following her silently like he always had when they were children.
Still oblivious to Sebastian tailing her, Alice came to the biggest cherry tree on the island. It was her tree, the one she d planted with Ned when she was little. It had now grown to a massive height, and the flowers bloomed beautifully help herself and took picture after picture. Once she thought she had enough, she sat underneath it, her back resting against the big trunk.
She sighed, inhaling the scent of spring air. Then she brought the camera up and started flicking through the photos, smiling with satisfaction as she inspected each one in turn.
Alone, she set down the camera and gazed across the distance . It was peaceful and beautiful here, and it helped her forget about everything.
Yes, s , and she felt rather sad about that.
Slowly she closed her eyes, and i long before she actually fell asleep, smiling, thinking about her mother, the woman whose name was Haruka Tanaka.
260 Alexia Praks
* * * * *

Darcy
he gazed down at Alice from where he was
on
the top tree branch.
She looked
just like Snow White lying there under the cher
ry tree
. Hed come here to get away from everyone, to be alone, to
think, to ease his desire and passion for his adopted sister. Then
once he found the tree, he thought it was a perfect spot for him.
Hed been sitting on the third branch, hiding amongst the cloud
of pink flowers, thinking about Alice. He
d almost fallen asleep
when she had announced her presence with her soft footsteps and
amongst the cherry blossoms in her photos. Then when she sat
down and fell asleep, he admired her. Here he had her all to
himself. Here he could watch her forever
at least until she woke
up.
He climbed down the tree and moved gently and quietly
toward her so he wou
. He came to sit beside her
. Dear Lord,
he thought,
she looks so innocent and beautiful.
He
f his knuckles against
her cheek.
She groaned.
His stomach flipped.
Then
before he could stop himself, he gently touched his lips to hers.
She was soft and warm against him. She groaned again, and Darcy
more passionately as he
brushed his tongue against her slightly parted lips. He dug his
fingers deep into her thick hair,
marveling
at her sweetness.
Oh shit!
He wanted her. The thought of last night came to him
in full force.
Darcy stopped himself from going any further and moved back
just in time when Alice fluttered her eyes open. She gazed at him,
their faces so close to each other that she could feel his warm breath
on her skin. She blinked.
A Secret Kiss
261
e
Darcy had forgotten that his fingers were still at the nape of her
neck, holding her there when he
d kissed her. He hastily moved
his hand back to his side and rested his back against the tree trunk,
his heart banging furiously within his chest.
d witnessed her sleeping in the woods alone. How embarrassing.
Then again, he
quietly.
ed it when I was li
help
He turned to her
as uncomfortable for her to
talk to him about her childhood. He cleared his throat and said
, I never hated
She
caught her breath, her heart thumping hard and fast

said, referring to that incident at the tree house and later when he'd pretended she never existed.

God!

He needed to get this off his chest. He needed to tell her how he felt.

been so horrible to anything wrong

I never hated

pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight. Alice felt her whole body trembling and her heart somersaulting within her chest.

Darcy snuggled his face against the nape of her neck, breathing in her wildflower scent. She smelled beautiful, and it stirred his insides pleasantly.

.
I wish
I could

.
Alice gave him a weak smile hurt, but that was a long time ago. We

262 Alexia Praks
tightly across his cheek.
smile.

me just like that?

he asked to make sure she had really forgiven him.

She nodded, chuckling softly.

His face became serious and dark as he gazed at her, his Alice gasped, and before she had time to think, he leaned his face forward and took her lips. This time he had both his hands at the nape of her neck, his fingers digging deep into her hair as he passionately kissed her.

Alice was shocked into stillness. Her heart thumped loudly

within her chest, her stomach flipped, and her whole body melted

in his embrace. Her head was spinning out of control as she felt his lips against hers, his tongue caressing her soft flesh erotically.

She caught her breath at the back of her throat as he deepened the kiss

. She gasped. Darcy took the opportunity and plunged his tongue into her sweet mouth. He explored her with a wild passion, causing her world to spin with delight.

Alice responded by clinging to him, weak and lightheaded, her body trembling with a beautiful sensation.

When Darcy moved back, his eyes were dark with passion.

God!

He wanted her. He needed her. He loved her. But he must stop.

Oh,

God!

long. He

had hidden his passion and desire for her, and now the feeling was too overwhelming for him to control. Hence instead of stopping Darcy moved himself close to her so she was between him and the tree. His face was so close to hers that they were forehead to forehead, nose to nose.

pouring out all of his passion for her, showing her just how much he loved her.

A Secret Kiss

263 Alice was breathless.

Darce

. Her Darce was kissing her. Her

heart was trembling with love,

yet she was so confused. How could

she love Darce when he was supposed to be her brother? Albeit not

blood relation. Albeit an adopted one. Could this be wrong? This

kissing? This passionate embrace?

Darcy moved his lips and gave her little kisses along the nape

of her neck. Alice groaned softly and sighed breathlessly. Was

this it? The beginning of lovemaking

? Darce. My Darce.

Hed come

back to her.

Hed said

he had never hated her.

Never!

She was glad and felt so wonderful.

Darcy knew he made her feel good, and he was pleased. Yes,

than this

when the time

was right.

Finally, he got control of himself again.

God,

he thought.

He had never lost control of himself before.

Ever!

But with her, with

Alice,

he could very well lose everything,

and he c

ared

less. He wanted her that much. He loved her that much.

The warmth of his breath against her skin caused a rush of

beautiful sensation through her, and her body went weak in

response.

He continued.

kiss

either because I never, ever think of you as my si

He slowly

moved back, his mauve-

gray eyes

dark and full of passion

on

re if

nd up properly after the kiss. She took a deep

breath and said, her voice tr

. You go on ahead.

Darcy smiled at her. It was a very handsome smile that caused

o flutter.

264 Alexia Praks

On the other side of the woods, Sebastian felt the dreadful pain

suffocating him. He felt as though the world had just collapsed

around him, leaving him alone and tormented. He fisted his hands

as his heart continued to bang against his chest, ready to burst out

of his being, killing him on the spot. His head spinning and his

world dark, he turned on his heel and started heading back.

Alice was trying her best

to persuade Darcy to leave, but he

budge. Hence they spent another hour together in the

weakly, her telling him that and him following her around. Then

e
was shocked.
He chuckled, holding the camera up to
model
never thought of herself beautiful. No, she was a beauty all right
both on the inside and out. And she was the woman he was in love
with.
Without further ado, he clicked the shutter
button.
e she
shrieked.
He laughed and continued clicking.
Click! Click! Click! Click!
Alice reached out to get her
camera, but
Darcy only laughed.
kissed her so damn passionately and wildly that Alice had to cling
was taking photos of them kissing, with the camera in his hand
extended out at a good distance.
When he moved his head back, he stroked her cheek with his
know it, but
Alice herself was gazing at him, her eyes large.
Click! Click! Clic
k! The camera continued to record.
Then she laughed. Alice never thought she could be this
happy with Darcy
her dear Darcy
e. Then suddenly her happiness
was snatched away from her as she realized this couldn
t be. This
A Secret Kiss
265 couldn
t last. The reason? Because Darcy was her adopted brother.
Because Alaina was his twin,
and she would never ever accept this.
Oh,
God!
more than she
d
She never ever wanted to hurt him.
He smiled

.
Alice turned and headed toward the road. Darcy watched her
go, a sad expression on his face. Quickly he opened the camera,
took out the memory stick,
and shoved it into the pocket of his
jeans.

Darcy loo
rushed up to her. He took
her hand in his and led her back home.

266 Alexia Praks

Brothers

Conflict

Sebastian, y

Tristan shouted in the distance.

, though, as

he raced to the other side of the court, colliding with Logan and
then thrusting Conrad to one side, causing the younger brother to
fall. Finally he jumped high and slammed the basketball through
the hoop.

Alice and Darcy came out into the clearing just then and
found almost everyone at the basketball court near the house.

Alice was fascinated as Richard threw the ball toward Conrad,
but before Conrad could get his hands on it, Sebastian intercepted

to the other side of the court again and threw forcefully. The ball went into the hoop straight on.

Tristan.

A Secret Kiss

267

, his fa

Sebastian turned to Alice and Darcy at that moment. His eyes were blazing with blue fire,

though no one saw it. He fisted his

hands, his heart thumping loud and fast.

Richard ran to Alice and hugged her tight. Darcy scowled darkly. So did his brothers on the other side of the court. Sebastian

wanted to punch Richard in th

at on the court instead since

they had a game to finish.

Richard pulled back and laughed.

basketball with him, Mary, and Katherine for ages. Then she saw

Mary talking to Peter on the other side of the court, who had

obviously played hard in the game because he was sweating quite

a bit.

,

side.

As she came

to Mary, Peter, and the brothers, she noted that

both Alaina and Tara were on the sidelines, sitting elegantly and

watching the game.

Tara sneered at her. Alaina frowned.

a care about their hateful stares. She kept

moving toward Mary.

teammates, who

were Tristan, Logan, and Conrad.

ave

s no fair

268 Alexia Praks

Richard, you sw

back, his eyes dark on

Darcy.

Darcy was very aware that Sebastian had something against him

an

be in the same team.

He ran over to where the other team was. The moment he got there,

e were very glad indeed to see him.

The brothers noticed and were instantly suspicious.

Conrad frowned at Darcy and instinctively moved closer to

Sakur

a, as if to shield her from Darcy.

then turned to Richard.

That

on

s team, Richy boy

and nudged him

to start heading that way.

Mary

ve to,

but my wedding is in

five

an accident o

s

o

A Secret Kiss

269

shouted back.

Alice noted that all of the men on the other team

Nicholas

were taking off their shirts.
Holy shit!
She blinked and tried to breathe as normally as she could.
She noted that Tara and Alaina were giggling on the other side of the court. They were obviously enjoying the view.
off his shirt too.
Alice wondered what was going on when Darcy and Logan took off their shirts as well.
disrobed.
Tristan
turne
Not me
, come on.
Tristan
Is that so?
, Sak
ura.
, you owe
me, just Tristan
Alice sighed.
tian shouted impatient
ly.
yelled back and pulled Alice along with him onto the court.
Sebastian, Nicolas, and Hayden stared in shocked surprise to see Alice with them.
member
,
announced.
sideline.
Tristan
Tristan
270 Alexia Praks
His eyes were intense on his brother. Their stances indicated they were ready for a fight.
Sebastian glared at Darcy, and he had the urge to punch his brother in the face.
That sneaky bastard,
he thought. Just because
he
defend her.
with the way Sebastian was talking to her.
Sebastian gritted his teeth and stared at her long and hard.
Darcy, feeling protective over Alice, clasped his hand over hers.
Sebastian noticed and nearly exploded.
For the first half of the game, Sebastian and Darcy were at each s throats. They were neck to neck, intercepting and stealing the ball from one another and throwing it into the hoop. It was like they were at war playing basketball. It was like they were the only two people on court,
and everyone else
were just bystanders.
Nicolas shook his head and knew those two had a score to settle, though he had no idea what the reason was. Then when he noticed both brothers constantly kept checking up on Alice to see whether she was all right, he knew.
When halftime was over, the teams were even. Sebastian refused to lose and told his team members to step up. Nicolas chuckled and wondered if it was really the game Sebastian wanted to win or Alice.
It was the second half of the game that

the rest of his teammates decided to join in the aggression. Alice wondered how they were going to win with Sebastian, Hayden, Nicolas, Richard, and Peter being such good players. Not to mention they were very tall. They kept stealing the ball from her.

A Secret Kiss

271

ed
Sebastian expertly throw
ing
the ball into the hoop once again.
On the other side, Tara and Alaina laughed.

s

her right

Sebastian watched her heading back to the sideline, glad. He to torment his mind and his heart. Yes, now his heart could slow down its beating, even just for a bit.

Alice.

