



FALLING FOR SAKURA TRILOGY

A SECRET

KISS

ALEXIA PRAKS

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

The Throwaway Child

SAYONARA, MY BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER. MONO no aware. You are like the sakura flower that blooms 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 Sakura. I am sad, my darling daughter, to leave you behind. I am sad to never see you grow up, feel your love, or hear you call me "Okasama." But I am not a worthy mother. Thus, sayonara, my beautiful Sakura.

* * * * *

SAKURA, WITH NO LAST NAME, was found in spring on the doorstep of Queen Mary Orphanage in a small town called South Hampton in St. Joseph Island. Her mother mysteriously disappeared after leaving the baby girl in a basket along with a note that said *My daughter's name is Sakura* and a beautiful necklace with a pink diamond pendant in the shape of a cherry blossom.

Sakura was a shy, quiet girl. Her childhood lacked the love and affection that one receives from one's parents. From very early on, she knew she didn't have a mother or a father and longed to have

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, didn't like Sakura very much, and neither did her pretty little daughter, Tara Byrd, who was Sakura's age and her worst nightmare. It was apparent from very early on that Tara was destined to be Sakura's enemy. The little blond-haired, blue-eyed girl enjoyed tormenting Sakura 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 Sakura. That Sakura worshiped 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 Sakura 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 Sakura lived in the orphanage being bullied, hated, and ignored.

Eventually, she grew accustomed to being alone and learned to endure the harassment. When she was told to pray to God for forgiveness for being a naughty girl, she prayed instead she'd get adopted by a nice family who loved her and to leave this horrendous place where no one liked her. Then she'd daydream about it actually happening, about her going far away and living with her very own family. Every night she'd imagine, 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, for Sakura's dream did come true one day.

The family she wanted to belong to appeared after she turned 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.

Sakura 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.

"Whoa! So pretty! So big!" the children murmured with delight. And Sakura 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's hair that everyone loved. He had a nice smile on his face as he greeted every one of them, and Sakura felt her heart quicken with happiness as his eyes met hers. There was kindness within those eyes that Sakura 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 Sakura 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 father's name was James Princeton, and the pretty mother's 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.

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 Darcy, at six years old. Alaina, the older sister by a mere three minutes, had honey-blond hair and baby blue eyes, 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 face behind his mother's skirt.

Sakura couldn't take her eyes off all of the children because they fascinated her. She felt a pang of longing as she watched them play with the other children, especially with pretty Tara.

It wasn't until late afternoon that Sakura became aware of one of the boys, Sebastian, watching her.

"Where are you from?" he asked. "You're not from around here, are you?"

Sakura 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'd been cast away by her own parents, was a rare specimen indeed.

"Her mother threw her away when she was a baby," Tara said behind Sebastian. "Mommy said she's tainted, a devil's daughter, and no one wants her."

Sakura felt her heart thumping furiously in response, her face flushing with shame. She felt like running away to hide because she didn't want this 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 a devil's daughter, and that was why no one wanted her.

"How could a mother throw her own daughter away?" Nicolas asked. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his fine nose and

made a frown very much like his father when he was contemplating something very important. "That's just mean."

Tristan stepped toward her and pulled her hair. "Maybe you are the devil's daughter. Your hair is so black."

"And your skin is so white," Logan put in, pinching her cheek. Sakura whined.

"If she's the devil's daughter," Alaina butted in, "then we shouldn't be playing with her. We shouldn't be talking to her at all. She might give us the pox or something." The pretty girl shivered and pulled a face. "Has she given you anything nasty yet, Tara?"

Tara laughed. "No, not yet. Not unless nightmares count. Mama said she cries at night and it sounds like a ghost. So we shouldn't talk to her at all. Otherwise, she'll give us nightmares."

Alaina shivered and hugged Tara. "I don't want nightmares. Go away, you devil witch. You're a bad witch just like the Wicked Witch of the West in the *Wizard of Oz*."

Sebastian frowned at his sister. "Don't be silly, Alaina. She's no witch, and she won't give us nightmares. She's just a little girl."

"Oh? How do you know for sure?" Alaina remarked.

"You're so skinny and short like a dwarf," Hayden said. "But those dwarves in books aren't that skinny like you."

Sakura blushed, feeling a bit overwhelmed at being the center of attention. She could feel herself shaking from nervousness and took a few steps back to get some space.

"I think she looks like Snow White," Darcy said. His hand reached out and stroked her hair. "Really black hair and really pale skin."

Sakura 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.

Sakura shyly returned his smile, liking his warmth and his gentle, feathery touches. Her wee heart glowed, and she felt warm

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 hoarsely. "Don't be silly, Darcy. She's ugly and a devil's daughter. Don't go near her." She grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled him back, away from Sakura.

Darcy glared at Tara. "Why'd you do that for?"

"Just get away from her!" Tara snapped, frowning darkly at Darcy.

Darcy scowled. "I don't want to. I like her."

"Darcy!" Alaina shrieked. "How could you like her? She's the devil's daughter!"

"She's not the devil's daughter!" Darcy replied firmly, taking Sakura 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.

"What's your name?" Nicolas asked.

Sakura was so conscious of Darcy's warm hand clasping around hers that she didn't hear Nicolas. When he patiently asked her again, she glanced up, licked her lips nervously, and said, "Sakura."

"Sa... What?" Hayden asked.

"Sa-ku-ra," Sakura said again.

"What does it mean?" Tristan butted in, his head cocked to one side.

Sakura shrugged her small shoulders and lowered her head to avoid their gazes. She felt rather ashamed that she didn't know what her name meant, but she was determined to find out once she got back to the orphanage.

"That name is too hard to pronounce," Logan said to himself. "Why don't we give you another name? A nickname?"

Sakura glanced up, her heart pounding with delight. *Oh God*, she thought. *They are giving me a nickname. Does that mean they're my friends?*

"Why would you give her a nickname?" Tara asked in annoyance.

"Yeah! Why?" Alaina shouted at her brother.

"I want a nickname, too," Tara demanded, furrowing her pretty brows.

"Your name is easy to pronounce," Sebastian said. "And it's kind of short already."

"How about Sarah?" Nicolas suggested. "It's a popular name, and it means princess."

Tara butted in instantly. "But she's *not* a princess. She doesn't even look like a princess. She's a devil's daughter."

"She looks like Snow White to me," Darcy said again, smiling at Sakura. "We can call her Snow or something."

"What? Just because she has black hair and pale skin?" Tara muttered unhappily. "She's plain and ugly like Mommy said. So we should give her a plain and ugly name."

"Yes, we should do that," Alaina said, nodding her head furiously.

"What about Sally?" Sebastian suggested. "It sounds pretty close to Sa-ku... Sa-ku-ra."

"Yes, Sally sounds about right," Tara said, nodding her head. "She is silly, after all, and it rhymes, I think. Sakura is a silly girl. Sally and silly." She laughed loudly. "Silly Sally."

And so Sakura 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, Sakura 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 Sakura 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 witnesses to the whole

ordeal. Soon Sakura 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, claiming that such a nice young girl couldn't have 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.

Sakura was so relieved and happy over this man's kindness that, for the first time in her seven years, she cried in front of everyone. James wiped away her tears, told her everything would be all right, lifted her into his arms, and took her home to his family.

CHAPTER 1:

Sakura, the Lonely Flower

SAKURA PRINCETON STROKED THE STRANDS of her long tresses away from her face. The glossy locks refused to obey her and fell back in place. She muttered under her breath and tossed them back, bunching up the curls and letting them fall to one side of her slender shoulder. Then she turned just so to the right to get into a good position, lifted 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.

It's perfect! Just what she needed. Countless 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. It'd be perfect 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.

"You're going to be my bestseller this week," she said, tapping her finger on the petal. "And I thank you for that." Then she 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 headed back toward the road as she hummed to herself.

Woof! Woof! Woof!

Sakura 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.

"Where have you been, Toby?" she greeted back. "I told you not to go too far. You might get lost. What if I couldn't find you? What would you do then? You'd become an orphan."

Sakura 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.

"You wouldn't want that now, would you?" she queried Toby as she bent down to pick him up. The dog stuck out his tongue and licked her cheek. She couldn't help herself and giggled.

The fact was Sakura 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 returned. If it hadn't been for her, Toby could've died from starvation and hypothermia.

The pup, later named Toby by Sakura herself, had known it had been Sakura who saved him and had taken a liking to her immediately, doting on her and following her wherever she went.

"Don't!" She told him off. The dog looked somewhat disappointed as he tried to lick her again. "It's your fault for not listening to me, Toby." She returned him to the ground. "Now then, I think it's time to head back. I do have many more things to do before dinner." She paused, looking up at the beautiful

spring sky; her eyes narrowed against the bright sunlight. "And then there's Saturday." She frowned, 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. There'd be so many people Sakura didn't know. But of course that didn't matter. What really mattered—and what really worried her—was the fact that her adopted brothers—all seven of them—would be coming as well since it was their cousin Mary's wedding.

Sakura 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.

Of course she couldn't really forget about Tara, Alaina, and their big-city friends. They'd no doubt only be too happy to be back and make Sakura's life as miserable as possible. But Sakura too had grown up into a fine woman and strong-willed. So Daddy James told her many times. Hence, come hell or high water, Sakura wasn't going to put up with 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 the 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 remembered 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 she'd 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 been the masterminds behind everything. Then they'd all gone off to boarding school—the boys to St. Michael's Boarding School for Boys, one of the most prestigious schools in America,

and Tara and Alaina to Princess Margaret's Boarding School for Girls, also one of the most prestigious schools in America.

Not very long after, Sakura 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' cousin from their mother's 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, Sakura would stay with the Collinses at their farm in California, enjoying her times there with Mary, Katherine, and Mary's brother, 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 James's side of the family. During those times, Sakura 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, she had no idea where they were living now, and to be frankly honest, neither did she care.

"So what do you think they're like now?" she asked Toby, who was busy sticking his tongue out and sniffing the air with interest. Sakura cocked her head to one side, wondering.

"Nicolas would be twenty-eight by now," she murmured to herself, picturing the young Nicolas when she last saw him when he was fifteen years old. "The triplets?" She cocked her head to the other side, watching Toby wagging his tail as he was sniffing something of interest to him in the bush not too far away. "They'd be what? Twenty-six?" The picture of the three when they were thirteen flashed in her mind. "What about Hayden and the twins?" Yes, Hayden would be twenty-four by now, and the twins, Alaina and Darcy, would be twenty-two.

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 of the house. “Yes,” she murmured to herself, gently touching the overgrown tall grasses, “he’d be twenty by now.”

“And me,” she said under her breath, her heart pounding within her chest. “I’ll be twenty-four in a couple of weeks.” *But then again*, she thought, April the 8th wasn’t her actual birthdate. 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 the family as if she were born into it. Sakura, on the other hand, couldn’t seem to make even one sibling like 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.