Alice pulled her shirt off as Mary laughed top and super skinny jeans. She breathed a sigh of relief because her body was covered with sweat. She pulled her hair back and

t know

she looked rather fetching
with her skin glistening with sweat, her
cheeks blushed a perfect pink color, her lips dark red, and her eyes
bright with determination.

Mary hid a smile. Gosh, Richard was going to have a hard time concentrating again, like always when they played basketball.

hard the moment

Alice returned to court. Conrad blinked and then staring. Tristan and Logan chuckled and eyed each other. They suddenly realized there was a possibility they could win the game.

, and his scowl darkened. Hayden

whistled. Peter grinned. Nicolas took his glasses off the bridge of his nose, gave the lenses a good rub, and put them back on again.

272 Alexia Praks

Darcy felt his stomach flip. Suddenly, he wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her again until they were both breathless.

Alice stood in the middle of the court, her hands on her hips.

Sebastian wanted to lift her over his shoulder and take her away

where,

, and he wanted

to kiss the hell out of her because at the moment she was taunting him with her exquisite beauty. Then the image of her kissing

Darcy back in woods flashed in his mind, and he saw red. He

The game continued, and Alice somehow found that the men

as tough as she thought they

d been. Even Nicolas was

toning down his aggressi

on. But not Sebastian. He was still a

s hostile

as ever.

Conrad threw the ball at her. Alice caught it. Sebastian materialized before her as if out of nowhere. She knew he was going to take the ball from her. Not this time, though. She twisted and jumped. Sebastian wrapped his arms around her waist and got his legs twisted against her. The ball fell from her hands. Sebastian tightened his arms around her, and they both fell down, rolling together across the court.

They came to stop on the other side, Sebastian on top of her.

Alice could feel his muscles straining against her. She could feel

her eyes open to see his face close to hers, his eyes watching her intently.

with concern.

Sebastian sat back and watched her. Alice tried to sit up, but pain shot through her ankle. She gasped.

Darcy rushed over and came to

okay

, giving him a reassuring smile.

A Secret Kiss

273

grunted, and without further ado, he scooped her in his arms. Before anyone could say anything, he carried her back to the house.

,
said to no one.

swore.

Darcy watched Sebastian go, his eyes dark.

On the other side of the court, Tara gritted her teeth and Sebastian came into the drawing room and put her down on the seat near the empty hearth.

Sebastian ignored her.

an icepack.

Conrad came to sit beside her and put his arms around her shoulders.

Alice chuckled. She thought he looked rather cute so worried
A moment later, Hayden returned with the icepack. He handed it to her, but Sebastian took it instead. He gently placed it about her ankle, his hand brushing against her skin. Alice bit her lower lip after gasping out, not from pain, but from the uncontrollable sensation that rushed through her every nerve.

she had the urge to laugh.

Oh my gosh!

Eight shirtless men were surrounding her. This was of course ridiculous. She shook her head and leaned back against the sofa.

Toby chose that moment to jog into the room. He barked a

274 Alexia Praks

Toby barked again and rubbed his head against her chest, his

i
she said.

Sebastian increased the pressure on her ankle. She gritted her teeth at the pain.

James and Brenda came in at that moment.

her sons

all shirtless. Then she spotted Alice on the sofa, with an icepack at her ankle.

James hid a smile.

id act like you just got dumped.

e you limping on

The brothers all looked at her, silent,

as if the president had just announced to them that W

orld War

III had just begun. None of

them liked the sound of Alice calling their mother

Mom. Brenda noticed the dead silence and cleared her throat uncomfortably.

shower? Dinner is in half an hour.

Nicolas nodded and headed out the door. He was followed by

Darcy hesitated. Alice caught his eyes and gave him another reassuring smile. He smiled back and then left the room as well.

Richard obeyed and left the room.

A Secret Kiss

275

nodded, he got up and left the room as well.

Sebastian moved her so her legs rested along the length of the sofa. Then he arranged the icepack on her properly, looking at him directly.

Sebastian

276 Alexia Praks

Nicolas Princeton, Prince of Guardian

Alice stayed in her room for

most of the next day

, working on her old photos while everyone was busy preparing for

Mr. Mayor, his wife, and Lauren came to join them for dinner, and Sakura excused herself that her ankle

still pained her and had her meal in her room

. She was sure

they were

having a

It was later that she remembered about the photos she'd taken

yesterday

afternoon

in the woods. She reached for her camera and clicked

it open to get the memory stick.

and looked

she swore under her breath, realizing the memory

. And

she found the one Toby had taken from her yet.

When and where could she have dropped this latest one? She

s

it tomorrow. She was sure

it was probably still somewhere on the pathway leading to the house from the woods.

Once she

she'd finished with the old photos and put them up for

sale on her website, she left Toby sleeping in his basket and went to shower. Fifteen minutes later, in her pajamas, she headed out to

A Secret Kiss

277 the library to find a good book to read. She was pretty sure no one would be about this late at night.

She took her time finding the right book, browsing along the shelves. She supposed she was pretty lucky Princeton Mansion had such a good selection of books. It was almost like the public library in town.

She found a book about the history of St. Joseph Island and thought that was good enough. She limped to the sofa near the hearth and sat down. She reached for the remote and turned on the fake fireplace. She thought she needed that extra bit to make herself feel cozy. Then she turned to the book and opened the

back. Two seconds later, she was fast asleep. When she woke up again, she felt someone was watching her. She blinked and then

sm
The person came close
. Unfortunately
her head, feeling drowsy

.
ly
fallen
She stood up and threw the book
, yes
putting me
it number three on the list of books
that put me
278 Alexia Praks
understand a damn
thing in high school. Every time we read
Hamlet
for homework, I
kept falling asleep. But come to think of it, I had the best sleep
ever that week. No offense if you like Shakespeare. Thank God
odd, but I can
himself from looking at her. Her eyes were bright and her smile
Nicolas nodded.
Alice cleared her throat and began
to recite the passage

.
Nicolas watched her closely. Her eyes were bright and her
cheeks were flush
ed. She had a faraway look on her face that did
something odd in his heart. She looked as though she were
thinking of something. She looked hurt, and by instinct, Nicolas
wanted to protect her.
Alice stopped. Nicolas noted that her eyes were brewing with
She was in her own world.
What is the meaning of
living? Why live when there is so much suffering? So much pain?
haps if you die,

ly
But then the
uncertainty of death itself is very scary and probably worse than
A Secret Kiss
279
hugged her tight.
wonderful things. What happened to you when you were young
er
know who your real mother was. Yes, there were problems with us,
but you make yourself happy, Alice. You choose, and I promise
Alice chuckle

,
will
thought about Sebastian and Darcy and their kisses. They
d never
thought of her as their sister
ever
. And they had kissed her
so
passionately that her insides cried with pleasure. Yet she knew and
felt that those kisses were forbidden, and it pained her that she
should so enjoy them.

be,
him.
Nicolas gritted his teeth. How could he tell her that he and his
brother wanted

as a woman?

II, if you do want

Good night

She moved to his left and then limped to the door. Nicolas stared unseeingly at the book. A moment later, he turned and marched out the door after her.

know what to say and stared at him in shock.

280 Alexia Praks

hu

I wake

frowned.

Oops!

They came up to the second floor and met Sebastian, who was

coming out of his room. He stiffened and his whole body went rigid.

straight to Sebastian and unceremoniously dumped Alice on his

Alice bit her lip and wiggled her body. Sebastian tightened his grip on her.

He answered her by ignoring her and headed to her room.

Once inside, he kicked the door shut and then put her into her bed. She quickly snuggled herself in between the sheets before he did it for her. He stood there, looking down at her from his great height, not saying a word. Suddenly, he moved himself toward her, and Alice gasped in fright.

She

her in and puffed up the pillows for her. As he was doing that, he looked at her while she was staring up at him. Then she remembered something. The images flashed in her mind. That night after she

d drowned in the

pool

Yes, she remembered it now.

Alice shut her eyes tight, trying to make the images go away, but they

they came even stronger.

She felt warm breath on her skin and flashed her eyes open.

s nose nearly

touching hers.

A Secret Kiss

281

Good night

She turned away, her heart pounding in her chest.

Sebastian moved back and watched her roll over so her back was to him. Reluctantly, he turned on his heel and headed out the door, switching off the light as he did so.

When he came out,

he saw Darcy in the corridor watching him,

, and then he went into his

own room.

Darcy frowned and went back into his room too, his heart hammering in his chest.

282 Alexia Praks

A Passionate Kiss

Alice spent the next day with Ned at his co

ttage,

painting. She

d been lucky since everyone had left the house early

, who were ar

riving early

go to the Princeton Hotel

and Resort on the o

ther side of the island

everything for
the wedding reception.
her from his side of the room.

S
doing a little dot of pink to make the cherry
flower on the canvas.
ed out the door.

A Secret Kiss

283 They had lunch in quietness and afterward continued with
their paintings. It was late by the time Alice decided she had
enough and headed back to the house.

Alice shook her head and just did what he told her to do.
Once they got to the mansion, Alice cursed loudly.

a
his Mercedes-Benz. He was of course followed by Conrad, Hayden,
and Nicolas. Tristan, Logan, and Darcy came out of the other car.
She wondered why she had to arrive home at the same time they
did.

The brothers stood watching her as she and Ned got out of the
car.

red

Alice bit

scaredy

Of course,

he gladly came to her side and escorted her toward
the house.

Master Nicolas, how are you? And Master

The brothers nodded at him, surprised that he still remembered
them even though they had only met once or twice in the last
couple of years.

Alice folded her arms

me, but I am

s

.

nodded in

understanding.

284 Alexia Praks

that, he

nodded at the brothers and headed into the house. Alice quickly
followed him, still limping a little. The brothers headed into the
house as well.

After saying good-

bye to Ned, Alice lied to Beth that she was

hungry and thus had her dinner in the kitchen before everyone else.

Brenda and Daddy James

,

know, but

Good

night

Alice rushed to her room, trying very hard to hide her
amusement. After browsing the Internet and doing a bit of
research on apartments

in New York, she did feel rather tired and

went to lie down on her bed. She patted Toby as she closed her
eyes, slowly falling asleep.

When she woke up next, it was past midnight. The house was
so quiet that she could hear her own heartbeat in her ears. No
longer tired, she felt rather restless and wondered what she should
her floating. Then the thought of Sebastian and Tara flashed into
her mind. She cursed under her breath.

Stop thinking about him, Alice.

Y

s a stupid

up and headed out the door anyway. She came down to the indoor pool area and found it was very quiet. The whole place, however, wasn't

at all dark,

and she decided she wouldn't

. A Secret Kiss

285 Decision made, she headed straight to the pool, took off her clothes

and left only her bra and panties on. Slowly, she lowered herself into the water. It was warm. She sighed in relief. When she realized

he giggled.

Yes!

She was floating.

Happily, she floated her

way around the pool. Now and again,

the ceiling. She marveled

at the beautiful prism of white and blue the water made on the wall. On the other side, the moon was bright and high above,

believe she

had never done this before.

She was back at the edge of the pool now, her eyes closed as she was floating there, not thinking about anything at all. That was

when she heard footsteps coming in. She flashed her eyes open and held her breath.

The footsteps were quite heavy. Could it be one of the brothers?

What? At this time of night?

The footsteps were getting closer and closer. Then she heard the person climbing up the ladder.

Darcy?

She looked up at the

figure at the top of the high diving platform but only saw a dark

shadow. Then she heard the board squeaking and then she saw the figure of a man jumping off and then

Splash!

Alice searched around as the person disappeared underwater.

Like whoever it was knew she was here anyway.

Nodding at that decision, she was about to turn but felt

somebody in the water in front of her. Then an enormous body popped up, his massive chest pressing against her so she was imprisoned

against the wall of the pool.

Alice gasped, and her

heart thumped hard in her chest as she

stared at the huge silhouette before her. The strong face was above her, water dripping, caressing

it.

.

286 Alexia Praks

The body stiffened. Alice watched in awe at the muscular arms that came up and trapped her on both sides. She licked her lips.

Alice felt her stomach flip. It was Sebastian.

He chuckled.

Again, licking her lips, staring up at the you, that

is?

He chuckled.

He continued.

?

quivering.

He continued, though his voice was cold and

He pulled her to him, his strong arms at the small of her back. Alice was squeezed up against his massive form, struggle free. he said, pulling her along with him. He swam on his back, drawing from him. Alice could feel the length of him against her.

A Secret Kiss

287
chest with her small fist.
,he
Alice struggled in his arms again as he kept taking her around the pool, his arms tight about her. She was angry now. He had no right to ask her such a question. In fact, he had no right to interfere with her life at all. shoved him from her and turned. She did her best paddling back toward the edge of the pool. Sebastian watched her go for only an instant, and then in a split second, he caught her by the waist and pulled her back to him again. He twisted her around, smashed her against him, brought his hand to hold the back of her head, and slammed his lips down on hers. lips. He was so wild that he scared her. Suddenly he pulled back, frowning down at her, noticing she was rigid and shaking like a leaf within his embrace.

have been
doing this to her. He loved her, so why was he hurting her? When he opened his eyes again, he knew he had to win her over. So he kissed her again. This time, though, it was gentle and very passionate. Her lips were soft and warm against his, both his hands cupping her face. Slowly, his tongue played with her lip, teasing, caressing, stroking, and licking her along the length of those marvelous, sensuous lips. Then he made her open her mouth for him, and when she did, he plunged his tongue in, exploring her, tasting her, teasing her, and caressing her with all the experience he had.

Alice struggled to gain her mind back. She was lost, so very lost in this wonderful, delightful, heavenly kiss that Sebastian was giving her. How could she feel this way? With only a kiss? But oh, it was such a kiss. She was breathless; she was mindless. Her body melted within his embrace. Her heart raced a million miles a minute. And something deep and hot burned within her being.

She softly groaned. She was totally lost as he deepened the kiss. His fingers dug deep into her wet hair while he had one hand down the small of her back, pressing her against him.

Oh, God! She could feel him growing hard. And instead of anger or revolt, she felt herself growing warm and excited.

Oh, God! She desired her own adopted brother.

Oh, God, no! Very wrong

When she felt his pressure on her lips loosen, she knew this had

rsue this
put a stop to it. That way she wouldn
That way she would
hurt herself.
said.

He stared at her, his face a mask. His eyes, however, spoke
volumes
because they were flashing blue fire.

Alice moved back, but before she got any farther, he pulled
her back to him and kissed her again, this time deeper and wilder
as he plunged his tongue into her mouth, stroking and lashing his
tongue against hers. His hand was strong and firm behind her head,
holding her still as he continued to kiss her. His other hand was
on her lower back, pressing her against him.
ore than respond to his demanding
kiss. Her whole body shuddered in pleasure as he expertly played
with her. His mouth and lips were warm against hers and she felt
weak and dizzy. When he let her go, she gazed at him, dazed.
a devilishly handsome grin on
his face.

A Secret Kiss

289 Though her head still felt somewhat light, the meaning of his
shoulder, opened her mouth wide, and bit him hard.

Sebastian gasped but
she continued to bite him.

Instead, he looked pleased. There was pain in his eyes, but there
was pleasure also, as thrilling sensations rushed through his being.

Oh,
God!

She was beautiful biting him.

Alice bit his flesh as best she could and then moved back.

Once she

d seen her teeth mark on his skin, she hastily turned and
paddled to the other side before he caught her again.

Sebastian watched her go, climb up out of the pool, grab her
clothing,

and literally run from the room in her underwear. He felt
his blood run hot with desire. She had been swimming in her
underwear.

Holy shit!

It was such a turn-
on.

Slowly, he turned his eyes to the bite mark on his chest and
smiled. He touched it, gently caressing the mark with his fingers.

A few moments later when he was sure she was gone, he got out
of the pool and headed back out. Before he reached the door, the
room flooded with bright lights. He turned to see Darcy at the
door. He walked to his brother, wondering if he was here
practicing his diving at this bloody hour. But then again, it was
Darcy. He could very well practice his diving at three in the
morning if he wanted to.

s on Sebastian

sighed, his heart hammering in his chest uncomfortably. He knew,

oh yes, he knew Sebastian had fallen in love with Alice too. He

knew that she too felt something toward him. But the realization
only pained him even more. How could he let Alice go w

hen he

had loved her all his life?

Shit!

His head hurt. His heart ached. His whole body trembl
ed with confusion.

290 Alexia Praks

e whispered

291 Tormented Heart

Alice woke up late the next morning, feeling extremely to sleep until four in the morning and pissed because Sebastian and his stupid kisses kept playing in her mind. Oh, God! Darcy. He had seen her running from the pool area, half-naked and dripping wet. He'd looked so shocked that he'd also noted that there was something in the expression on his face, as if he were in deep, dark pain. She'd wanted to go to him and explain but had found he'd taken a long breath. Why did she feel like he was upset with her? Oh, Darcy. She groaned loudly and got out of bed, even though all she wanted to do was to lie there, close her eyes, and make everything do that because she'd promised to go to the Princeton Hotel with Mary and Katherine to sort out the decorations for the wedding reception. She showered quickly and got dressed, wearing a pair of super skinny jeans and white blouse. She French plaited her hair and let

292 Alexia Praks

it fall down her left shoulder, leaving some tendrils dancing about the sides of her face. Toby barked at her, wanting to come along as well. a good boy, okay up, grabbed her bag, and headed out, leaving the door open so Toby could go out as he pleased. She came down to the kitchen and was glad no one was around. It was pretty late in the morning, after all. Lunch was only a few hours away. She made quick work having her breakfast of cereal with some fruit and milk. Just as she was about to finish, Mary walked in.

, a makeup artist
ve

, Damn

! was lying
to her best friend.

all Some twenty minutes later, they arrived at the Princeton Hotel and Resort. It was a very grand building of nine stories and had the beautiful private beach conserved specifically for guests and a great view of the ocean beyond. They parked the car in the reserved lot and headed into the main lobby via the grand entrance. A few A Secret Kiss

200 minutes later, she came into the main hall on the first floor where

that both Richard and Peter were already there, talking to the wedding planner and the hotel manager.

Both Alice and Mary looked around the great hall. It was beautiful

ly decorated with red and white roses.

The tablecloths, a beige color

, were of the finest quality, and the lighting was just perfect.

For a couple of hours, the wedding planner explained to them what had been done,

and then Peter and Mary told them what

needed to be changed as Alice stuck around, trying to help out with ideas as best as she could. When by lunchtime they finished, Alice excused herself to go and find Daddy James.

She came up to his office on the top floor of the hotel and gave the door her usual three knocks before going in. Once inside, to her surprise, she found Sebastian and Nicolas there, and Daddy James was nowhere in sight.

Alice bit her lip and her heart thundered within her chest the moment her eyes met Sebastian

. The handsome man raised one

nice brow at her and gave her that sly grin of his that told her he was very pleased to see her indeed. She scowled at him to tell him

, however. Nicolas,

on the other hand, was oblivious to their silent bickering and gave her a smile.

No, wait

294 Alexia Praks

Nicolas pulled her by the arm and led her to the armchair near the window. Sebastian watched her intently. Their kiss last night was still fresh in his mind, and right now he felt the thrill rushing through his blood.

Alice caught him looking at her. He grinned at her, his blue eyes intense on her person, telling her he would like to do it again right now if he could. Alice gritted her teeth and glared at him.

Nicolas voiced loudly, interrupting her anger simmering nicely.

should. I mean, if

do a good j

me for advice, not tha

see things from a different perspective

i

Nicolas felt a thrill of warmth coursing through his being. His silvery-

gray eyes lit up,

and he chuckled softly. He turned to

he bite mark on his

shoulder hurt. He glanced at Alice, who met his gaze for a split second. She quickly glanced away again. She was still pissed with him;

he could tell by her stiff posture. He was pleased. That meant their kisses last night were also still on her mind.

A Secret Kiss

295

,she greeted

him.

Alice chuckled, her cheeks burning hot at the reminder.

few

Internet

okay

they are

Her heart
possibly tell him now,
especially when the wedding was so close and all.
an uncomfortable silence in the room as the brothers wondered
The brothers agreed. Alice followed them, her mind far away.
They met up with the rest of the brothers
Tristan, Logan,
Hayden, Darcy, and Conrad
down at the ground-
floor
restaurant. Conrad rushed over to Alice the moment he saw
her
and grabbed her wrist, leading her to the buffet area. As she took
a
flipped,
and her heart raced.

296 Alexia Praks

Hed not spoken one word to her yet, and he looked as though
he were pissed with something, his face a dark, stony mask. Conrad
kept putting food onto her plate, chatting away animatedly as
Alice kept taking peeks at Darcy, who now and again also
ked her gaze away,
embarrassed. She wondered why he was keeping his distance. Her
heart jolted within her chest. What about that kiss in the woods?
Had that really meant nothing to him? She was totally confused
by his actions.

A few moments later, Mary, Peter, and Richard joined them.
She sat down and had lunch beside Mary, who kept chatting
animatedly to Peter. Conrad chose to sit on her other side, who
also kept on a constant conversation,
to take in as she was too deep in her own thoughts. Then she felt
someone watching her. She lifted her head and saw Darcy gazing
at her from across the table, his face a hard mask, his mauve-
gray
eyes intense on her face. Her pulse raced and her breathing became
short. He looked as though he were in a dilemma, in pain.
Darcy was in fact in a very deep, dark dilemma.

What to do?

Oh, God, just looking at her caused his insides to ache. How could he
back out of wanting this woman to be his when he loved her so
much? But then again, his brother Sebastian was also in love with
this woman. How could he steal Alice from Sebastian? They were
family. But he loved this woman
. Shit!

His heart hurt.

Sebastian, sitting beside Nicolas and Conrad, noticed Darcy
and Alice staring at each other and gritted his teeth.

A voice sang to them then.

. The

whole family here at

Alice looked up to see Alaina walking toward them. Behind
her were Tara and another woman Alice thought looked oddly
familiar to her. As they came closer, Alice felt as though someone
had just punched her in the face. It was Kate Anderson, her ex-
classmate, the popular cheerleader who had bullied her in high
school.

Mary nearly choked on her orange juice the moment she saw

A Secret Kiss

297

e.

The brothers looked up then and all swallowed hard, staring at
the brunette beauty that was heading their way. They knew Darcy
was in deep shit now.

Darcy went rigid instantly and his impassive face turned over

long table. Then she spotted Darcy and smiled with delight. The boyfriend
. Oh, Tara and Alaina had told her all about her ex-classmate all right, that the bitch Alice was trying to steal Darcy from her, and Is. Kate wanted to snort
Princeton
the fake Princeton
steal her Darcy away from her.
She had all her plans worked out. Yes, all she needed to do was to kick the bitch out and take Darcy back, and get her Darcy back, even if it killed her.
She cleared her throat and said loudly so that everyone could from behind, kissing his cheek in front of everyone.
Alice felt as though she d just died
. Kate? Darcy?
Her head spun,
and she felt sick to her stomach. Suddenly, her body started trembling.
Mary noticed and took hold of her hand to support her. Mary , however,
about her relationship with Darcy. Alice was afraid of Kate,
as
Mary thought.
Alice glanced up and her eyes met Darcy , intense and blazing.
neck.
298 Alexia Praks
Tara and Alaina looked at each other, smiling, pleased with how things had gone so far.
James cleared his throat
Alice sucked in her breath and wanted to die right there and then. Why she had such a
, but God, how that very statement really affected her. So that was why he was had kissed her,
yet he was dating Kate.
Darcy scowled darkly. He was still staring at Alice, his eyes intense.
Please, Alice
, he wanted to shout again.
Everyone was watching them, even the brothers, waiting for Darcy to do something.
Suddenly, Darcy was pissed. Why the hell did she have to turn up here and now of all places? After all, he had told her their relationship was over.
He shoved his chair back, which caused Kate to jump back in surprise. He turned to look at her then, his face a mask of anger and his eyes dark. The look on his face scared Kate shitless, but she managed to compose herself because she was here for a reason. She Without saying anything, he stalked out of the room. Kate felt embarrassed for only a split second and then followed him. Tara and Alaina grinned at each other, knowing very well that their plan had gone rather well thus far.
Sebastian turned his eyes to Alice and noted her hands were

Shit!