It didn’t matter now, 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 Ned Faber, Beth’s 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, Sakura knew her mother loved her because otherwise the woman wouldn’t have given her a name—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 Sakura was determined to find the woman and then...

Then what?

Unconsciously, she touched the pink diamond about her neck.

When the wedding was over, she’d be going out there into the world—she didn’t care where—to find her mother.

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 soon she'd find the woman who had given her life.

CHAPTER 2:

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 invited 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'd bought from an unknown, talented artist he greatly admired. The second night, they refused to let him stay home to finish his work and dragged him out drinking until the early hours of the morning. Their argument was, "It's Saturday!" The third night, they told him to get packing because they were leaving for St. Joseph Island three days early for their cousin Mary's wedding to surprise the bride-to-be—and their mom and dad, of course.

Sebastian knew instantly it was that damn Tristan's idea, who only wanted to annoy the hell out of him, and naturally Logan went along.

Then Hayden arrived on his motorbike, crashing on Sebastian's 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 and 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 comforting Darcy by patting Darcy's 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't give a shit whether this new ex-girlfriend of his dumped him or not and was 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 Darcy couldn't 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 happened again, he'd 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 hadn't been fooling around near the railing on the lower deck of their two-million dollar, brand-spanking-new luxury yacht, trying to kill each other to get a peek at his new apartment plan, then he and his laptop wouldn't have gotten thrown off board into the ocean.

Furthermore, if he wasn't such an excellent 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.

"I'm sure Hayden can fix it," Tristan said coolly, throwing him a dry towel.

Sebastian glared at his brother as the towel landed on his head, partially covering his handsome face and azure-blue eyes that were glinting with fire.

"Nope. Can't fix it," Hayden said matter-of-factly. "It's totally stuffed, bro. Better get a new one."

"Jesus! My work!" Sebastian muttered, looking heavenward as he pulled down the towel. "It's not the laptop! It's my work!" he growled.

"Surely you have a backup, right?" Conrad, the youngest of the brothers, put in calmly from the other side of the pool.

"Of course, but—"

"Ah." Logan butted in, putting down his martini. "Girlfriends."

"What?" Sebastian snapped. 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 of Sebastian's mighty punches. Of course, Tristan didn't want his gorgeous face to be ruined, and what would he do without his handsome face and flirty smile? The girls wouldn't bed him, that was for sure, and Tristan would be very devastated indeed.

"He's pissed because all his *girlfriends*' photos are ruined," Logan said matter-of-factly, emphasizing the word girlfriends as plural.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Sebastian replied. Though he had to admit it was losing the photos that really pissed him off since he hadn't backed up some of the most recent ones on his hard drive.

"I didn't know you had a girlfriend, Sebastian," Tara said, sitting across from him, her long, slender body posing elegantly on the poolside lounge. She knew she looked enticing wearing a two-piece bikini that barely covered her hot body, and she knew the brothers liked looking at her. *Oh hell!* Who didn't want a body 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.

"He doesn't," 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 brothers," she said. "When will you all get a nice girl and settle down? Aside from you, of course, Conrad, since you're still too young."

Conrad snorted at his sister to show her his annoyance and returned 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.

"Don't feel sorry for me, Alaina. I'm not ready to get tied down yet." Nicolas chuckled. "I like my freedom." He took a sip of his cocktail and then relaxed back on the poolside divan, gazing up at the sky above. "Twenty-eight is still too young to settle down," he murmured to himself.

"What about Dad's offer?" Darcy asked.

Nicolas raised his brows.

"Didn't he want you to take over Princeton Group?" Sebastian queried. "He's ready to retire."

Nicolas sighed. Of course, all the brothers knew their dad had been asking him to take over the business, but Nicolas didn't feel 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

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

"I've been thinking about it for a while now," he said. "I'll take a look at it this spring and decide then."

"Aside from that," Alaina said, "none of you are bringing any girls home to meet Mom and Dad?" She turned to Hayden. "Where's your girlfriend? What's her name? Judith or Julie or something?"

"We broke up," Hayden snapped.

"He got dumped." Tristan gladly offered. This of course welcomed a death-ray glare from Hayden.

"And you, Darcy?" Tara asked. "What about Kate?"

Darcy frowned at Tara, telling her to piss off and mind her own business.

Tara thought Darcy's dislike of her had grown even more in these past few years. This frustrated and pissed her off because she couldn't understand why he was like that toward her. These feelings multiplied since she had a big crush on him. Well, she couldn't help herself, and what woman could? 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.

"He got dumped." Tristan 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 Tristan's face. Instead of cursing, the older brother laughed and said, as he watched Darcy walking past him toward the stairs that'd lead him up to the high-diving platform above, "Get over it, Darcy boy. She'll come begging for you again like all of your other ex-girlfriends did."

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,

Kate Anderson, he hadn't known it was one of Alaina's friends. If he had known, he wouldn't have gone out with the damn woman in the first place. As a matter of fact, he hadn't had 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, since she hadn't been able to control herself from screwing another guy in their apartment, which he happened to witness by accident. Her reasoning? He hadn't had sex with her since that first night, and it had been five months. Then of course she had the gall to accuse him of being gay. He hadn't said a word—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 closed his eyes, his handsome face serene, and then he jumped and expertly did a beautiful 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, "Who wants another drink?"

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 didn't want to run her fingers—oh ever so slowly—down those abs of his? And those azure-blue eyes, the color of the summer sky, so vibrant they took a girl's breath away.

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

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 she wanted that again. She wanted all seven of them around her. But most of all, she wanted Sebastian Princeton. She wanted him to love her as a woman. She wanted him in her bed, making love to her and calling her sweetheart. But then again, she also wanted Darcy—despite he was a year younger than her and didn't seem to have any interest in her whatsoever, which of course made the chasing even more exciting. *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.

"I can see South Hampton from here," Darcy said from the high-diving platform, drawing everyone's attention to the one and only town on St. Joseph Island that suddenly appeared in the distance.

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 been the Princeton's hometown 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'd 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,

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 they'd brought along in the yacht. Tara and Alaina, on the other hand, decided they'd stay in town and do some 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.

"He's being bloody childish," Sebastian said under his breath.

"He wants to annoy you—*again*," Nicolas commented matter-of-factly, his attention on his tablet.

"Tell me when we get home." Conrad informed them before closing his eyes and making himself comfortable on the back seat, resting his head on Darcy's shoulder.

Darcy grunted and shoved him back. "Oi, find another pillow."

Conrad pulled a face, made himself comfortable on the other 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.

"There they go again," Darcy said, shaking his head.

Sebastian wasn't taking it and had the urge to give them the finger but managed to control himself. Then just when he thought it wouldn't get any more annoying, Tristan honked at him five times, waking up Conrad, who also got very annoyed.

"I think I want to kill him now," Conrad muttered, glaring at the car in front of them.

"Stay calm now. There's no need to be childish," Nicolas said, typing away on his tablet.

"I see trouble coming," Darcy murmured under his breath, knowing very well how Sebastian would respond to the challenge.

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 Tristan's face, Sebastian smiled with satisfaction and sped up even more. He laughed, knowing very well he had left his brothers in his dust once again.

"Good job, Seb." Conrad chuckled.

"You guys still haven't grown up," Nicolas said under his breath.

"Better slow down, Seb," 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 sides. 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.

"Holy shit!" Conrad shrieked.

"Watch out!" Darcy shouted.

CHAPTER 3:

Darcy Princeton, Prince of Darkness

SAKURA 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 had a moment of sheer panic, wondering if she'd live, when Toby ran to her and started barking at her and licking her hand with concern.

Sakura 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 rushed 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.

"Oh shit!" Conrad shrieked in dismay. "You hit a girl."

"I'm calling the ambulance." Nicolas dug into his backpack, searching for his cell phone.

"Are you all right?" Sebastian shouted, his voice hoarse, his heart pounding hard.

Darcy growled. "What do you think? You bloody hit her, for Christ's sake!"

Just then the black car drew up behind them, followed by, "Hey, what's the holdup?" from Tristan.

"Accident!" Conrad shouted back.

"What the hell!" Logan muttered as they all got out of the car.

Sakura stroked her hair back from her face and managed to sit up. Toby jumped into her lap and asked her with his eyes if she was all right.

"I'm fine, Toby," she said, patting his head in reassurance. The dog whimpered at her and licked her hand.

Sebastian sighed in relief when he heard she spoke, not to him but to the dog.

"Are you all right?" he asked again, thinking she hadn't heard him the first time. When she didn't respond, he wrapped his hand around her soft, slender arm to get her attention.

Sakura 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 didn't want to answer.

"Did I hurt you?"

What the hell do you think? She wanted to shout at him. *You nearly killed me with your reckless driving.*

"I'm fine," she replied none too gently.

Darcy, who was on the other side, felt the odd, furious 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 the girl's voice so oddly familiar?

Curious, he glanced in their victim's direction, hoping seeing 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 was blocked by Sebastian's large frame.

Darcy couldn't help himself. His legs moved without his command. He found himself by her side in an instant, opposite Sebastian. He said, "Are you sure you're not hurt? Let me see."

The voice! Oh gosh! The voice! Sakura 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. Sakura 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 echoed 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, Sakura felt the heat rising steadily within her. Involuntarily, she trembled and quickly glanced 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 heart 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.* With the blackest hair, the palest skin, and the darkest eyes that seemed to draw him

into their mysterious depths. She was so damn beautiful it knocked the wind out of him, and he found he couldn't stop staring, didn't want to stop staring.

"Sebastian!" Nicolas called out. "Is she all right?"

Sebastian finally managed to get his wits back and uttered, "I... I think so."

Sakura drew her arm away from Sebastian's grasp and looked away, feeling his intense stare was beginning to unnerve her. She was hoping he'd walk away and leave her alone when the man gave her a fright by touching her again. He was in fact 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. Tristan laughed from the distance, and Sebastian gritted his teeth, knowing his brother was enjoying his embarrassment.

"I'm only trying to help," he said to her.

"Are you hurt anywhere?" Darcy queried, his eyes still on her. "No broken bones?"

Sakura turned 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.

"How's that ambulance going, Nicolas?" Conrad asked his eldest brother, who was apparently still searching for his cell phone.

"It's in here somewhere," Nicolas muttered under his breath.

"If it were a serious accident," Conrad said, "she would have died by now."

Nicolas frowned. "What about your cell phone?"

"I'm fine. No need to call for an ambulance," Sakura said loudly.

"Are you sure?" Sebastian asked, moving his face even closer to her now.

Shit! He could smell her—wildflowers and honeysuckle and something else. *Something sweet.* It tickled something nice and warm within his being. He loved it.

"Yes. I'm fine, thanks," she said firmly.

“No, I don’t think you’re fine until you’re checked thoroughly,” Sebastian commented, and without her consent, he scooped her into his strong arms.

Sakura was shocked. In fact, she was outraged. *Oh my gosh!* He touched her! Without her consent!

“What are you doing?” she snapped at him. “Put me down this instant!”

Sebastian was so taken aback by her burst of outrage that he didn’t know what to 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 demanded 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. They moved around to get a better look at their victim.

Sebastian let go of her and stood up. He didn’t know what to do since she had rejected his offer to help. He didn’t want to touch 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, “Holy smokes!”

Like moths attracted to a flame, the rest of the brothers saw the most enticing image they’d 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’ prying eyes.

Sakura didn’t like the fact that she had 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 the middle of nowhere that he couldn’t speak. Tristan, Logan, Hayden, and Conrad just gawked at her as though they were watching a really interesting movie. *And Darcy?* Her heart jolted within her chest as she met his gaze again. Those eyes—so

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 enriching the men's experience of 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 couldn't take it anymore, 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 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 Sakura whatsoever, he jumped out of her arms and into Sebastian's.

"Hey." Sebastian chuckled. "You're a friendly one, aren't you?" Then he glanced up, eyeing Sakura, who looked rather upset about the whole thing. "Unlike your owner."

Sakura 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 flown 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 want to help,

but it was because what they saw was preventing their male brains from performing their functions properly.

Sakura was bending over on her knees as she was gathering her camera, notebook, sketchbook, and coloring pencils. They could clearly see the enticing view of her cleavage, which they thoroughly enjoyed. Then, once she was done, Sakura 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 couldn't seem to breathe properly again for a few more seconds after that.

Slowly, Sakura managed to get up and stood straight, her body sore all over.

She just couldn't believe 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 forward a rush of anger, and she saw red.

She stared at them, one by one, no longer afraid of them as she'd 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. Not 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 out of any girl's league.

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 Flirt in the family. Sakura wondered how many females he had bedded already and how many hearts he had broken along the way.

The same went for Logan with his very charming smile and devil-may-care manner. Sakura wouldn't be surprised if he had bedded at least a dozen women within the past few months.

Hayden, the handsome Prince of Rebel, with features inherited from their mother's side of the family, had that rogue look about him that any good girl found extremely hard to resist. This was enhanced by the fact that he had one golden earring in his left ear. He looked like a bloody pirate—a very handsome one—and Sakura was sure any girl wouldn't 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. Sakura 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 her interesting. Sakura herself couldn't 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'd married the famous Luke Princeton. Darcy had that aloofness and darkness about him that any intelligent girl knew to avoid but couldn't resist and ended up falling crazily in love with him anyway.

Then there was nice, sincere Conrad. He had a cute, boyish, friendly smile any female, young or old, couldn't help falling for.

Then it hit her. *Oh Gosh!* They'd 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 seemed to register that fact, however, and Sakura began to grow more annoyed. Then there was the way in which they looked at her, which caused her to shiver. There was this bizarre sensation rushing through her.

"Toby," she called.

The dog barked back at her.

"So that's his name? Toby?" Nicolas asked.

Toby barked again, which annoyed Sakura even more. When they got home, she thought she'd teach him a lesson that succumbing to the enemy was not something one should ever do to one's allies.

"Come on," she said, frowning at the dog for being disobedient all of a sudden. "It's time to go home."

Toby ignored her as Sebastian started scratching his head. Toby's eyes glazed over as he stuck his tongue out in pleasure.

"Ah. You like that, don't you?" Sebastian chuckled.

Tristan came forward and offered to help her. "Are you sure you can get home? We can give you a ride."

Sakura turned to him. The thought of sitting next to them in a car didn't sit well with her.

"I'll be fine, thank you," she said, reaching out for Toby. She took the dog from Sebastian, turned on her heel, and began to walk away from them.

"There she goes," Conrad said, disappointment echoing in his voice.

Darcy watched her go, his eyes intent on her slender form. There was something about her that he couldn't quite place, and why his heart was still thumping so hard and so furiously within his chest was beyond him.

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. "I suppose since I'm the one responsible..." he said, and without further ado, he was behind her and pulled her around gently by the arm.

Sakura gasped, and before she could protest, she was being lifted up midair and into the arms of her adopted brother.

"What are you doing?" she shrieked.

"Taking you home," he replied calmly, heading back to the car. "I can at least do that much after I nearly killed you."

"I... I can walk home by myself!" she stammered. "I'm not hurt, as you can see. And you didn't kill me. I'm still breathing."

Sebastian refused to respond to her logical argument and headed straight to the car.

"Why does he have to be the one to carry her?" Conrad asked no one in particular.

"Because he's responsible," Nicolas replied.

"I'm responsible," Tristan put in matter-of-factly. "I made him lose his cool back there so, yes, I'm responsible."

"Just shut up and get in the car," Sebastian said to Tristan.

Sakura watched the brothers, who were still staring at her. She couldn't believe it! She *just* couldn't believe it! None of them remembered who she was. *Not one of them.* And here she was this close to them. She couldn't decide if she was 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.

Nicolas got into the front seat followed by Sebastian in the driver's seat.

Outside, Tristan chuckled merrily and slapped Darcy on the shoulder. "Looks like you're riding with us, bro."

Darcy narrowed his eyes dangerously at Logan, who had stolen his seat in the car. Logan, however, didn't see the death ray his younger brother gave him because he was too busy trying to please their new acquaintance.

"So," Nicolas began charmingly once Sebastian started the engine, "where do you live?"

Sakura 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 Sakura, 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.

"Just drive straight," she began. "It's a long, narrow road. Then when you get to the intersection, turn right and then left and then left again."

Conrad cocked his head to one side. "That's pretty close to Princeton Mansion, isn't it?"

"Good," Sebastian said with double meaning and started the engine.

"So what's your name?" Logan asked, moving closer to her.

Sakura glared at him. "I don't tell strangers my name."

Logan laughed and Conrad said, "We're not strangers. We're your neighbors. We live at Princeton Mansion."

Sakura 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.

"It's all right, Toby," she said, patting his head. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine," Sebastian countered. "You're in shock."

"I'm not in shock!" she retorted. "I'm afraid. How do you think I feel when all seven of you refuse to leave me alone and are now taking me for a drive?"

The moment she had said those words, realization dawned on them.

"Shit!" Sebastian muttered under his breath.

Nicolas, always the calm and levelheaded one, turned to her and said, "As the eldest Princeton brother, I take full responsibility for our unthinkable actions. I'm very sorry that we've frightened you. However, I guarantee you none of us meant you any harm. We want to see you home safe and sound."

Both Logan and Conrad nodded furiously.

Sakura went quiet once she saw the sincerity in Nicolas's eyes. He reminded her so much of Daddy James, and she couldn't help but relax. The brothers smiled when they saw she had accepted Nicolas's apology and promise. Toby stuck out his tongue then, pleased.

A few minutes later, the car turned at the intersection as Sakura had told them, but it also surprised them when the black car

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

“What are they doing?” Sebastian said under his breath.

Logan laughed. “Tristan!”

Nicolas sighed. “He’s interested.”

Sakura didn’t have a clue as to what they were talking about and pretty much didn’t care. All she cared about now was whether Ned was home or not. If he was, then she hoped he wouldn’t call out her name or, worse still, greet the brothers and tell them all about her.

“Is it just me or are there more cherry trees around here?” Conrad commented.

“It’s nice,” Nicolas said. “Though I don’t remember ever seeing that many on the island before.”

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

“It’s spring,” she murmured.

“Cherry blossoms are beautiful,” Sebastian remarked. “Too bad we don’t have them up at the house.”

Sakura wanted to laugh. *Really? Not one cherry tree up at Princeton Mansion?*

“I think we’re here,” Nicolas said, eyeing the small cottage ahead of them.

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

“That’s your house?” Conrad asked in awe. “It’s pretty nice.”

“No,” Sakura said, meaning it wasn’t her house. “Not really.”

None of them paid any attention to the meaning of her words, however, and they all got out of the car. Conrad took care to aid her even if she didn’t need help.

Tristan and Hayden got out of the car as well since they didn’t want to miss the chance to talk to Sakura again.

Darcy stayed back, pretending to be busy with his tablet, which he wasn’t, 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*

intensely back on the road? Her chocolate-brown eyes stirred something deep within his soul, awakening him from his slumber. She seemed oddly familiar to him, yet her identity eluded him, and this frustrated Darcy greatly.

Outside, Sebastian frowned at Tristan. "Why the hell did you follow us?"

"You might get into an accident again," Tristan responded. "Seeing as though you're pretty reckless and irresponsible at driving." He turned to Sakura then, giving her a dashing smile that would make any young female's heart flutter with happiness. "My brothers didn't harass you, did they?"

Sakura cocked her head to one side. "No," she said. Then before they insisted on coming with her into Ned's house and perhaps even opting to stay for afternoon tea, because she knew they'd want to, she went on. "And thanks for the ride. Bye now."

Sebastian was about to stop her, but she was quick and walked briskly away.

Sakura hoped they'd disappear before she got to the door because she didn't know whether Ned was home or not and whether the door was locked or not.

Logan whistled. "That's one hot chick."

"Wonder what her name is," Conrad said, smiling pleasantly.

"Conrad! You like her!" Tristan chuckled.

"She's nice," he said. "Totally my type."

"Wonder if she has a boyfriend," Hayden murmured. "Hope not."

"Okay, boys, time to get going," Nicolas said, opening the door.

The brothers took their leave without ever seeing Sakura enter 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.

CHAPTER 4:

Coffee & Cherry Blossoms

SEBASTIAN WAS FORCED TO EAT his own words when they stared wide-eyed in disbelief at the sight before them. The Princeton Estate was in full bloom with cherry blossoms. Clouds of pink flowers stretched endlessly beyond them, and the road leading to the house was carpeted with pink petals.

"We don't have to go to Japan to see cherry blossoms in full season," Conrad said, smiling.

"It's nice," Nicolas remarked.

Sebastian couldn't say a thing. 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 reached the front courtyard of the two-hundred-year-old stately mansion, which most foreigners liked to call the Grand Castle of St. Joseph Island, made of massive gray stone that had stood up against many winters.

The estate was immaculately maintained with lush, green lawn and neat, pretty flowerbeds their father loved. The grand water feature of cupids and fairies, their father's pride and joy, stood

proudly in the middle of the courtyard for them to admire, though the brothers didn't notice it as they drove past.

"Phew!" Tristan voiced the moment he was out of the car. "We're finally here. Really need a drink."

"Non-alcoholic," Darcy said, 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 screamed, "Oh Mother of God!"

The brothers turned to look at her, surprised by her voice.

"Beth!" Logan greeted. "Surprise!"

"My goodness! This is a very big surprise," Beth said. "Now I really have to get all your rooms ready."

Tristan chuckled. "As if that's hard for you."

"All seven of you, mind you," Beth replied. "And where's Miss Alaina and Tara?"