Alice chose that moment to get up and excuse herself, her voice shaking. Then she rushed out and headed straight to her car. Alone and with her heart still thumping hard within her chest, she drove out.

A Secret Kiss

299 Oh,

God!

She could feel herself shaking, and her head

slow down its furious beatings. She felt tears rolling down her cheeks. Why was she crying?

Why?

Soon she came near the Princeton Estate, and instead of driving up to the house, she parked the car on the side of the road and ran, just ran into the woods until she reached her cherry tree, the very same tree where Darcy had kissed her.

She collapsed against the tree and cried her heart out, her body shaking and her heart trembling. She stayed there, for how long beautiful pink cloud of cherry blossoms

as tears

rolled down her cheeks.

Oh,

this age. She was turning twenty-

four soon and here she was still

crying. Crying for what? The stupid crying would change

anything, would it?

Once she

had used up all her tears, she sighed, feeling a lot better

. She sat up, wondering why she was crying so hard.

Darcy.

She

thought that he

She chuckled. How stupid of her. Yes, Sebastian with Tara and

Darcy with Kate. They were two perfect couples.

She

had known her whole life that she was never that lucky, that

she just had to make the best of what she had. She chuckled again.

Yes, she was stupid after all. There was no hope at all, was there?

After the wedding,

everyone would

be able to return to their own lives. Had

she forgotten that her life and theirs were completely different?

That whatever happened, none of the brothers would ever choose

to kill her by drowning her in the pool when they

had known very well

that it was hers? That

she had done a thing.

Since they were little, the brothers had always chosen Alaina

and Tara over her. How stupid of her to even think that would

change. Now it seemed Kate was a part of that privileged group as well.

300 Alexia Praks

She sat up and squared her shoulders.

She didn't care anymore. From now on,

she was resolved to keep her distance

from the brothers. She no longer wanted to get hurt. Besides, had

Nicolas not told her already that none of them ever wanted her as their sister?

Before this day,

she

had hoped to be their sister, loved for them

d had enough.
ir sister anymore.
After this wedding, she was going her own way, to find her mother,
to begi
they all wanted for so long,
even Alaina and Tara. She would no longer be a member of their
family.

Her face now dry
of tears, she spread her arms as she stared up
at the petals of cherry blossoms raining down on her, landing on
A Secret Kiss

301 Falling For Alice

t
ed Alice cocked her head to one side as she studied herself in the
full-
length mirror. Yes, it worked all right;
she had to ad
mit that

.
elegant. The light blue suited her skin
perfectly. It was short and draped to one side of her waist, and
from there, the lacy material extended over her left shoulder,
falling down her back. Her hair was high on her head, enhancing
her swanlike neck and oval face. Her makeup was natural, with a
hint of rosy blush on her cheekbones and bright pink lipstick on
her lips. Yes, she did look beautiful.

.
sure
out the door.
Alice grinned. Alone, she turned to look at herself in the
mirror one more time. She was Alice Princeton. But was she
really Alice Princeton or was she Alice something else

? 302 Alexia Praks

Tanaka!

was Haruka Tanaka. At that moment, she knew without a doubt
who she was. Yes, she
d been thinking about this since the day Kate
made an appearance. She had been thinking about it long and hard,
and now she was ready.

Mind made up, she left the room and went in search of James
and Brenda. She found them in the study room, and thank God,
none of the brothers were there to make her nervous about what
she had to do.

She lightly knocked on the door and went in after James called
out.

them the moment she stepped into the large
room.

noting how beautiful she looked. His sons were going to have the
shock of their lives.

James raised his brows at her, noting the odd tone in her soft
voice and the slight expression of dread on her flawless face.
Alice licked her lips, her heart pounding hard within her chest.

ad. Alice turned to James

d to one side.

Alice took a deep breath and sa
permission

I mean,

I

I want to change my name. What I

mean to say is that if I were to change my name, I mean my last
name, from Princeton to something else, would that bother you? I
mean,

but she never said

nervousness.

is Princeton or something else, you w

James said that, he had a sad look in his eyes. He knew what this

A Secret Kiss

303 meant. He knew she was leaving them. Of course,

he had known

all along

very well stop her since she had her own life and her own future to think about.

Alice asked.

Alice cocked her head to one side, wondering if her adopted father suspected she was planning to leave. She turned to Brenda.

Br

sweetheart, y

tell them, she went

Island after the wedding.

such short noti

had pal

Brenda, with tears in her eyes, pulled her adopted daughter into

Alice chuckled.

ll

standard coffee,

she

continued.

Once his wife had finally let go of

their adopted daughter, he pulled Alice into his arms and hugged her tight

ke sure you keep in contact.

Alice nodded.

Half an hour later, she was standing in the garden,

listening to

the

played by the St. Joseph Island Orchestra.

She gazed at the scene before her in awe. She had been right. A

wedding in spring was absolutely beautiful, especially when the

ceremony was done under the cherry trees in full bloom. To the

left was the pond, the clear water sparkling under the bright

sunlight. Now and again, there were soft, gentle breezes which

304 Alexia Praks

caused the cherry blossom flowers to detach from the branches and

rain

down on them. It was so nostalgic.

Then it was time, and Alice found herself not quite being the

center

of attention, but

still

the center

of attention nonetheless,

as

she slowly made her way down toward the platform where Peter

stood waiting patiently for his bride. Richard and Jack, both in

formal attire of black and white, stood to one side of Peter, their

hands

clasped back.

as she took a peek at young

Michael, who was holding on to a cute satin cushion with two gold

bands on top of it. He walked really slowly, worried that he might

drop the precious thing.

In front of Alice was Katherine, dressed in her pale pink

maid

of honor

gown, slowly striding toward the platform. Halfway

Instantly, her eyes spotted the brothers, all dressed in Armani suits,

them to gasp in awe. They stood in a row, watching the procession. They had their eyes intensely on her, especially Sebastian and other brothers. In fact, their expressions were stone cold.

The broth

sister. She was so beautiful that she took their breath away, as James had predicted. That dress they help

ed design

fit her slender

body perfectly, showing off her fine, delicate figure. Her long hair was formed into a classic bun on top of her head with a bunch of flowers on the left side near her ear. It was the first time the brothers had seen her with her hair like that,

and

help but marvel

at just how sophisticated and refined she looked.

Darcy loved her exposed, swanlike neck and wanted to brush his finger along the length of it. Oh,

God, he ached to touch her,

to smell her, to feel her in his arms. But he knew

he must keep his

distance because

Because what? It was hard. So very hard.

A Secret Kiss

305

f the woman he was in love

with either. She really did take his breath away.

Shit!

He ached to

be near her, to touch her, to kiss her. But for the moment,

he

. H

Because what?

Shit!

It was so hard. So very hard.

Alice quickly glanced away from them, her heart pounding within her chest.

Stop thinking about them, Alice

, she told herself.

Just stop!

Yes, only a couple more days to go.

T

be gone

back to their lives and she to hers.

They reached the platform,

and Michael rushed up to Richard,

sighing with relief that his job was nearly over. Katherine and

Alice came to stand on the other side of the men, waiting for the

bride to reach them. Everyone

s eyes were on Mary now, who was

making her way very slowly to the front with her father,

Mr. Collins,

giving her away. Finally, Mary came up and Peter took

her hand in his. Mr.

Collins returned to his seat in the front row

next to his wife.

The minister smiled pleasantly at the audience before him.

Then he began.

Collins and Peter Johnston,

I welcome you all to this marriage

ceremony. We are here today to encourage, celebrate,

and support

the covenant these two people, Mary and Peter, are going to make

and to share in the joy that Mary and Peter experience as they

manner God has led them to each other and got them to the place
Alice tried to concentrate on what the minister was saying but
, of course,
and saw both Darcy and Sebastian watching her, their eyes intense
and their faces expressionless. She bit her lower lip.
Stop thinking
about them, Alice,
she told herself yet again. It was nearly over.
The minister turned to Peter and continued.
stands by your side is going to be your wife. She will look to you
for comfort, for support, for love, for understanding, for
306 Alexia Praks
encouragement, and for protection. You must never take her for
granted and always stand by her,
of God, family,
and friends, I pledge
Alice turned her attention to the cherry tree above them and
thought that after tomorrow all the flowers would almost be gone
again for another year. Yes, spring was nearly over, and instantly
she felt sad.
The minister said
Peter, since it is your intention to marry,
join your right hands and declare your consent. Do you take Mary
to be your lawful wedded wife, to have and
to
hold from this day
on, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and
in health
The minister turned to Mary
Mary, do you take Peter to be
your lawful
wedded husband, to have and to
hold from this day
on, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in
sickness and
The minister continued.
The wedding ring symbolizes unity,
a circle unbroken, without beginning or end. And today Mary and
Peter exchange these rings as confirmation of
their vows to join
their lives, to work at all times to create a life that is complete and
unbroken
, to love each other unconditionally. May the Lord bless
these rings which you give each other as the symbol of your love
and fidelity.
Peter, take this ring and place
it on
state
your pledge to her, repeating
Instantly, Michael stepped forward and gladly offered them the
rings. Peter took one and slipped it on
in his, he repeated after the minister. Then it
was the minister's
promises to each other and have declared your everlasting love by
exchanging the rings. Your vows may have been spoken in minutes,
but your promises to each other will last until your last breath. As
A Secret Kiss
307 they have pledged themselves to meet sorrow and happiness as one
family before God and this community of friends, I now
Peter pulled back
, grinning cheekily, kissed her
on the lips. Everyone cheered then, and Alice laughed, tears in
her eyes.
Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr.

ug Alice around the
little brat?
Everyone laughed at them. Alice ruffl

Michael
t long before Alice found herself in the photos with
the newly wed Mr.
and Mrs.
Johnston, being squeezed in between
the brothers, mostly between Tristan and Conrad. Sebastian and
Darcy seemed to stand as far away from her as possible. She
understood their
body language completely and told herself to get
over it.
Alice had her camera with her as well and proceeded to take
photo after photo. Suddenly, Tristan and Logan came up to her,
cornering her on both sides as if they had caught their prey.
our photos, little sis
e for our photos, my dear
cheekily, grabbing Alice by the arm and leading her away.
grabbed her other arm and proceeded to lead her in the opposite
direction.

r camera from
her. He called to Patrick, one of the three photographers they had
hired for the occasion, to come over to them.
308 Alexia Praks
Tristan took the chance and pulled Alice to him, causing
stood with Alice in the middle and the brothers on either side of
her. Patrick raised the camera to his eyes and then
click, click, click,
click.
started clicking again, he sneakily kissed Alice on the cheek.
Alice gasped. Logan saw. The brother growled and said,
her as well on her
other cheek.
Oh,
God,
Alice thought. She had to get out of here before this
got any worse. But worse it did get as Patrick laughed and
encouraged them both to kiss her at the same time. The brothers
took on the challenge with enthusiasm. As the camera clicked and
click
ed and clicked, both Tristan and Logan kissed her cheeks with
delight. They would have continued if
command that got bombed their way by Sebastian.
far behind him.
Tristan and Logan pulled back and frowned at their younger
brothers

cause
Tristan chuckled. He came over and slapped Sebastian on the
. S
said to Darcy,
who only frowned at him. Tristan and Logan
walked away, chuckling merrily.
Alice felt her heart thundering within her chest as the two
brothers watched her intently. She took a deep breath and then
walked pas
t them
I have my camera back,
please
said and started walking away

309

?