The brothers started 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. They simply couldn't believe 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 at his brothers' flirtatious nature and followed them into the drawing room, followed by Conrad, who gave the maids a friendly wave and smile. Darcy—darkly handsome and totally hot with his *I don't give a shit about the world* look—nearly sent the girls to Nirvana. He glanced at them, which caused the maids' hearts to flutter with joy and their knees to turn into jelly.

"He's so handsome," Anna, with red hair and 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

because he was so gorgeous, just like an archangel with blond hair and blue eyes.

Sebastian didn't pay them any mind and in fact didn't even see them. He headed straight into the drawing room to see his mother, Brenda Princeton, hugging and kissing her sons.

"You boys have changed so much since I last saw you," she said, tears in her eyes.

"Oh, come now, Aunt," Mary Collins, the bride-to-be, said from the other side of the room. "It couldn't have been that long." She turned to Sebastian. "What happened? I heard you caused an accident."

That was fast. Sebastian eyed Tristan, who winked at him. "Just a minor accident," he said mildly.

"Minor?" Conrad stated loudly from the other side of the room. "You nearly killed her!"

"You'll have a lot to answer for if you did hurt her, you know," Tristan said.

"Don't scare your brother, Tristan," Brenda said, coming over to Sebastian. "Now give me a kiss," she demanded, tiptoeing so her cheek could reach his massive height.

"No sooner than you're all here, there's trouble," James Princeton said at the door. At nearly sixty years of age, he still looked amazingly handsome, with a tall, lean body and charming, aristocratic 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 looked 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.

"Thank God," Conrad said, pouring himself a cup.

James looked none too pleased at the coffee. Brenda chuckled, and Beth noticed James's dark frown.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Princeton," Beth said, "but it's standard coffee this afternoon."

James sighed. "Well, there's always tonight."

The brothers didn't have a clue as to why their father was upset about the coffee. It didn't taste half-bad.

"We're expecting your grandparents for dinner tonight," Brenda announced to her sons.

"Yeah!" Conrad remarked. "I haven't seen them for ages."

"I suppose I better inform Sakura to prepare for seven more," Beth muttered to herself before she left the room. No one was paying any attention to her mentioning the name "Sakura" as they continued to enjoy their afternoon tea.

"So, Mary, where's Peter?" Hayden asked.

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 high bone structure, Mary's 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.

"Coming on Friday," she said. "With Richard."

"Richard?" Tristan asked. "Haven't seen that old flirt for ages."

"He's not a flirt." Mary defended her older brother.

Tristan chuckled. "Come to think of it, you're right. He's not. He's so lousy at flirting that it's not flirting. Has he got a girl yet?"

"Ask him yourself when he's here," Mary said.

"Will do," Tristan replied, smiling.

"Mom, Dad, and Peter's parents will be here next Wednesday," Mary said. "Hope the weather is going to be nice on my wedding day."

Logan waved her worry aside with a flick of his hand. "It'll be fine. By the way, why spring? Why here on St. Joseph Island?"

"What do you mean?" Mary raised her brows.

"What he means is," Darcy said from where he stood near the window, his eyes fixed on the countless cherry trees outside, "why get married here in spring?"

"Yeah, why here and why spring?" Hayden asked, curious. "Don't all you girls want to get married in summer when the weather is perfect?"

Mary chuckled. "I asked myself those questions many times, too. Why here on St. Joseph Island. Why in spring?" She turned to look at her cousins who were waiting for her answers. "I suppose I have to blame it on my dear friend. She's the one who started it 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 to get married here in spring."

"I see what you mean," Darcy said. Because 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, however, he could not think of what, when, why, or how. Though he knew it was right here on St. Joseph Island.

"Mom?" Conrad suddenly called to his mother. "Do you know who lives in that cottage down the road?"

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 her sons. "Down the road? You mean the cottage?"

"Hmm." Conrad nodded.

"Ned Faber," James said.

"You mean Beth's younger brother?" Sebastian asked after taking a sip of his bland coffee.

"Yes," Brenda said. "He lives there. Why do you want to know?"

Conrad laughed uneasily. "No reason." He returned to his coffee. So did his brothers when they realized their parents were looking at them oddly.

CHAPTER 5:

Hide & Seek

SAKURA DECIDED IT WAS ALL the brothers' fault that she had to take the long way home. If it weren't 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. Normally she didn't 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 they'd be 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.

She groaned. She couldn't believe they'd be eating the food she prepared.

Once she reached Princeton Mansion, she sneaked into the kitchen—hoping like hell she wouldn't bump into any of the brothers—when she was greeted with a, “Where have you been? Mr. Princeton was looking all over for you.”

Sakura jumped, her heart nearly dropping to her shoes. "Beth! Why do you have to shout?"

The housekeeper cocked her head to one side. "Oh! I wasn't aware I was shouting," the woman said, giving her a smile. "Those two maids became useless the moment they arrived," she muttered to herself.

Sakura knew very well what she meant. Any female, aside from her, would become useless the moment she set her eyes on the brothers.

"I was out for a bit, taking photos. I thought I told everyone," Sakura 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.

Sakura, too, was deadly thirsty. She opened the fridge door and poured herself a good cup of apple juice. Once she'd finished, she sighed and said, "Ah, that was good."

Beth opened the oven door and pulled out the tray of chocolate biscuits that had just been baked.

"Woo. Nice," Sakura said, bending over to snaffle one. She popped the hot piece into her mouth and sighed with pleasure. "You're the best. I'm starved."

"Who told you to go out for so long? You didn't have lunch either," Beth grumbled. "Go and eat properly in the drawing room like everyone else. Jesus! No wonder you're so thin."

Sakura chuckled. "That's okay. I'll eat here."

"Sakura, do go and eat with your brothers," Beth said with a no-nonsense tone.

Sakura's heart skipped a beat. The images of the seven men back on the road flashed before her eyes.

"Come along now," Beth said, grabbing for another tray of sandwiches. "Mr. Princeton wants you to meet them. Not that you haven't met them before. But you haven't seen them for a while now, haven't you. To be frank, I haven't either. But oh, you should see them now. Handsome men they are."

"I'll come right along in a wee bit, Beth. I just need to clean up," Sakura said. "After all, I can hardly present myself in this state."

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.

Beth shook her head. "You're still as wild as ever. What will they say when they see you in such a state? All right then, but don't be too long," the housekeeper said, walking out the door with a tray in her hand. "Oh, by the way, we'll be serving seven more now."

Sakura sighed. *Of course.*

Once the housekeeper was gone, Sakura 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 her heart's content, tossing a wee bit for Toby to enjoy. It was just a little after six o'clock when she heard them all raiding up the stairs onto the second floor.

Holy smokes! She'd just remembered that all the brothers' 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 they wouldn't open hers by accident. Surely, dear God, they remembered their own bedrooms and wouldn't randomly walk into hers, which of course was at the very far end of the house.

"That was the best afternoon tea I've had in a long time," she heard Logan say.

"You have afternoon tea?" Sebastian asked.

"Can't wait for dinner," Conrad said. "I heard there's roast pork."

"Need a shower," Darcy stated.

She sensed they were getting closer and closer to her room. Something wasn't right. 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.

"What was that?" Nicolas uttered.

"What?" Tristan asked.

"I thought I heard something," Nicolas replied.

"You're going senile, old man," Tristan said. "Hearing things."

Sakura 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. Sakura swallowed. And before all hell broke loose, she raced to the door and quickly locked it. An instant later, the doorknob wriggled as if someone were trying to open it.

"It's locked," Sebastian muttered.

"Of course it's locked," Nicolas said. "No one stays there."

"You got the wrong room, handsome boy," Tristan shouted. "Your room is next door."

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

"Oh God," she muttered under her breath. "Way too many surprises in one day."

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.

"Sakura, sweetheart, you're not coming down for dinner?" Brenda queried from the other side.

Sakura rushed to open the door and said, "Hi, Mom. Sorry, I have a really bad headache. Mind if I stay in bed?" she asked, feigning sickness.

"Then take some aspirin and rest. I'll tell Beth to bring something up for you. You know you should look after yourself more. You should just relax. You're on holiday, after all."

"I know," Sakura said. But then again, she needed to 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.

"I know how independent you are about money, and I know 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.

"Yes, I know," Sakura said.

"All right. Your brothers are here, by the way."

Sakura bit her lip. *I know. I've met them.*

"You'll have to wait until tomorrow to greet them," Brenda commented. "And Dale and Molly were hoping to see you tonight."

"I can come down and see them in town tomorrow," Sakura suggested happily.

"Yes, they'd love that. You get better," Brenda said and then gave her a peck on the cheek.

"Okay," Sakura murmured. Once Brenda left, she closed the 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, Sakura stared up at the ceiling, thinking.

"They're eating my roast pork," she murmured to herself. Then she glanced at Toby, who obediently sat there waiting for her to finish. She sat up and reached out to pat him on the head. "I hope they choke."

CHAPTER 6:

Princeton Brothers & the Wood Nymph

THE BROTHERS LOVED IT. THEY absolutely loved the roast pork—and of course none of them choked. Tristan, Logan, and Hayden couldn't help chomping down the delicious, soft morsel and then grabbed for more.

"There's still dessert," Mary said from across the table, smiling.

"You'll have to visit home more often to get a proper feed, boys," Molly, their grandmother, said.

Hayden nodded his head, his mouth full.

"Or we could just take Beth with us." Darcy suggested.

James and Brenda glanced at each other, and Dale, the brothers' grandfather, laughed.

Beth cleared her throat and said, "Unfortunately, Master Darcy, I still wouldn't be able to cook you such nice roast because I wasn't 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 was only via specific instructions."

"New chef, then?" Conrad put in. "Finally, we have decent food to eat. Not that yours isn't that good, Beth. Your baking is the best in the world. I especially love your chocolate brownies."

"Understandable, Master Conrad," Beth replied, hiding a smile.

"That roast pork was meant for Dale and Molly," Brenda said.

"Prepared by one of my favorite girls," Molly added.

"Who unfortunately couldn't join us," James muttered, frowning.

"Is she unwell?" Dale asked.

"Headache," Brenda said. "She'll be fine."

James's frown darkened. "Standard coffee again, I suppose, Beth?" he asked the housekeeper.

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Princeton," Beth replied.

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 weren't for them, he would be having his delicious coffee after dinner. He knew exactly why his adopted daughter Sakura refused to come down. It was because of his sons. He knew she'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 Sakura had come out of her shell one rainy night after she'd screamed 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.

"Do you really love me?" she had asked him, tears in her eyes.

Gently, he had drawn her into his arms and hugged her tight. "Of course I do," he said. "With all my heart."

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 wee heart out. "Then you must only love me in secret," she said. "Please love them more. My new brothers and sisters, I mean. I do not want to see them get hurt because of me. I love you. You won't kick me out, will you? Please, I didn't burn the orphanage down. I really didn't. I didn't kill Mrs. Byrd. I really didn't."

"I know. I know," he'd said, rocking her in his arms. "I won't let you go. You're my daughter now."

"Thank you," she sobbed.

It had been much later when he found out the meaning of Sakura's words. His own children, Tara included, had been treating Sakura unfairly. The little girl believed that if he and Brenda didn't show any sign of love toward her, then her new brothers and sisters wouldn't hurt her. Of course, James would never tolerate such malicious behavior from his children and had taken the bull by the horns by setting them straight and telling them he wouldn't take such nonsense from them and was indeed very disappointed. They were the Princetons, 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, he'd decided the lesson was very effective indeed. Perhaps it had been too effective because the boys began to ignore Sakura completely, to the point that she no longer existed in their lives.

James put down his knife and fork, knowing very well he'd have to talk with Sakura later tonight. After all, she couldn't very well hide away in her room for the next few weeks when everyone was here preparing for Mary's wedding.

He turned his attention to his sons, eyeing them from one to another. They were all enjoying their meal to the max, and of course, he wasn't at all surprised they didn't pay any attention as 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.

"It's not half-bad," Hayden said, taking a sip.

"I too was looking forward to the coffee," Dale commented, 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

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.

"I forgot how quiet and peaceful it is here," Darcy 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. "Beautiful scenery. I can't believe it's in our backyard."

"Dad must have hired a new gardener," Logan said. "As well as a new chef."

"That was the best meal ever!" Conrad shouted out into the night, stretching his arms out as if he were on top of the world.

"You always eat too much," Tristan commented, gazing off at the night stars above.

"Speak for yourself," Logan chuckled.

"Speaking of which..." Nicolas said suddenly. "Alaina and Tara haven't arrived yet." There was a note of concern in his voice that the brothers couldn't miss.

"Probably enjoying their time in town," Logan said. "Not that there's much in town here."

"Should probably shoot them a text or something," Sebastian suggested.

"Yeah," Nicolas said and pulled out his BlackBerry.

Logan came up and hooked his arm around Tristan's neck. "So what happened to your girlfriend?"

Tristan frowned at his brother and naturally told him to bugger off.

"Come on," Logan egged his brother on. "I'm your brother and best friend."

Tristan couldn't deny that Logan was his brother as well as his best friend and therefore felt it only right he tell him what had happened. "We broke up."

"Is that why you chose to crash at my apartment and drink yourself stupid? To celebrate your single life again?" Sebastian asked none too gently.

Tristan managed to look rather sorry for what he'd done. "Yeah. Really sorry about those paintings, bro."

Sebastian just shook his head since he didn't have anything else to say.

"She was hot," Logan said.

"She was too clingy," Tristan muttered.

"So... about that girl today," Conrad suddenly blurted out.

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 God's sake. Especially for Sebastian and Darcy since they'd been the ones who had the most interaction with her.

"What nationality do you think she is?" Logan asked randomly.

"Caucasian-Asian," Nicolas said. "She's half Caucasian, half Asian."

"Very cute," Logan murmured, staring off at the sparkling water.

"Hey, did you hear that?" Sebastian asked.

"What?" Nicolas queried.

"Listen."

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 dog ran up to the men's feet and stopped. He dropped something onto the ground, stood on his hind legs, and stuck his tongue out at Logan.

Logan crouched down and stroked the dog's head. "Isn't that..."

He didn't have to finish the sentence because they all knew 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. "What are you doing here at this time of the night?"

"If he's here..." Conrad said.

"Then his owner..." Tristan continued the sentence. On cue, the musical voice they expected to hear came.

"Toby? Toby? Where are you? Come out now. You're grounded, mister!"

They waited expectedly for the owner of the dog to appear, but they didn't expect her to appear like that.

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 tresses down and wet and her feet bare, she looked like some sort of wood nymph that they happened upon in the night.

The brothers couldn't stop staring at her.

Sakura didn't expect her dog to be surrounded by seven men in 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 rush back. But because she was confused, shocked, nervous, and totally out of her wits, she stumbled and fell flat on her face.

The brothers—except for Darcy—acted 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. Sakura, however, was too shocked to reply. Logan helped her legs out of the vines, finally allowing Sebastian to lift her up.

Sakura 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.

"I'm fine, Toby. I'm fine," she said. Then she glanced up at Sebastian, who looked rather concerned about her well-being. She turned to Nicolas.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"How did you get here?" Logan queried.

Darcy stood rigid, watching the scene before him, his heart thumping too hard for his liking. He bloody well didn't like the

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.

Sakura 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 said, "Thanks for finding my dog," and ran back the way she came.

They watched her go, unable to hide their disappointment.

"We didn't ask for her name," Conrad said.

"How did she get here wearing that?" Hayden asked no one in particular.

"She lives in the cottage just down the road, remember?" Nicolas reasoned. "Otherwise, she wouldn't be wearing..." He left the sentence unfinished because, to be honest, he couldn't come 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.

"I think this belongs to her," he said to his brothers.

"We'll have to give it back," Sebastian suggested.

"Yeah." Conrad nodded, smiling broadly.

CHAPTER 7:

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, he could see long, black hair dancing in the wind, the strands brushing gently on his face. He could feel warm, small hands within his grasp, tightening as if the owner of that lovely hand was afraid he'd disappear.

He was in a dream, Darcy realized, and he was lying down on the ground, his long, lean body across and his head resting on someone's 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, for he couldn't see her face. The harder he looked, the darker 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?

"Snow? Why do cherry blossoms fall?" The 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.

"They are the tears of spring, Darce, the tears of spring," she replied 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 he sensed it, her face slowly descending toward him. A second later, he felt her warm breath fanning over 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. There wasn't any cherry tree around nor was there a girl near him. For a moment he panicked. *I've 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 darkened.

Snow! 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

beautiful creature all right—with blackest hair, palest skin, and reddest lips. *She was Snow White.*

Darcy didn't understand the connection between the dream he'd just had and this artwork he'd 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 total 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 into 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, he had to endure Tara's presence. After the wedding, he'd be out of here and back to his 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.

* * * * *

THE TWO PEOPLE SAKURA DIDN'T want to see most, Tara and Alaina, finally arrived at half past four the next morning, waking Sakura from her very 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 they were.

Her stomach flipped and she sighed. She couldn't believe she 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. Or was it Darcy? Conrad?

That is totally stupid, she told herself firmly. It didn't matter, 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. Sakura 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, Sakura found herself lying there in her double bed, staring up at the chandelier, her stomach flipping and her heart racing uncomfortably. Soon, she'd have to actually 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, her backside! Brothers who didn't remember her. Brothers who didn't recognize her when they were *that* close to her?

Her stomach flipped again at the thought of what happened yesterday afternoon. She couldn't believe she had to meet them 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.

She sat up, and Toby jumped onto her lap. "What will happen today, Toby? What am I going to do?"

The dog barked at her excitedly. Then the door flung open, and Mary marched right in.

"Heard you weren't well," she said, almost in a sheer panic. "I didn't want to bother you last night, but it's morning now so I thought it should be fine. Oh shit! You're going to be all right for Laura's birthday party, right? Mark will be there so you have to come. You have to look pretty."

"Mary," Sakura said, "just because he's your brother's friend and he had a crush on you years ago and now you're getting married to another man, you don't have to feel that you need to match him with me."

"No. No, he really likes you," Mary said adamantly. "He really does. Now get up and shower because I'm going to make you look pretty."

"I'll be fine. You should make yourself look pretty since you're going to be the center of attention soon."

"Jesus, woman, it's not my wedding yet. It's Laura's birthday party, Mr. Mayor's daughter, who's turning the ripe old age of eighteen. Besides, you don't want to embarrass the Princeton family. A lot of important people are coming."

"Oh crap! Important people, eh?" Sakura asked cheekily.

"Of course," Mary said. "Now shower!"

"All right. All right." Sakura chuckled. "I'm going to shower. Be back in a minute."

"Don't worry. Take your time," Mary said.

Ten minutes later, Sakura was back and Mary began blow-drying her long hair and then curled it.

"You know it's only a lunch thing," Sakura said. "And besides, we don't want to look prettier than the birthday girl, do we?"

"Of course not," Mary replied. "Just want you to look good for Mark." Then she silently added with a smile on her face, Good enough *to eat*.

Sakura chuckled. "It's a good thing I'm going." Of course she didn't hear the *last* bit.

"Right you are," Mary said, tossing back Sakura's long curls.

What Sakura really meant was that she didn't have to see the brothers again today after all, since the birthday party would probably last until late evening, and then after that, she'd make some excuses to go and stay in town for a few nights with Katherine. Her friend's husband, after all, was away to New York on his business trip and wouldn't be back until Friday, so it wouldn't be that inconvenient. And little Michael would just love to have her around.

Hmm? What kind of excuse, though? The café is short-handed and they need her help? Yes, that sounded rather good. That meant she'd have to give Katherine, her co-owner of the café, a call and tell her to play along.

Fifteen minutes later, she was done. Sakura looked at herself in the mirror one last time before heading out.

"You look amazing," Mary said. "Mark is so going to like you in that."

Sakura 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.

Mary cocked her head to one side as she studied Sakura's chest. "I can't believe I haven't noticed you have the most amazing 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."

Sakura chuckled. She wasn't really aware that her breasts were ever perfect. Her mind had always been too occupied with other interesting things.

"All right. Time to go down," Mary said, heading out the door, pulling Sakura along by the hand.

They both came into the kitchen, and Brenda greeted them with an, "Oh my! You girls look great."

"Morning," Sakura said, giving Brenda a peck on the cheek.

"Good morning, my sweet girls," Brenda said, hugging Sakura tightly. Then she moved over to hug Mary. "Don't you think she looks pretty?"

Mary nodded. "Mark," she whispered.

Brenda smiled and nodded. "Oh. Of course."

"What are you two on about?" Sakura couldn't help but ask after she'd noted they looked as though they were conspiring about something.

"Nothing," Brenda said.

"Ah, Sakura, Mr. Princeton is looking for you," Beth said. "Have you had your breakfast yet?"

"Nope. Thought I'd eat here first before heading out," she said and poured herself a cup of tea.

"I'm going to phone Peter," Mary announced.

Sakura 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.*

"I'm hoping to see at least one of my grandchildren getting married soon, you know," Molly said as she came into the kitchen. Sakura nearly choked on her pastry.

"Molly," Sakura said. "Good morning. When did you get here?"

"We stayed the night, naturally," Molly replied. "Since Dale really wanted that coffee." She was teasing of course. They had finished very late last night, James and Dale, talking about investments. Hence the elderly couple decided to stay the night rather than drive back into town. She came to hug Sakura and looked at her properly. "My, you do look fine this morning. Are you sure you were unwell last night?"