Now then,

Sebastian grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her to him,

causing

he said to the photographer.

He placed his arms about her waist, pulling her even closer to

him as the camera clicked

and click

ed and click

ed. Alice felt her

heart beating faster and faster within her chest,

and her body began

to go a bit crazy with him being so close to her. When she thought

se, Darcy suddenly walked to them,

caught her wrist,

and pulled her to him, leaving Sebastian standing

there alone.

He placed her so she was slightly in front of him. Then he

wrapped one hand around her waist. He was so close that she could

smell him. She could smell

her Dar

ce.

The photograph

er

Alice blushed. Darcy smiled. Sebastian scowled.

The photographer continued to take picture after picture after

and it anymore.

He pulled

Alice from Darcy. The two brothers stood staring at each other,

their eyes intense as if they were about to have a showdown.

What were they doing? Were they turning against each other

because of her? At that realization, her stomach flipped

uncomfortably.

,

click, click, click.

When he returned to his position, Alice was standing in the middle with

the two brothers on either side of her. Then he continued to take

more photos.

, the newly wedded bride, appeared behind the

, but I must steal my

310 Alexia Praks

precious Alice away for a wee moment

grabbed

Alice by the arm and took her away.

The brothers watched her go, their faces stone cold.

Alice was only too glad to be taken away because, my God,

how she could feel the tension between the two brothers.

once they were in her bedroom.

something in her huge closet.

akura voiced, totally understanding what her friend

meant. Was this conflict really because of her?

A moment later, she came back and gave Alice a pretty little

box, neatly wrapped up with happy birthday wrapping paper.

Mary pulled Alice into her arms

here when you turn twenty-

four

-four is a big number. Almost

a quarter

That was true, but Alice never thought about that.

sometime earlier than this, but since you were found at the

orphanage two days from now, twenty-

four years ago, then

thought none of the brothers would have remembered. When

to them.
warned.
us return to our photos
out the door.

A Secret Kiss

311 Alice clutched the small box in her hands, a smile on her face
as she, too, walked to the door.

* * * * *

The music struck loudly, causing
the continuous
squealing
noise to echo across the great hall.
Everyone covered
their ears in annoyance, and then a moment later, Logan chuckled
ladies and
gentlemen

. That
wa
, including the bride and groom
, who were standing in the
center
of the hall, w
aiting to start their
first dance.

After some tweaking, the music started. It
was

Unchained
Melody
by the Righteous Brothers.

The moment Alice
heard the words felt her heart quickening
and her pulse racing. Suddenly, Richard had her wrist and led her
to the center of the dance floor. She stiffened, suddenly
embarrassed. She glanced to Mary and Peter, who were dancing
I
smiles on their faces. Then she
glanced at Katherine, who was laughing and having the time of her
life as she winked at Michael standing on the sidelines near his
father. The boy was swaying his body back and forth as he watched
S.

Richard pulled her into his arms and started moving her around,
I

good at dancing,
but she moved
about anyway, trying to be in tune with the slow music. Then they
were on the other side of the dance floor, and Alice felt as though
someone was watching her. She lifted her head and saw Sebastian,
his blue eyes intense on her face.

Alice felt her heart thundering within her chest as she
her eyes away from the handsome blond who was staring at her as
if she were the only person in the room. The music was making
her head dizzy.

Sebastian gazed at Alice
his beautiful Alice
dancing in

312 Alexia Praks

was him instead who was holding her in his arms. And why not?
That was when he imagined him and her together, dancing
to this

very classic song, just the two of them together in this very room
as everyone faded into darkness. Yes, he was twisting her around
now,

and she was laughing and smiling up at him, her eyes bright

down and took her lips, kissing her passionately and wildly as they moved about the dance floor
. Alice. His Alice.
Yes, he
hungered for her touch, for her love
; he hungered for her.
Oh how he ached in his heart as he watched her dance. S
he too was staring back at him. Yes, he noted there were confusion and pain within her dark eyes, and it caused a knot in the pit of his stomach.
when Richard moved her around to another part of the dance floor.
en she met
Darcy,
who was
also watching her intently.
Oh, God, his eyes
he could see the pain within his eyes as
he gazed at her, and her heart ached with him, for him. Why was it so pain
s as she
continued to dance.
Darcy squeezed the stem of his wine glass, nearly causing it to break. His Snow, she was dancing with Richard, and he wanted to be Richard. He wanted to be
king her into
his arms, twisting her around the dance floor, watching her beautiful face laughing happily up at him, her eyes bright with love
love just for him. Oh how he ached to be with her, how he ached to smell her, how he ached to touch her, ached to kiss her. Yes, he needed her love. He needed her love so badly it hurt.
My
Snow,
he thought, and he imagined them alone on this very dance floor
not dancing,
but just standing there kissing, kissing so very passionately and wildly like they had done back in the woods. How he needed her love, craved her love, wanted her love so much that he was deeply in pain.
My Snow. My beautiful Snow.
Will I ever get to be with you?
A Secret Kiss
313 Alice wanted to take Darcy into her arms and hug him, give her all to him. S
because he was already with someone
d never wanted to be with her. Her heart cried out in anguish.
Finally, she managed to move her gaze away from his by casting her eyes downward, tears brewing within them.
Richard moved her around again. Then when she managed to control her emotions, she was again looking at Sebastian. She gazed at him, again feeling that dreadful pain within her heart. They continued to gaze at each other as the song continued, her heart racing within her chest, her head dizzy as she leaned more of her weight against Richard, feeling weak all of a sudden.
Suddenly the music came to an end and Richard laughed.
Alice slowly looked up, her face pale.
she said quietly. She needed to decide on what to do, what should happen next. Yes, she had come to the realization that she had feelings for both Darcy and Sebastian. But how could a woman have feelings for two guys at the same time?

possible? Especially when the two guys were her adopted brothers?
She needed to think. She needed to clear her head. She needed
to decide.

Suddenly, the song
Sway
by Michael Bublé
erupted in the
room and everyone rushed
onto the dance floor, swayi
ng their
bodies back and forth
with enthusiasm

. Behind her Darcy stood still, watching her standing alone in
the middle of the dance floor as people happily moved around
them. He long
ed for her but
of her stood Sebastian, also standing still as people
moved around
him, laughing and singing along to the song. He watched her,
wanting her, longing for her.

Alice closed her eyes, torn. What should she do?
Conrad surprised her by pulling her into his arms and started
laughing

on, Alice. Dance
Before she knew anything, Tristan got her by the other arm and
314 Alexia Praks

. I
She managed to give him a small smile, thou
gh her head was
weakly.

pulling her into his arms. He whisked her away to the other side
of the dance floor. Then he twisted her around until she was even
Alice
, dance.

He chuckled. Then Conrad
She needed to get out of here. By that time, however, the music
ended and she quickly escaped. She ran across the corridor, down
the stairs,

and into the back courtyard of the hotel. Alone, she
breathed in the fresh air and closed her eyes.

Oh, God, that was
intense.

Then her mind traveled back to the brothers.

What must she
do?

She walked farther toward the swimming pool, deep in thought.
were obviously making out, and she
disturb them.

A knot formed in the pit of her stomach. She stopped in her
spot and slowly turned. Across from her, she witnessed Darcy
lifting his head from t
realized the

woman was Kate Anderson.

Kate was smiling, and before Darcy had the chance to walk
away, she wrapped her arm around his neck and kissed him again.
head still spinning and her
heart still thundering within her chest, she walked away.

She had made her decision. Yes, no matter what happened from
now
it.

A Secret Kiss

315 A Secret Kiss

pushed her back, his face
Kate watched Alice walking away and smiled with satisfaction.
Oh yes, Alice had seen them all right, and that pleased Kate very
much. At least that part of their plan had worked. Not so where
Darcy was concerned, however. He was a stubborn old goat all
right. Here she was, offering herself to him on a silver platter
all
of her
off
with her that he nearly slapped her f
ace just mere moments ago.
Kate folded her arms across her chest and smile
coming back to you.

I
Kate cocked her h
Are Tara and Alaina right? Are you in love with

S
316 Alexia Praks
n a low,
I love her. I have always loved
her, even before
nk about
never
loved you. Is that
Kate gritted her teeth and then bashed her fist on his chest.

!
Darcy closed his
eyes and his
heart ached. He had to tell Alice
how he felt. How
could he back
out and let the woman he had loved all his life
go to
someone else, even though that someone else was his very own
brother? But then again
, how could he
do that to his own brother?
Sebastian too loved Alice, and Darcy could never do such a
horrible thing to Sebastian. Darcy could never steal the woman
Sebastian loved.

-
rejoin the wedding that was still in
progress. Instead, he walked home along the highway
alone
his
mind in a muddle of confusion and
his
heart in pain. Somewhere
in the middle of the night
, when
help himself and ran and ran
and ran until he was exhausted,
breathless
, and puffing
, sweat
soaking his body.
arther, he collapsed to his
knees in the middle of the empty road. As he lifted his head to gaze
at the moon, tears were in his eyes and his heart ached, tormenting
He howled long and loud.
His voice, hollow with agony, echoed
across the air like a lone wolf in
the woods,
missing for the loss

his mate.

When he finally couldn

his hands against the pavement. Oh, how he hurt. He hurt so damn much. What was he going to do?

Snow, my dear Snow. What should I do?

A Secret Kiss

317 Some while later, when he managed to get hold of himself again, he got up and slowly made his way homeward, his pace slow.

It was after midnight by the time he reached Princeton

Mansion, and as he made his way up toward the house, he saw the person who was responsible for his tormented heart.

She was wearing her very lovely nightdress, like the one she'd worn that night he and his brothers had met her in the garden near the pond. She looked like

a wood nymph then,

and she looked like

a wood nymph now.

Snow, my

Snow.

Oh, how he wanted to go to her. How he wanted to take her into his arms. God, he

ached.

* * * * *

The house is oddly quiet

tonight,

Alice thought

as she got

out of

the shower. Of

course, there

was only her, James, and

Brenda, who

had returned from the wedding

reception. Everyone

else

the brothers, Richard,

Tara

, and Alai

had gone off into

town to do some drinking and clubbing. She had no doubt that

Darcy and Kate were with them, enjoying themselves

tremendously.

It was odd also that tonight she had decided to wear her pretty

Victoria Secret silk and lace nightdress. Why she wanted to wear

it on some night

cream and blow-

dried her hair. Once done, she went straight to

,

why.

She flicked on the light, grabbed her camera, and went through

the photos she had taken during the wedding. As she gazed down

on the photos, her heart ached within her chest.

Her family.

her with Tristan and Logan came up, the one with them both

kissing her on the cheeks. Tristan and Logan. They were the best

of brothers and the best of best friends. They were never far away

from one another, and they had always helped one another.

318 Alexia Praks

She flicked through some more photos and found some

pictures of her and the whole family together. She was a part of

them. She was

a Princeton. Yes, there she was, standing in between

Tristan and Conrad. Then there were Dad, the James and Mom

affected her most
both mentally and emotionally
Sebastian
and Darcy

She put down the camera, her heart aching even more as she thought of them both. Were they really fighting because of her? What was she going to do? They were brothers. She was their adopted sister. Yet Absentmindedly, she reached for her treasure box and opened it. Inside, she saw the single earring she had bought a long time ago for Hayden. This had been the one he'd thrown back at her, telling her he only needed one. She'd kept it safe until now. She wasn't sure why. She picked it up and gazed at it, marveling at the blue stone. Slowly, she returned it to the box and then took out her craft gear. She pulled out her watercolor paints and the small cards. Then she began to paint some cherry trees. Yes, spring was almost over and summer was just around the corner.