Sakura laughed uncomfortably. "Dale wants coffee, does he?" she asked. "I'll make him one."

"Make that two," Molly replied. "One for me."

"Okay," Sakura said, heading toward the other side of the kitchen where her fancy coffee machine was already warmed up for the day.

"Make that four," Brenda said. "One for me and one for James."

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

Molly couldn't help but quickly take a sip of hers, and she sighed in pleasure.

"So...", Sakura began. "Tell me which of your grandchildren should get married first."

"Someone standing right next to me," Molly said.

Sakura pulled a face. "Not likely," she muttered under her breath.

"A little bird told me you and Mark are going somewhere."

"Mark and I are going nowhere. If we are going somewhere, I will of course inform both you and Brenda first. How about that?"

"Hurray for that," Molly said. "At least that means you're a step ahead of my other grandchildren."

Molly and Brenda took their cups and headed out of the kitchen. Sakura couldn't believe they couldn't get enough of 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.

Sakura continued to enjoy her light breakfast as she contemplated what Molly meant when she said Sakura was a step ahead. *A step ahead in what?*

It wasn't long before Beth stormed into the kitchen again, shooing her out and telling her to get Toby away from the pond before he had the chance to drown himself. Sakura quickly put down her cup of tea and rushed out the door.

CHAPTER 8:

Awakening of the Past

SEBASTIAN HADN'T HAD SUCH WONDERFUL sleep for a while. There hadn't been any noise like in New York at all, just what he'd always wanted. Quiet. Peaceful. And 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 was pretty sure it wasn't Alaina or Tara. The maids perhaps?

Now fully awake and refreshed after his shower, he sighed in content. It couldn't get any better than this, sitting here with his brothers in the morning sun in their pretty courtyard with cherry and magnolia trees in full bloom surrounding them.

Woof! Woof!

"Holy smokes!" Conrad said, perching up in his chair. "Is that?"

"Toby," Darcy supplied, more interested than he wanted 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 jumping around the man's leg with delight. Tristan picked him up and let him sit on his lap as he fed the dog his bacon.

"Man, Toby really likes to hang around here, doesn't he?" Conrad said.

"That's because his owner lives nearby," Hayden put in.

"We should return Toby and the memory stick to her after breakfast," Nicolas suggested.

"I concur," Tristan added, feeding Toby yet another piece of his bacon.

Logan, who was sitting beside Tristan, stroked Toby's head. 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 floor because Darcy's fingers and thumb seemed to have lost their gripping function.

She was in *their* house, and Darcy couldn't believe his eyes. He felt another hard thump in his chest.

"She's in our house," he whispered in amazement.

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.

When they thought it wouldn't get any weirder, James pulled 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 opened French door and right into the courtyard.

Sakura nearly fell off her three-inch Jimmy Choo pumps when she came face-to-face with the seven brothers again. *This isn't happening*, she thought to herself. She couldn't believe it. *Just couldn't!* She thought she'd get away with it. She thought they would still be in bed until midday, and she therefore wouldn't have to face them. *At least not this soon.*

Well, at least she was decently dressed this morning and in a better position.

"Toby," she said.

"Woof!" the dog replied.

"You found him." James suddenly appeared behind her, one hand holding his coffee cup and one arm wrapped around her shoulder, which of course caused the brothers to stare at him in confusion.

"Shouldn't you be thanking your *brothers* for that?" James asked Sakura, a cheeky smile on his face.

The brothers blinked, and then Darcy said, none too quietly, "*What?*"

"*Brothers?*" Sebastian shouted.

"*We're her brothers?*" Hayden asked in disbelief, pointing a finger at Sakura. 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 eyes sharp as he said, "Don't tell me you forgot Sakura? Shocking. Most shocking. Your own adopted sister."

A long silence followed. Sakura knew James was doing this on purpose. She knew he knew the brothers didn't remember her. She knew he knew she didn't want to meet them again. She knew he took pleasure in shocking his seven sons by introducing her to them with such weird timing.

She gritted her teeth and said, "Toby! Come here. You're in trouble, young man."

Toby jumped out of Tristan's arms, trotted to her, and rubbed 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.

"I'm going back in," Sakura said, turning around.

"No, you're not." James held her by the shoulder, rather a bit too firmly for her liking, to prevent her from escaping. "Have breakfast with your *brothers*." He emphasized the word *brothers* again.

"I've had mine, thanks," Sakura replied, desperate to get out.

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 one wasn't enough, and a certain person refused to offer him another, as too much was bad for his health.

Sakura heard him and said loudly, "Too much caffeine isn't good for you, Daddy James."

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.*

Sakura 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. Sakura got very annoyed when Toby rubbed his head against the handsome man's palm and then even moved from her lap onto Logan's to sit. Not a moment later, the dog began to enjoy some of Logan's delicious bacon.

"Toby, behave yourself. No more bacon, all right?" She lectured. "Your cholesterol isn't too good at the moment."

Toby ignored her, and just when she thought she couldn't handle the brothers staring at her in silence any longer and was ready to leave this weird situation in the past, Sebastian said, "So you're Sally?"

Sakura gritted her teeth and her cheeks turned a becoming pink. "My name is Sakura. Pronounced Sa-ku-ra. It's a Japanese name meaning cherry blossom."

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, after all. Yes, Sakura wasn't a "Silly Sally." Sakura was *Sakura*. *Full stop!*

"Sally means princess," Sebastian said, his eyes on her.

"And you were the one giving the nickname to me," Sakura replied sarcastically. "I believe it also sounds rather like silly. Sally is silly. Sakura is silly."

The brothers shuffled uncomfortably in their seats as though all of a sudden memories came flooding back.

Sebastian couldn't believe this beautiful girl was Sakura, 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 been too many incidents in the past involving her that he hadn't 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 he'd 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.

"So...", He began. "Where are we up to?"

The brothers didn't know how to respond because none of 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, Sakura, 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 Sakura he used to care about, used to like—*used to love even*. But that particular incident thirteen years ago had changed everything.

"Sakura," James said loudly, breaking the silence, "Mark phoned last night, asking for you."

Sakura looked up. The brothers turned their attention to their dad then. James could tell curiosity was eating at them, and he grinned rather pleasantly.

"But since you weren't feeling well, he left you a message."

"What is it?" Sakura asked.

"He was asking if you'd be free this afternoon."

"I'm free," Sakura said quickly. Anything to get out of staying at home with these men.

"Good. I told him you're free. He needs help at the lab, running tests."

"His research, I suppose," Sakura murmured under her breath. "He'll be at Lauren's birthday party anyway, so I'll go to the lab with him after."

"Of course," James said, smiling. "So Sebastian." He turned to his son who was watching Sakura way too intensely, which of course warmed James's blood. "Would you like to be a volunteer?"

Sebastian turned to his father and blinked. "What?" Obviously, he wasn't paying attention.

"Mark needs healthy volunteers for his research," James said. "Unfortunately, I'm too old."

Sakura knew where James was going and quickly put in, "I'm sure he already has enough volunteers."

"I'd be happy to volunteer," Nicolas said. "What do I have to do?"

"Not much." James chuckled. "Just sit and let Sakura take your blood."

Sakura frowned at James. Her adopted father laughed at her sour expression.

"I'll volunteer," Logan said quickly.

"Me too," Conrad said. "So, erm, Sakura, does it hurt? Taking blood, I mean."

The brothers were quite shocked that Conrad had managed to say their adopted sister's name without a hint of a quiver in his voice, as if it were absolutely natural for him. But then again,

Conrad had been rather young when Sakura had been adopted, and so his interactions with her hadn't been much of anything before she'd left for boarding school. Hence he didn't feel awkward calling her by her actual name.

"Maybe a little," she said, smiling at 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 the rest of his brothers because they couldn't stop staring at her once again.

James, on the other hand, suddenly realized that not only did all his sons like Sakura, but they were smitten with her. In a million years he never imagined that could be possible. Now he wondered if he'd be having more trouble keeping them away from Sakura.

"Oh my, my!" Mary uttered the moment she was outside. "Look at you guys, taking my precious Sakura away." She came to stand behind her friend, and after greeting her seven cousins good morning, she pulled Sakura up and tsked seriously that they were going to be late if they didn't hurry.

"What's the hurry?" Logan asked.

"Lauren's birthday party," Mary said. "Sakura and I were asked to help. It starts at ten. Oh, why don't you guys come along? I'm sure you remember Lauren? She's turning eighteen today."

"Yeah," Conrad said. "I remember Lauren."

Lauren Simpson, Mr. Mayor's one and only darling, 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.

"Good," Mary said. "See you guys there." She then dragged Sakura, who was only too glad to be taken away, into the house to get their bags.

The brothers watched Sakura go—each had his very own odd expression on his handsome face.

CHAPTER 9:

Birthday Party & Champagne

“YOU KNOW...,” MARY BEGAN, HER eyes on the peaceful scenery of lush, green rolling hills in the distance. “You never talk about them much.”

Sakura stared at the long, straight road ahead as they made good speed along the motorway toward Mr. Mayor’s house in town. “What do you mean?”

“The brothers,” Mary said, adjusting herself on the seat. “You didn’t talk about them much back in high school. What was that all about?”

Sakura shrugged her shoulders. “Was there any need?”

“Was there any need?” Mary asked in disbelief. “You didn’t even tell me you were Uncle James’s adopted daughter until I actually found out myself. And that was because Uncle James himself came for the parents’ interview regarding you, and I thought he came to visit me. That was really embarrassing.”

Sakura laughed. “Well, yes, I suppose I should have told you, but at the time I thought it didn’t really matter.”

Mary shook her head. “If you were to announce to everyone that you were Uncle James’s adopted daughter, those bitches wouldn’t have bullied you.”

Sakura 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.

"They'd still bully me anyway," Sakura said, her mind flashing 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.

"I suppose," Mary said, frowning darkly. "Does it feel awkward?"

"You mean having the brothers around? Totally," Sakura replied without hesitation. "I haven't seen them for years and now—"

"Totally understandable."

Sakura sighed, and Mary began another unwelcoming subject. It was Mark Chatsworth.

"Seriously, Mary," Sakura chuckled. "If he really liked me, he would've asked me out by now."

"Mark is a bit shy," Mary said. "You'd have to make the first move."

"Me? No way!" Sakura said. "You know me. I can't do that stuff. And besides, why should I? It'll be a total waste of time if he's not interested in me. And I told you before. I have other plans. I'm not interested in a relationship right now."

"Come on," Mary said. "You're twenty-three. If you don't start now, you'll miss the boat. In fact, I'm already thinking you're missing out on a lot of things right now."

"Such as?" Sakura prompted.

"Sex," Mary said without hesitation.

Sakura chuckled. "Sex? And I'm missing out how?"

"You're still a bloody virgin," Mary said. "I mean, I'm not judging you or anything. You know me. You're my best friend, and I totally respect you for that. But come on... Sex is like the best thing ever."

Sakura cocked her head to one side. "I'm sure it's very pleasant and all, especially when you do it with someone you love."

Mary nodded. "Totally. Just so you know, I've only ever done it with Peter."

"And I'm glad to hear that," Sakura said.

"So what?" Mary asked curiously. "Are you waiting for your Prince Charming or something?"

Sakura chuckled. "I'll know when I'm ready for it."

"For what?"

"For both. The relationship and the sex," she replied. "And now can we talk about something else?"

Mary chuckled. "Okay. Okay. Your real mom. It's about her, right?"

Sakura nodded. "It's what I want. You know how much I want to find her. How much I want to meet her."

"I understand," Mary said. "And I promise not to push things along with you and Mark. But I know for sure that he really likes you."

Sakura laughed. Mary was Mary. She could never stay out of other people's business, especially Sakura's.

Once the girls arrived at the Simpson mansion in South Hampton some twenty minutes later, they got busy helping out setting the scene—Sakura with the food and drinks and Mary with the decorations. By twelve o'clock, most of the guests had arrived, and Sakura 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.

"I can't believe they came," she muttered under her breath, watching a flock of girls rush up to them and surround them, begging for their undivided attention.

"Sakura darling?" Mrs. Simpson called out.

Sakura turned to see Mr. Mayor's perfect 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 expected 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.

"Why don't you be a dear and give those handsome young men some drinks?" She nodded toward the Princeton brothers near the entrance now almost engulfed by young females.

"Of course," Sakura replied and silently added, *Not that I'm one 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.

"Since you're so good with drinks and all, you know, considering the fact that you used to be a waitress and of course now own a café." Mrs. Simpson chuckled. "And the waitresses are all busy with the food."

"Of course, Mrs. Simpson," Sakura managed to reply with a straight face. She wanted to tell the woman that if she were to spend a bit more money and hire more waitresses, then they wouldn't be having this problem, and Sakura herself wouldn't have to deal with the brothers.

"All right," she said. "Why don't you go and enjoy yourself with your daughter? I'll deal with the drinks."

"Oh, thank you, darling. You're a godsend," Mrs. Simpson said and then sailed off to greet James and Brenda.

Sakura poured champagne 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 freaking waitress again, and of course the brothers didn't seem to have noticed 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, didn't have any luck at getting herself noticed by the brothers either.

"Sakura," Lauren said excitedly, her eyes bright and shiny. "I can't believe they're here. I heard they're coming to Mary's

wedding, but for them to come *here*, my birthday? I can't believe this. Oh, they're so handsome. Please, Sakura, introduce me to them. Please. I remember Conrad. He's a couple of years older than me. We were in the same elementary school."

Sakura sighed. This was getting even more complicated than she thought. She just wanted to run out of there. Only she couldn't because she was wearing these blasted high heels she found rather difficult to walk in. Then there was also the fact that she still had to offer these glasses of champagne to the brothers, which she'd already promised Mrs. Simpson she'd do. That was when a sudden thought struck her. Of course, if Lauren wanted to get introduced to the brothers, then she should.

"Lauren?" She smiled prettily at the younger girl. "Why don't *you* give these drinks to them and introduce yourself?"

"What? Really?" Lauren asked, doubt in her voice.

"Really. You are, after all, the birthday girl, and it's only natural you welcome your guests," Sakura lectured, shoving the silver tray to Lauren. "Here."

"Oh, but I can't!" Lauren shrieked, pushing the tray back and shaking her head at the same time. "I don't know how to hold this thing." She pointed to the tray. "I might drop it, and it'd be embarrassing."

"You won't drop it," Sakura said firmly. "Here, spread your palm."

"No. No. No." Lauren shook her head.

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Look! You'll be all right. I promise," Sakura urged, practically pushing the tray to Lauren now.

"Are you sure?" Lauren asked uncertainly.

"Very sure," Sakura confirmed and handed Lauren the tray.

With hands that shook, Lauren held tight to the tray, praying she wouldn't send it crashing to the floor—or on anyone, for that matter.

"See? You're doing fine," Sakura said. "Now go and offer the drinks to the Princeton brothers."

"Okay," Lauren said, nervousness echoing in her voice. Then just as she was about to turn, she nearly fainted when she saw

Nicolas, Sebastian, and Darcy behind Sakura, 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.

"Are those for us?" Conrad asked from behind her, his warm breath fanning against the skin of her neck.

Lauren jumped, sending the tray flying in midair and the champagne splashing on Sakura, 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.

Sakura sighed, and Lauren froze in shock.

"Oh my God! I'm so sorry, Sakura," she said. "So sorry."

Sakura managed to smile, though inside she was rather pissed. She didn't blame Lauren for that, though. It was Conrad's fault for surprising the girl, which had caused her to jump and send the tray crashing.

"It's all right, Lauren," she said.

"No, it's not. You're totally wet. Your dress is ruined," Lauren muttered. "I'm really sorry."

"It's fine. I'll go home and change."

"Sorry." Conrad butted in. "That was my fault." He turned to Lauren and gave her an apologetic smile. "I'm really sorry, Lauren. I didn't mean to surprise you like that."

Lauren blushed as she gazed up at him, speechless.

"Damn right, it's your fault," Logan said. "You've ruined her dress."

Conrad cocked his head to one side and moved over to Sakura. "Sorry about that, Sakura," he said. "And since I'm responsible, why don't I take you home to change?"

"You'll do no such thing," Tristan said. "It's my responsibility to take her home."

"Your responsibility?" Conrad asked, outraged. "What have you done? I'm responsible!" He turned to Sakura. "Come, Sakura." He wrapped his hand around her arm and was ready to lead her out when Logan pulled Sakura to his side.

"Mind what you're touching, young pup," he said coolly.

Sakura couldn't believe what the brothers were doing. What was going on here? Why were they all of a sudden treating her like this? She was totally confused.

"Why are you guys making such a big fuss about this?" Sebastian asked his brothers.

"Because she's wet," Logan said.

"Because she looks uncomfortable," Conrad put in.

"And smells of champagne," Tristan added, moving his nose closer to Sakura and inhaling. "Hmm, delicious." He grinned cheekily.

Sakura scowled at him and moved back. "I can take care of myself, thank you very much. I have a car, and I can drive perfectly well."

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

"Sebastian, give us the key," Logan said. "I'll take her home."

Tristan was having none of it. He caught Sakura by the wrist and led her to the door. "Come on, darling sis. Let's get that wet thing off you."

Darcy said abruptly, "Just stop the fuss already. She can just change here."

Tristan stopped just as he was about to step his foot out the door. Sakura pulled back and said, "I said I can look after myself."

Logan nodded his head at Darcy's perfect suggestion. "That's not a bad idea."

"I'm sure Lauren has something she can borrow." Nicolas added with a smile.

Sakura was getting very annoyed. She freed her hand from Tristan's grasp and moved so 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 Sakura 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

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 here?* All she wanted to do was to get away and change, for Christ's sake.

"Um," Lauren said from somewhere behind Conrad, "I do have lots of dresses."

The brothers turned to look at her, which caused Lauren to blush considerably for gaining their undivided attention.

"Why doesn't Sakura change here? Surely at least one of my dresses will fit her."

Sakura wasn't pleased they weren't consulting her regarding what she wanted to do with her wet dress. This pissed her off even more when Sebastian said, "It's sorted, then."

She wanted to box his ear when he turned to her and ordered her to, "Go change."

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 and said, "You're wet and—"

Sakura frowned. When 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's face was expressionless. Nicolas shoved his glasses up the bridge of his nose. Conrad blushed. And Hayden tried to keep his face as straight as he could.

"Come on, Lauren," she said tightly, heading toward the grand stairs, her head held high.

"Err, okay," Lauren replied, hiding a smile as well. "We'll be back in a minute," she said to the brothers.

The brothers' eyes followed them as they climbed the stairs.

Logan whistled. "Nice package."

"Nice legs," Tristan said.

These remarks were of course rewarded with a dark scowl from Sebastian and a hard shove from Conrad to Tristan.

Nicolas said sternly, "She's your adopted sister."

This quieted Logan and Tristan. Conrad sighed.

Sakura, 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. She just couldn't believe they'd seen her breasts—well, the shape of them anyway.

Once they were on the first floor and in Lauren's very pink and very large bedroom, Sakura sank on the cozy king-size bed and groaned.

"Which one do you want?" Lauren asked.

Sakura sat up and watched Lauren, who was standing in front of her gigantic walk-in wardrobe filled 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.

"Holy smokes!" Sakura said, her eyes almost blinded by the color pink.

"I know." Lauren chuckled. "I love clothes."

"I can totally see," Sakura uttered in amazement, blinking a couple of times.

"Let's find one that fits you," Lauren suggested.

Twenty minutes later, Sakura stood in front of the full-length mirror, staring at herself for the second time that day. She couldn't believe she was wearing this. It was a cute dress—for a *sixteen-year-old girl*—and she was no sixteen-year-old girl.

"Sorry," Lauren said. "It's the only one that fits you."

Well, it wasn't so bad. It was a satin strapless dress, 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 Sakura really opposed was that the dress was designed in such a way as to push one's breasts up and—*voilà!*

"You look amazing, Sakura," Lauren said in awe. "I wish I looked like you. You look so pretty."

Yeah. Sakura had heard that many times before. Sometimes she liked it. Then other times she really hated it because of the way she got treated.

“Your boobs!” Lauren made a face that showed she was awed as well as envious. “And your shoes are a perfect match with the dress. Jimmy Choo, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Thanks,” Sakura said. “I’ll return the dress tomorrow.”

“Oh no, that’s okay. If it’s all right, I’ll come up to the house and get it myself,” she said eagerly.

That was when it dawned on Sakura. She realized Lauren wanted to see her adopted brothers again. *Or is it just one in particular?*

She chuckled. “All right. Then maybe you could stay for dinner or something,” she suggested.

“That’ll be great,” Lauren said eagerly.

“Come on. I think it’s time to blow out those eighteen candles of yours,” Sakura said, heading out the 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, “Not bad.” And Sebastian and Darcy didn’t look too pleased.

Sakura wasn’t pleased either that they had to be there, witnessing her awkwardly descending the stairs in her heels and short skirt.

“What do you think, Conrad?” Lauren asked. “Doesn’t she look great? I wore that dress on my sixteenth birthday. Do you remember? But it fits her perfectly.”

“Yes, it’s beautiful,” Conrad said, his eyes on Sakura.

“Do you really remember me wearing that on my sixteenth birthday back in New York?” Lauren asked him, her eyes bright.

Conrad blinked and then laughed uneasily, remembering no such thing.

“She looks like a sixteen-year-old girl,” Sebastian said, a hint of disapproval in his voice.

"Who wants to get laid," Darcy muttered under his breath.

"You look very nice, Sakura," Nicolas said.