She smiled sadly. Some two hours later, she finally had enough and put everything away. Still not tired, she went to kneel down beside Toby, who was sound asleep. She stroked his white fur and the dog purred with pleasure. They were

The air was warm and breezy as Alice headed down toward the garden near the pond where Mary and Peter had their wedding ceremony only that afternoon.

She closed her eyes and breathed in the spring air, her face tilted up toward heaven, serene. She stayed there for how long she did not know as her mind wandered off into the far distance. Then when she realized it was getting rather late, she turned on her heel and started walking back toward the house.

A Secret Kiss

319 She was deep in thought and was just passing the section of the garden with thick bushes when someone grabbed her arm and pulled her into the darkness.

Alice gasped, her heart pounding hard and fast as she instinctively tried to free herself from the tight imprisonment. , her voice weak.

The person turned her around so her back was resting against the thickness of a tree trunk and her front was to him. His masculine, lean body completely enveloped her, embracing her so she had no way of escape. Alice could feel his warm heat radiating out to her, and her heart started to thunder loudly within her chest and her head began to go a bit dizzy.

not at all seeing his face
in the
darkness.

He was tall, she realized, for her head barely reached up to his shoulders, and his body was firm against hers as he pressed her back against the tree, squishing her beneath him.

As if to calm her down, as if to tell her that he meant her no harm, he gently touched his hand to her face and moved his lips through her being.

Alice closed her eyes and her body unconsciously relaxed in his arms. Her breathing became labored as he continued to stroke

her neck down toward her collarbone and then down toward her

Alice bit her lip, her head spinning,
and her legs suddenly
turned into jelly. Then she could feel his warm lips against her
throat. She could feel the heat of his mouth burning against her
skin, sending her head reeling with wonder. Then before she knew
it she could feel his tongue on her sensitive skin, stroking her,
kissing her, sucking her.
She gasped as the heat within her decided to rise deliciously. He
suddenly stopped. Alice widened her eyes, wondering why he
d stopped. It felt so good.

320 Alexia Praks
She gazed up at him.
All she could see was the shadow of his
strong, handsome face above her.
Slowly, he moved his fingers and stroked her bottom lip, as he
was marveling at the soft flesh. She heard him breathing harder, as
if he had difficulty controlling himself.
to her query, and before she could
understand what was going on, his firm lips were on hers.
Alice was taken by surprise. She could feel the heat from him
as he passionately kissed her, his fingers digging deep into her hair.
She felt weak and light, like a feather floating in the air, flying
high
er and higher.
She groaned and held on to him for dear life. In response, he
deepened the kiss by plunging his tongue into her mouth and
wildly invading
her.
dy shuddered in ecstasy as his tongue stroked
and played with her, exploring her, sending wild passion coursing
through her being, exciting her to such powerful levels that she
Yes, she was lost in the wonderful heaven.
Suddenly, he pulled back, as if he suddenly realized
hed made
a mistake. Alice gazed up at his dark form, her heart pounding.
Then just as quickly, he pulled her into his arms and hugged
her tight,
as though he never wanted to let her go.
He kissed her again, his tongue wild against hers, as if he were
desperate to have her, as if he were afraid of losing her. When he
pulled back again, he was breathless and she was shaking from head
to toe.
He whispered softly near her ear.
gone.

Just like that.

Alice stayed there staring into the darkness, her finger
touching her lips, her heart pounding, and her head spinning.
When she managed to get back to her room and then into bed, it
was very late,
or rather early in the morning.

S

She was restless. Her heart was still pounding. Her mind was still
on the man who had kissed her.

A Secret Kiss

321

322 Alexia Praks

Tragedy

Alice woke up late the

sleep until about

five in the

morning. She came down for brunch

feeling a bit out of

sorts

and she noticed that the house was still as

they
night out.
getting married and settling down,
and now you want that for
sleep was because of that secret kiss last night in the garden by
g out for a walk along St.

Helena B
till much
brows nearly up to her gray hairline.
A Secret Kiss
323
disapproving stare.

.
Il the
housekeeper not to worry.

B
earshot.
Some ten minutes later, Alice found herself walking along St.
Helena Beach, her bare feet sinking deep into the porous white
sand that stretched endlessly across the horizon. With her sandals
in her hands, she strolled along, staring off at the pristine blue sea
. In the distance, she noted dark clouds gathering, indicating there
was a storm coming.
So she might as well take it all in now, enjoying every moment of
it. She was minding her own business and admiring the
breathtaking view when she noticed men surfing on the other side
watched with interest,
marveling at how expertly they stayed on the boards as they surf
ed the waves. From where she stood, which was a very long distance
away
looked like they were having a lot of fun. That was when she
decided to have a closer look and
headed toward them.

She regretted it some fifteen minutes later when she realized
those men were actually her adopted brothers. There were Nicolas,
Tristan, Logan, Hayden, and Conrad surfing the smaller waves
closer to where she was at the beach. They were laughing and
shouting encouragement at each other as they surfed. On the other
side,

much closer to the rocks where bigger and more dangerous

324 Alexia Praks
waves resided, were Sebastian and Darcy. It looked as though they
were competing to see who the better surfer was.

Alice found she could
as they
expertly rode the waves. Suddenly, her heart ached within her chest.
No, sh

especially not about
them and not now when she had already made up her mind that

. S
hed decided she no longer wanted
to be their sister.

With that firm idea in her mind, she turned on her heel and
headed the other way.

As she was walking up from the beach
to the high cliff above,

Alice didn
t notice that Conrad had seen her and was shouting
the water and raced after her. The
as they continued to surf.

As she was walking, neither did Alice notice that someone was
trailing her. Then all too soon she came to a cliff that overlooked
the ocean below where the brothers were. From here, she could
sheep them or interrupted

relaxing back against the rock. In the distance, both Darcy and Sebastian were surfing big waves, and when they disappeared under the water, her heart raced, praying that nothing bad would happen to them. A few seconds later, she saw them emerge unharmed. She sighed in relief. started gathering in the distance and heading their way. Lightning flashed, and Alice jumped at the sound and automatically hugged herself. Then it started pouring hard. She due until much later. She narrowed her. They were still surfing. In this rain? Obviously, She hastily got up and rushed back toward the side of the cliff, hoping to find shelter. She was in luck. She spotted a small cave not too far away and rushed into it. Once inside, she hugged herself, shivering severely from the cold. She surely hoped the

A Secret Kiss
325

course, Daddy James and Mom Brenda would be so worried. She turned her attention to her surroundings and that was when she realized she'd been here before. Lightning flashed and Alice blinked. Then it all came back to her. That day after she'd drowned in the sea years ago when Alaina had pushed her over the cliff, she'd decided to run away, and then she had fainted because of the fever. That night she had found herself in this very cave. There had been a small fire, and she'd felt the warm body of a boy hugging her, keeping her warm. Alice gasped and her eyes widened. Sebastian! He had been those horrible hours when the fever had broken. She brought her fingers to touch her lips. The kiss! She remembered the kiss that Sebastian had given her. brewed in her eyes. Oh, Sebastian! Tears rolled down her cheeks, and her heart tore even more as she fell to her knees. aid behind her. Alice lifted her head and blinked. She hastily got up and turned around to see Kate at the entrance of the cave. Kate slowly walked in, looking around her as if she were e, think

.

After all, if I were to marry Darcy, then
Alice gritted her teeth at the mention of Darcy. Then she

did she get here? No one ever used this part of the island except for the Princetons because it was private. Anyone seen walking through was trespassing.

Alice was suspicious and knew with

326 Alexia Praks

thought she better get out of here fast. But the rain! How would she get back home safely in this weather? Furthermore bring any

warm clothing to wear because she'd expected

to return

home before the storm even started.

Mind made up, she started walking back toward the exit. Kate intercepted her and roughly caught her arm, which surprised

Alice. Kate smiled darkly, and then with all her might, she shoved her back, slamming her against the wall of the cave.

ice cold.

Alice wriggled her arm free from the tight grip, her heart hammering in her chest.

Oh, shit!

Kate was here to hurt her again!

Suddenly, the images of Kate bullying her in high school came back to her in full force. Kate slapping her face. Kate slamming her head against the locker. Kate kicking her. Kate slamming the basketball against her face in PE.

ripped out

N

Kate smiled pleasantly as she cocked her head to one side.

laughed maniacally

pulled Alice by the collar, which s at all.

just a freeloader, sucking their life

t get it straight in that dumb

Princeton family.

use the family to break apart.

and

life

Alice shook her head as Kate started moving toward her in a threatening way, like she

d always done in high school.

A Secret Kiss

327 First, you burn

ed

because you bloody well hated Tara s so much.

Then you played the helpless little girl so you could get adopted by one of the wealthiest families

in America. Then,

of course,

you

use your bloody tricks to take poor Darcy away from Alaina, spinning his head with lies and making them turn against one another. Now you even take dear Sebastian away from poor Tara.

Now, did I forget something else? Ah, how ab

bloody smitten with you that he forgot about his own children.

Oh, Alaina told me all about how you used your bloody tricks on

James. How he took Alaina

s. Now get out of

people are good people, and I,

for one, will not allow a wicked

bitch like you to hurt

She grabbed Alice by the hair and

cave.

The impact was so and she fell to the ground, her head spinning and her body aching. Her breathing was short as she tried to get up to get away from the woman who obviously wanted to kill her. She needed to gain control of herself. She needed to defend herself. She had to. She anymore.

When Alice managed to gain control of her body again, she looked up to see Kate taking a Swiss Army knife out of her belt.

Alice gritted her teeth and pushed herself up, ignoring the pain that was coursing through her body. She tried to get up but found that her body was too weak and the pain was too unbearable. Suddenly Kate was on top of her, kneeling her to the ground. Alice watched in horror as Kate brought the Swiss Army knife down toward her. She screamed, and instantly, before the knife could cut her fl stopping her in time.

328 Alexia Praks
out lowly, her face pale.
rid

of you
Kate applied more force, her face red as she brought the knife
Alice wanted to cry out.
Oh, God!

The fear within her was
overwhelming. What if Kate did manage to slice her throat here
and now and kill her in an
instant?
ious weapon.

Alice took the opportunity to shove Kate back, causing the other
woman to fall on her backside. Alice chose the chance to run out
of the cave and into the storm outside.

The rain was hard and heavy and beating down on her with a
ferocious a
narrow pathway she hoped would lead her to somewhere
safe.

corner,
nearly slipping on the muddy pathway. She blinked away
rainwater from her eyes as she searched in panic which way to go.
?

Alice came to a sudden stop and nearly fell off the cliff. It was
a dead end. She shot back and clung flat against the wall. She
closed her eyes and took a deep breath, praying very hard that she
, not too far away, rain beating down on
you off the cliff and make it look like an accident. What do you
Alice felt her heart thumping loud and furious within her
chest, her head spinning and her whole body shaking. How did it
A Secret Kiss

329 come to t
anything to deserve this.
She bit her lip and peeked down.

,
for straight down below her was the sea
very angry, with those
big waves crashing against the cliff
edge. It was ready to devour
her.

She swallowed and tried to stay as calm as she could,
telling
herself to take a deep breath and not move. If she kept quiet and
still, then
Kate would realize
She breathed in heavily and clung to the side of the cliff as the

throbbing with pain. She felt blood sliding down her face and quickly wiped it away. That was when she realized her head was injured, probably from the impact against the rocky wall in the cave.

Suddenly Kate appeared, and Alice jumped in fear.

“What’s going on, eh? Now toward the edge of the cliff. ruined my life. I have to get rid of you so we all can live happily

ever after

to the

groove of the rock with one hand and Kate with the other.

Conrad suddenly appeared on the other side, shocked to see her hanging on to the cliff within a thread of her life.

Get away

Kate, after hearing

, went into

of shock

and stillness.

Then she panicked, and a

she’d come too far, she shoved Alice harder, which caused Alice to lose her grip on the rock.

330 Alexia Praks

a screamed as her body fell back, her hands reaching out to him.

Oh,

God!

She was going to die.

Conrad raced

to

hand reached out for her, but he was too late. She was already falling from the cliff and into the ocean below.

The voice, though mostly muffled out by the rain and the storm, reached the brothers down below. They all turned just in time to see her hitting the water.

Sebastian went cold the moment he saw

her body. Darcy

, his voice loud, his face

red, his stomach flipping with dread.

The brothers discarded their surfboards, diving deep into the ocean, and swam toward her. They propelled themselves against the current, their strong arms and legs working hard against the waves. In that instant, an enormous wave came crashing toward them, steering them off course. Sebastian dove deep under and then emerged again. Darcy was behind him, and then suddenly

another wave came and smashed against Darcy, swirling his body about and throwing

it off against a rock, scratching his skin and

breaking his arm in the process. He fell unconscious immediately.

As soon as it was here, the wave was gone again, and Sebastian swam back to Darcy. He caught his brother and brought him up to the surface. Nicolas, Tristan, Logan, and Hayden finally got to them. Hayden took Darcy and slid him on top of his surfboard. Sebastian, leaving D

dove

back down and went in search for Alice. Nicolas and Tristan

Please, God, let her be all right.

Please let her
be all right.

He finally found her and vigorously swam toward her. He
caught her by the small of her waist, hugged her against him, and
brought her back up to the surface. Nicolas and Tristan came to
A Secret Kiss

331 back. Once they got back to the beach, Sebastian took Sakur
a in

Oh, shit!

He laid her back down, his heart thundering in his chest and
his stomach knotted in dread.

you dare die on me!

he cried internally in anguish.

He opened her mouth and blew air into her lungs. Then he
pressed on her chest.

He moved to blow air into her lungs again and then press
ed her

wake

Hayden and Logan were fixing Darcy up as best as they could
so he would
bleed to death.

fa

he cried.

Sebastian continued to do CPR, and then finally, she cough
ed, spurring out loads of saltwater,

and opened her eyes. Sebastian

sighed with relief and hugged her tight within his arms, tears

Alice gazed at the man who had saved her life once again.

hazily looked around.

Her heart was pounding violently within her chest when she saw
Darcy lying on the ground not too far away from her

, bleeding.

Blood.

There was so much blood

dryly,

her head spinning. Then, as

she closed her eyes again

and fell unconscious.

332 Alexia Praks

Confession

Alice slowly opened her eyes.

Why was she so sore?

She groaned in pain as she brought her hand up to touch her
forehead. Oh

, God, her head was aching something sorely.

Suddenly, she

realized

there were long line

s of IV tubes connected

to her arm.

Where am I?

She tried to sit up but

to her softly.

Alice turned to see Sebastian moving toward her from where
he sat. He touched his warm hand to her cheek, cupping her face.

ie

. She obeyed him. Sebastian pulled the blanket up to her chin as
he watched her.

eyes again, trying to think what had happened. Her head hurt.

Why was it so painful? Then slowly

very slowly

everything

came back to her. The storm. Kate. Conrad. Her falling from the

333 The last thing she remembered was her flying down, hitting the water, and then drowning. She had thought that she was going to die for sure. The water, it was taking her, wanting to kill her. She whimpered in pain at the reminder.

Darcy!

She
d seen him bleeding on the ground next to her.
happened to him,
her eyes.

Sebastian slid in next to her then and pulled the blanket on the both of them. He made her rest her head in his arms, and then across the

hall
blood and his left arm was broken when he was trying to save her. Sebastian rested his chin on top of her head

Alice clutched

he began slowly.

Sebastian knew h

hold back anymore. He had to tell

her. After the accident,

her life seemed so fragile,

and he realized

she could be snatched away from him just like that, like yesterday afternoon. H

e knew for certain he never wanted that to happen

again, ever. Yes, he needed to tell her now.

, staring into her dark eyes

eyes that had

always mesmerized him.

I have always loved you, Alice

As she stared up at him, tears were rolling down her pale cheeks.

She held on to him tightly, her whole body shaking like a leaf.

him that she, too, loved him. But she knew she could not because

she knew very well that it would never work out. All too soon,

,
it pained her to think about it.

334 Alexia Praks

Then before she could say anything, his lips were on hers, kissing her gently and passionately. With tears in her eyes, Alice

submitted to him, letting him kiss her, letting him explore her

mouth, letting him have all of her because she knew it would be

Then when he finally

lifted his head and wiped her tears away, she

and

with happiness.

His hands were shaking

as he cupped her face. Then slowly he kissed her again and again.

He tenderly kissed her forehead, her nose, her pale cheek, her chin,

and then he passionately and wildly

kissed her lips.

When he was finally done kissing her, Alice laid her head on

his chest and closed her eyes, clinging onto him, never wanting

to

let him go

feel his warm embrace and smell his earthy scent. Eventually she

slept in his arms.

Sebastian stayed with her until well past midnight, embracing

her in his arms, thanking God that she was saved. Then,

of course,

he had to leave because the nurse begged him to.

When Alice woke the next morning, she was surrounded with

people. Daddy James and Mom Brenda were sitting on one side of

the room. Nicolas was leaning against the window, Tristan and

Loren at the end of her bed. Sebastian and Brandon on her left

She licked her lips and tried to get up. Conrad was fast. He stopped her by putting his hand on her shoulders, telling her to lie back.

. Y
last night, but
with you. You
scared the shit out of me,
ie

Conrad frowned at his brother but did move back to give Alice some breathing space.

A Secret Kiss

335 Alice managed to give him a weak smile, nodding her head to tell him she was fine.

Logan cleared his throat and then
a good fight against that
s pale face.

appropriate
to mention the incident.

ed
his eyes dark.

Alice could feel the pain radiating from his voice, and her heart ached in response.

. Y
a said, stroking back
her hai

r. Alice nodded
in agreement. Then Brenda shooed all her sons
out,

who finally left after putting up a big fight. Brenda kissed her
Alice nodded, and then before Brenda went
enda raised her brows.

Brenda cocked her head to one side, confused as to why Alice
would say those words to her all of a sudden

Alice watched her adopted mother go, tears brewing in her
eyes, her heart aching, knowing very well this would be the last
a long while. Finally, she turned her
attention to James

Daddy James

.
He took her hand in both of his and brought it up to his
Alice

,
336 Alexia Praks

marvelous
raised up and touched her
hand to his face. Slowly, she leaned forward and kissed him on the
ames, and thank you for everything.

James looked at his adopted daughter and realized the meaning
of her words. Yes, she had told them that she was leaving, but this
soon?

Good-
bye
on her face.

James watched as she slowly rest
ed back and then closed her
eyes, tears rolling down her pale cheeks.

A hollow feeling sat in the pit of his stomach as James walked
out the door, knowing very well what was going to happen next.

y daughter Alice. You will always be our Alice

Alice quietly sobbed until she fell asleep. The next time she
woke up, she saw Ned sitting beside her bed, waiting for her to
wake.

worried, you

of
She chuckled. Then when he moved back and looked at her,
the determined
look in her dark eyes.
A Secret Kiss
337 A Final Kiss
Alice lay there, watching the
moon rising high above
in
the night sky. It was beautiful, and it reminded her of that night
in the garden after she
It reminded her
of the man who had secretly kissed her
. Darce. My dear Darce,
she thought. At least
he was saved.
She closed her eyes, thinking about him, thinking of their
childhood together, of the fun they
d had under that sakura tree
in the woods. She thought of her stroking his dark hair as he lay
there on her lap and stared up at the bright blue sky. It had been a
beautiful childhood even though it had only been for a very short,
short while. That was until the world and everyone had turned
against her. Now, however, she was resolved not to think about
those horrid experiences. Now she wanted to put everything in the
past. She wanted to move forward. She wanted to make her own
path and forge her own future. And even though she knew
break many hearts doing so, she knew also that it was the only way
to resolve the conflict that
she had within her heart.
Yes, her leaving was the only solution. Alaina would no longer
be estranged with James and Brenda. Alaina and Darcy would once
again be best friends, which was what Alaina had wanted since
338 Alexia Praks
Alice had entered their lives. Alice would not break either
first, but she knew
that eventually they would forget about her. Eventually this Alice
would fade from their memories and disappear from their minds,
just like it had all those years ago before. Eventually each one of
them would find that perfect woman they
d been waiting for.
Then
fairy tale book
s,
and
the name Alice would no longer have any meaning to them.
Alice opened her eyes, got out of bed, and slowly made her
way to the door.
The hospital corridor was dark and quiet at this very late hour,
and Alice was very glad indeed as that meant no one would see
her. Finally she came to the ward on the other side of the floor and
went toward
d been told he was recovering fine
after the accident, but she had to make sure, had to see for herself
before she left for good.
She stood by the door, watching him, her heart aching for him,
with him. He was still unconscious, it seemed. She noted IV lines
were connected to his person. He was probably on morphine or
something to keep the pain away.
Darce!
My Darce!
Slowly, she walked toward him lying there motionless. She
came to sit on the side of his bed, her hand gentle and warm on
his face as she stroked and comforted him, pleading for him to wake

Slowly she lowered her head toward his face and gently she kissed him on his cold lips. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she continued to kiss him, pleading for him to wake up, pouring out all of her love and passion for him. Her hand dug deep into his thick,

black hair as her tongue stroked his motionless lips.

Her heart quivered with frustration and with pain. She whimpered within her throat as she continued to kiss him with a wild, feverous passion.

Darce!

My dear Darce!

Please wake up!

A Secret Kiss

339 Alice cried, her whole body shaking with emotion as she hid her face against his neck.

he whispered.

Alice moved down and kissed him again passionately and

wildly

pouring her heart out for him, telling him of how much

she loved him, just like when he

d kissed her in the garden that

night under the bright moon and whispered the words

I love you

to her.

Darcy responded, his hand at the back of her head, drawing her to him as their lips locked and their tongues danced wildly against one another. Alice cried as they kissed, her heart bursting with pleasure and pain, with happiness and sadness. T

his was their final

kiss.

In effect, this was a

good-bye kiss.

Finally she moved back. Her lips were bruised red from their passionate kisses. She watched Darcy smile, content, as he closed

his eyes again, falling back to his unconscious state.

She watched him for a couple more minutes, memorizing his handsome features in her mind, wanting to remember him forever.

Darce.

said softly

and then kissed him gently again. At that moment, however, she

Then slowly

she got up and walked to the door.

340 Alexia Praks

Sayonara, My Beautiful Family

The old Toyota Corolla came

to a halt a good distance

from Princeton Mansion. Alice, in jeans and a light sweater

, got

out of the car. Ned watched her as she

walked up the pathway

toward the house, his eyes dark with sorrow.

Alice entered the house via the back door and then took the back stairs up to the second floor. Once she was in her room, she took out her treasure box and took out the cards she had prepared a few days ago.

Some moments later, she was standing outside once again, looking toward the house. There were lights in the drawing room, and from this distance, she could hear the family going about doing their things.

At this very moment in the drawing room, James and Brenda

well poster for Alice and Darcy. Nicolas and Sebastian were on their laptops, working on their card for the pair as well. Conrad was busy writing his get-well messages on the card that he had handmade for Alice. He was rather pleased with the outcome and hoped Alice would love it.

A Secret Kiss

341 As they went about doing their projects, engrossed, no one noticed Toby getting up from his cozy spot by the fireplace and trotting quietly to the door and then out of the house. The dog instinctively came to his master, who was standing by the pond, waiting for him.

Alice picked Toby up in her arms and kissed his nose. She gazed at the house a bit longer, her heart aching. She knew, however, that search of her

mother, to live her life, to experience her life.

She closed her eyes and

tears rolled down her cheeks.

Sayonara, my beautiful family. Mono no aware. You are like the sakura flower. Bloom vibrantly, just like this spring, so beautiful and full of life and color. You are here in my life for only a short time, enchanting me with your wonderful way of life and your everlasting kindness, and a brief moment later you are gone again, out of my life. I am sad, my beautiful family, to leave you behind. I am sad to never see you again, to feel your love, to hear you call me sweetheart. But I must go. Thus

, sayonara, my beautiful family.

Slowly, Alice walked down the road, leaving her beloved, beautiful family behind. A few moments later, the car drove away from Princeton Mansion, away from Princeton Estate, away from the Princeton family.

342 Alexia Praks

Hearts Broken

Hand in hand, James and

Brenda walked up the stairs to

their bedroom on the first floor. As they came into the room, they immediately saw the little card sitting on the large king-size bed.

James knew immediately who it was from and nearly broke down. However, he managed to control himself and picked up the card.

I love you, Daddy James and Mom Brenda. I will always be your daughter Alice, no matter who I am or where I am.

Brenda came to read the card by her husband and gasped out in anguish, tears rolling down her cheeks. James took her into his arms as tears, too, rolled down his cheeks.

* * * * *

Nicolas came into his bedroom as he checked his

e-mail

on

his

tablet. Once he

finished replying to the

various

messages

that needed his attention pronto, he put down

the tablet and

A Secret Kiss

343 He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, wondering whom it was from. He picked up the card. It had a pretty hand-painted picture of cherry blossoms. He opened the card and read: To be, or not to be, that is the question.

You forge
your own destiny.

Alice
Hand shaking, Nicolas whispered,
. * * * * *

Tristan picked up the small,
pretty card and
read it
. As he
opened
it, a photo slipped out and landed o
n the bed. H
e picked
it up and saw it was a picture of him with Alice and Logan. He
and Logan were kissing her
He turned his attention to the card and read:
Sorry I slapped you that day in the library years ago.
ot to know you better.

Alice
the card again.
* * * * *

Logan stared at the photo
of him and Tristan kissin
g Alice on h
. Then he read the card
again:
I will miss your laughter and your teasing.
to know you better.

Alice
344 Alexia Praks
s, Alice. When
* * * * *

Hayden stared at the little
card and the small box sitting
next to it,
confused
. He picked the card up, opened it
, and read:
I love your motorbike and I love those wonderful rides near the cliff.

Alice
Hayden picked up the box and found an earring. He gritted hi
s teeth, his eyes dark. It was the earring she
d bought for him when
they were
children.
* * * * *

Conrad cocked his head to o
ne side as he looked at the
pretty car
d sitting on his bed, wondering who
m it was from.
Grinning, thinking it must be one of the m
aids who just might
have a crush
on him, he picked it up and opened it.
My dearest Conrad,
You always make me smile and I thank you for that.
You are my favorite brother,
and I love you deeply.

Conrad blinked and read through the contents again. Then he realized what it meant.

No,
he thought.

I

Someone must be playing tricks on him. It must be Tristan. He rushed out of his room and ran to even bother to knock and he burst in. He found the room as it was before, clean and tidy. But there were things missing. The laptop, his bag were all gone. That was when he

345 e A Secret Kiss

realized she was really gone. He collapsed onto his knees and Nicolas, Tristan, Logan, and Hayden came into her room then.

realized
she was gone
really gone.

Conrad lifted his head to his brothers and she left

* * * * *

Sebastian stared at the little card on his bed, his heart thumping loudly with in his chest.

He knew the instant he had seen

the card who it was from and what the meaning of it was. He, however, refused to think about it, refused to pick it up and read the content

s. That was when he heard someone rushing into

.

It was as though the world had collapsed on him, and he felt sick to his stomach.

Suddenly he felt dizzy, and his legs staggered.

He sat on the bed, finding it difficult to breathe. He felt as though he was being suffocated.

Then, as

that card said, he reached for it. Slowly he took a deep breath and opened the card.

Mono no aware.

I love you.

Alice

Sebastian closed his eyes, his face contorted with anguish.

shaking uncontrollably as he sat there, silently crying his heart out.

Why did you have to leave? Why? Who told you to leave? Have you no heart? You said you love me.

So why did you leave me?

refusing to submit to this stupid fate she

had made out for him. He

346 Alexia Praks

would

here and let her run off just like that. Oh no. He and bring her back.

Alice, and I will never allow you out of my

lifted his head then, a determined look in his azure eyes, his face a hard mask.

* * * * *

Darcy opened his eyes. His head hurt. In fact, his whole

everything? G

t his fingers to his lips and stroked the
pale flesh. He closed his eyes again, trying to remem
ber what had
happened
. All
that
he remembered was him trying to save Alice
in the sea.
Is she safe? Where
is she?
He continued to stroke his dry lips as his mind searched far and
wide for that elusive memory. Why did he have the feeling that
someone had kissed him last night? The warm lips. The gentle
touches.
Oh,
Then he saw the card sitting on the bedside table. He reached
out for it and noted it was very pretty. It was a watercolor painting
of a cherry tree, the very same tree that he and Alice had sat under
and where he
d kissed her. Suddenly, his heart ached within his
chest and his body tensed as though he knew.
Slowly, he opened the card.
I will always be your Snow.
I love you.
Alice
A sound escaped his lips and Darcy felt dizzy. His heart began
to beat fast.
, trying to calm his
beating heart. Then when he fully comprehended the meani
ng of
A Secret Kiss
347 those few words, he flashed his eyes open, jolted up,
and screamed,
His heart was pounding so hard and so irregularly within his
chest that the machine started beeping loudly in the room,
indicating abnormal heart rate. Darcy was lost in his rage and
despair as tears flowed down his cheeks from his eyes and the world
spun
, his eyes dark,
his voice shaking.
He scrambled off the bed, mindlessly tearing away IV lines
? Please,
The door burst open and two nurses rushed into the room.
They took one look at him and immediately took him by the arms
and tried to make him return to bed.
he fought them off, thrusting a nurse against the wall as he headed
for the door. It was then that the brothers, who had just arrived,
rushed into the room. Sebastian caught Darcy in his arms and
managed to calm him down.
Sebastian nodded.
just leave
at his brothers, begging them with his
eyes to agree with him, to help him find the woman he loved.
Before him stood Nicolas, Tristan, Logan, Hayden, and Conrad,
and one by one, they nodded, a determined look in their eyes.
her
Da
shoulder.
find
her
The brothers nodded again, and Darcy smiled, tears in his eyes.
348 Alexia Praks
A New Beginning
It was morning and the

just
beginning
to rise
over
the horizon. Alice raised her face and breathed in the
fresh air. When she opened her eyes again, she saw the
Statue of
Liberty and in the distance New York City.
Behind her, Ned folded his arms across his chest as he watched
her,
a smile on his face.
Toby, who was in
licked her chin. She turned
to the city beyond. The dog barked
happily, and she laughed.
Yes, she was heading
to her new home and her new future. At
that moment, the sun rose just above her, shining down on her,
which gave her an orange picturesque beauty that if anyone cared
to look would have taken their breath
away.
Alice felt at peace as her serene face gazed off into the distance.
Now, s
he was no longer Alice Princeton. From this day forward
and beyond, she was Alice Tanaka, and she so looked forward to
her new future.
, please forget Alice Princeton becau
se she no longer exists
A Secret Kiss
349 Alice knew that eventually the two men would forget about
her, forget about Alice Princeton like they
d forgotten about her
before. Soon their memories of her would fade and then
completely disappear from their minds. Then one d
ay, they would
meet the wonderful women who surely deserved them. Alice
Princeton, however, was not that person. Alice Princeton never
was and never would
be.
softly.
Alice Tanaka smiled as she stroked her long hair back, her
eyes gazing off to
to herself.

* * * * *

new york city
one year later, spring
Luke Hamilton waited nervously as
he stared at the
painting of some
cherry tree
s that was placed proudly in the middle
this type of painting so badly.
It was just a picture of
cherry tree
s with some green land in the distance and beyond that, the pristine
blue ocean and th
Sebastian Princeton had wanted it. Well, not that Luke was
complaining about coming here
, of course. Even though he had
no interest whatsoever in the paintings, he did have an interest in
the painter herse
If. And now he stood waiting for her to
materialize
And materialize

.
,
heart to flutter within his chest.
Speaking of the angel,
he thought
and eagerly turned.
Oh,
God!
She really did take his breath away.
She stood before him now like a queen with her very refined
figure. Actually, he should be referring to her as
my lady because
he thought this title suited her rather well. Especially when she was
dressed like this, wearing her very elegant long skirt and a white
350 Alexia Praks
blouse that covered up to her neck, which was of course lovingly
and fashionably designed. God, she looked like a Victorian lady,
so elegant and,
bloody hell, like a very precious ornament that he
Today she had her long, ash brown curls loosely braided and
resting over one shoulder. As he came closer, he noticed that today
her eyes were two different colors again. Her left eye was an azure-
blue color, bright and shining just like the clear blue sky above
New York City on this very fine spring day. Her right eye, on the
other hand, was the color
of the moon on a stormy night, a mauve-
gray color that he
d never seen before on any person. No, he was
lying there. He had actually seen that very same odd color
on one
particular person. He was the young, famous game creator Darcy
Princeton,
who every woman desired
and wanted.
beautiful head to one side as she looked at him.
she was smiling at him. Why
was she so beautiful when she smiled?
Shit!
What was he here
, and the
paintings.

.
She chuckled softly,
and Luke
ix
months now,
and calling me Ms.
Luke swallowed
boss. But then

.
at
is due to take place in a few months
Your sister is working for the Japanese designer Mr.
T
achibana,
Luke nodded his head.
might
ask for a favor
very hard to hide his eagerness.
A Secret Kiss
351
r sister
be able to help
her eyes on him, the two

fascinating
him even more.
Alice paused for a moment, for the name Princeton caused
of course. Mind you, many people are going
to show up since the famous Princeton brothers are going to be
there
Luke moved forward, curiosity eating at
asking
interested in them, are
Alice felt her hands
almost a year, the brothers were still affecting her
, both mentally
It was her mother, Haruka Tanaka,
who she wanted to meet.
She knew for a fact Haruka
possibly pass up the chance now, could she? Even if she had to play
hide-
and-
seek with the brothers
. Of course,
she reasoned with
herself,
know
be there.
Besides, they
d probably all
forgotten about her by now,
so she had nothing to fear.
Finally
to Luke.
know how much this means to
* * * * *

Thank you for reading Falling for Alice: A Secret Kiss. The story
of Alice and the seven Princeton brothers continues in
A Secret
Proposal
and
A Secret Affair

To get notification of when these next books are released, join my
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FALLING FOR ALICE TRILOGY

A Secret Kiss (Book 1)

A Secret Proposal: Part 1 and 2 (Book 2)

A Secret Affair (Book 3)

KIWI BRIDE SERIES

His Hired Girlfriend (Book 1)

Highland Kiss (Book 2)

When the Sun Courts the Moon (Book 3)

A Secret Admirer (Book 4)

THE ROGUE SERIES

THE NINE KINGDOMS SERIES

His Crimson Rose

My dear reader,

This is Alexia, and I would like to thank you very much for
purchasing this book. If you like A Secret Kiss, then I encourage
you to write a review. Better yet, rate this book and post your
thoughts on Goodreads, Facebook, and Twitter.

Here are some things about me.

I love

to write romance; be

it contemporary, historical, fantasy

or a combination
of any
of these. I live in historic,
students-
infested Dunedin, Aotearoa (land of the long white
cloud), aka New Zealand. My bad habits? I love eating,
daydreaming, watching anime, and of course, reading
fiction,
non-
fiction, manga, and of course scientific journal.

I encourage you to visit me at

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and
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e transaction
to
th
e author.