The brothers didn't miss Nicolas saying Sakura's name for the first time either, as though he were really cherishing it.

Darcy turned on his heel and headed toward the drawing room to join everyone else. Sebastian turned and left as well.

Sakura was quite pissed with Sebastian's behavior thus far. Oh, she'd heard him all right when he said she looked like a sixteen-year-old girl. She wasn't an ignorant sixteen-year-old girl, for Pete's 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!*

"Come on," Lauren said to Conrad. "It's time." She grabbed his hand and led the way to the drawing room. Conrad laughed uncomfortably as he trailed behind her. Sakura, 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 his daughter's eighteenth birthday. Then when it was ready, the cake was brought in, and a chorus of "Happy Birthday" followed. Lauren happily blew out the candles that stood on top of the biggest and grandest cake Sakura had ever seen. So that was what Mrs. Simpson had splashed her money on—the *cake!*

"Sorry I'm late," a voice suddenly said behind Sakura while everyone was cheering loudly.

Sakura turned to see the boyishly handsome Mark Chatsworth smiling at her. "Hey," she said. "Where have you been?"

"Hey," he said back. "At the lab. You look great."

"Err, thanks," she replied. "Want some cake?"

"Sure."

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.

"Who's he?" Conrad asked.

"Mark Chatsworth," James said. "*Dr.* Mark Chatsworth."

"Are they dating or something?" Logan asked.

"Not that I know of," James said honestly.

This was of course followed by sighs of relief from Logan and Conrad.

"Come on. I'll introduce him," James announced and led his sons toward Mark and Sakura, knowing very well they were dying to know who this guy really was in relation to Sakura.

"I don't trust that guy," Conrad whispered to Sebastian.

"Why not? He's a doctor." Nicolas chuckled from behind.

"Oh, shut up," Conrad snapped.

James heard the conversation and hid a smile. "Sakura?" he said the moment he was beside her. "A new dress?"

Sakura turned and gave her adopted father a grand smile. "Accident," she said. "And your sons are to blame." She glared at the brothers, who looked as though they were ready to pick a fight with their defensive stances and serious faces.

"Really?" James asked and turned to his sons. "Which one of you is responsible?"

"Me," Conrad said without hesitation.

"In that case, I believe you owe Sakura. How about repaying her by volunteering for Dr. Chatsworth's research?"

"Oh. That's great," Mark said before Sakura could say no. "And they are?"

"My sons," James said. "Nicolas, I believe, is the same age as you."

Nicolas shook hands with Mark—*tightly*. He also made sure his hand was on the top, which pleased him and his brothers mightily.

"Logan." James nodded to Logan. "Tristan, Sebastian, and Conrad." Then he nodded toward his other sons. "Hayden and Darcy."

Mark shook hands with all of them, pleased. "Are you all volunteering for my research?"

When the brothers all nodded, Mark clasped his hands together and said, "Why don't we go to the lab now? I'm quite eager to—"

Sakura wasn't happy. *All of them?* Volunteering for the research? Good God!

"But, Mark, you haven't had lunch yet," she cut in.

None of the brothers had lunch yet either, and they were quite upset she didn't notice—especially Conrad.

"Besides," she added, "it's rude to leave a party without saying farewell to the hosts."

Mark chuckled. "All right. We'll eat first."

Sakura sighed and walked away to get some food. She'd do anything to delay going to the lab with the brothers. God! She had to take their blood, and the thought didn't sit well with her. She 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 she wasn't sure if she'd be able to do a proper job simply because it was the brothers.

It was an hour later when Sakura 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 them, Sebastian drove the silver Mercedes with Nicolas and Logan as passengers, and Tristan drove the black one with Darcy and Hayden as passengers.

Sakura 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 she'd 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 Sakura. She blushed profusely when they smiled at her, and her hands shook uncontrollably when she handed them each questionnaires a little while later.

"What's this for?" Logan asked.

“Err, your well-being questionnaires,” Sherry replied, blushing again. “It’s just the standard. Take your time. I’m here to help if you need any. When you’re done, Sakura will take your blood.”

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 Sakura 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.

He knocked on the door.

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.

“You’ve finished your questionnaires, then?” she asked.

He cleared his throat, which had gone dry all of a sudden. “Yeah.”

“Sit down.”

He didn’t move. More specifically, he didn’t hear her. He was too busy looking at her.

Sakura cocked her head to one side, wondering what was wrong with him. “Sebastian?” she asked.

Sebastian blinked. It was the first time she'd called him by his name, and it caused his blood to tingle deliciously.

"Huh?"

"Don't tell me you're afraid of needles," she said.

He was offended. "I'm not afraid of needles."

"Then why didn't you sit down like I told you to?"

"I was busy—" He stopped short. He couldn't possibly tell her he was too busy looking at her and that he couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Then why don't you sit down?" she suggested.

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

"Which arm?" she asked.

"Whichever," he replied, watching her.

Sakura bit her lip and told her heart to stop beating so fast. It was only Sebastian, for God's sake. He was her adopted brother. 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 wasn't 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.

"You have good veins," she said.

Sebastian could feel the warmth of her breath fanning over his skin, which sent pleasure rushing through his body.

"I won't have any problem at all," she continued—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.

Sakura felt quite nervous by the fact that he was always looking at her. She didn't know why, but she had the feeling he'd 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.

"This will hurt a bit," she said, leaning down toward him, and then she slowly inserted the sharp needle through his skin and into to his vein.

He didn't even flinch. In fact, it didn't look like he felt the needle going into his skin at all as he sat there watching her.

Sakura hoped he was only staring at her because he didn't want 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. Sebastian's blood easily rushed out from the needle and spurted into the tightly vacuumed tube.

As this was happening, Sebastian was staring at Sakura's thick, 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 covered 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—

I can't take this anymore, he thought and scowled darkly, his whole body fully alert with desire.

"Are we done yet?" he asked none too gently.

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

Sakura quickly glanced away, her stomach flipping and her heart pounding. “Nearly done,” she whispered, her throat dry.

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 the injured spot. “Hold this,” she told him.

Sebastian pressed his finger on the cotton bud while Sakura labeled the tubes with his name and date of birth.

He noticed and said, “You know my birthdate?”

She gave him a smile and said, “Bet you don’t know mine.” Then she added, “I don’t even know my *real* date of birth.”

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 Sakura.

“Okay. Leave,” she said. “I’m not begging you to stay.”

Just then, Conrad barged in and eagerly took the seat. “I’m ready,” he said, offering his arm for Sakura. Nicolas, Tristan, Hayden, Logan, and Darcy were behind him, waiting by the door. Nicolas didn’t miss Sebastian’s sudden bad mood as he walked out.

Sakura couldn’t help but laugh at Conrad’s eagerness, which of course pleased Conrad mightily. Nicolas, on the other hand, thought the youngest of the brothers was the first to break into Sakura’s heart and wondered if he’d be the first to steal it as well.

Sebastian and Logan weren’t pleased, however.

“It’s going to hurt just a little,” Sakura said, and before she could pick up the needle, she was being pulled around and found herself facing Sebastian’s wall of hard chest. She blinked, looked 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 he was doing. Sebastian didn’t give a hoot that it

was inappropriate for him to be doing this, however, and he pulled Sakura's lab coat 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. Nicolas 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.

Sakura wasn't pleased that Sebastian was suddenly acting as if 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.

"Hurry up," he said and strode out the door again.

"I'll take my time, thank you very much," she replied through gritted teeth and swore she'd make him sorry for humiliating her in front of his brothers.

And indeed, she did take her time as she slowly and meticulously bled the rest of the brothers. Conrad closed one eye and sneaked a peek with another as Sakura inserted the sharp needle into his skin. He jumped and gasped, which caused Sakura 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.

"Are we done already?" he asked, a look of displeasure written on his face, disappointed that the procedure ended all too soon.

"Did you want me to take another tube?" She teased.

"No, you're not," Logan said from behind. "I've been waiting for ages already. Now scoot!" He pulled Tristan by the arm and shoved his brother from the chair.

"Just hurry up, will you!" Sebastian called out. His voice was thoroughly impatient.

Sakura pulled a face as she prepared another set of equipment.

"She'll be taking her time," Logan replied. "Isn't that right, Sakura? Take your time, my sweet. I don't want you to rush such a delicate job."

Sakura chuckled. "Of course not."

"See?" Logan nodded to his brother to tell them he was right. "Our dear sister agrees."

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. Sakura was pleased indeed that when it was Hayden's and then Nicolas'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 wasn't so bad after all. Her joy, however, didn't last long when Nicolas finally got out of the chair and he said, "And lastly, our Darcy."

Sakura 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, Sakura. Just calm down*—she told herself. *It'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 wasn't right. *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 she couldn't help herself. She glanced up and her eyes 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.

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. That realization knocked the wind out of him, and he felt as though he couldn't breathe.

Breathe, Darcy, breathe! the voice in his head shouted at him.

Sakura quickly looked 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 important, even showing them how the analyzers worked, Sakura hid in the bathroom, freshened up, and tried her best to regain her composure before coming back out to face the brothers once again.

CHAPTER 10:

Confrontation

SAKURA 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 have to return home with them? Why couldn't Mark have dropped her off? Why had Mary taken her car away without telling her? *Why, oh why?*

She pulled Sebastian'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.

"Sakura," he began, "what interesting things have you been doing?"

Sakura wanted him to stop bothering her and thus gave him a good scowl.

"Stop frowning, my sweet Sakura," Logan said, which welcomed a quick suspicious glance from Sebastian through the rearview mirror. "You'll get wrinkles."

Her frown darkened. "I haven't been doing anything interesting, apart from the usual," she said. After all, why would 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.

"Give it a rest, Conrad," Nicolas said abruptly. "She's tired."

"Yes," Sebastian added. "It has been a long day."

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

Once they got back to Princeton Mansion twenty minutes later, Sakura quickly escaped from the car and rushed into the house. She was promptly greeted by the hyperactive Toby, who raced toward her with his wee, short legs.

Sakura laughed and bent down to pick him up. "You miss me?" she said.

Toby barked excitedly and licked her cheek.

"Huh!" a voice expressed from the drawing room. "Finally, somebody shut that stupid dog up."

Sakura froze and automatically hugged Toby against her chest protectively. "It's okay, Toby," she said to the dog and quickly headed across the corridor toward the stairs.

When she thought she would escape unscathed, Tara emerged from the drawing room.

Sakura wasn't surprised to see that Tara was still as beautiful as 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-formal as well.

“Hey, where have you guys been?” she asked, pouting her lips akin to that of a little girl being denied candy. “Should have invited me.”

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, they’d 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’s eyes lit up the moment she spotted Darcy, though he didn’t give her any indication he appreciated her presence. Sakura, on the other hand, chose that moment to leave quietly. If only Toby didn’t bark, however, then she would have been gone without anyone noticing her. But the dog did bark, and Tara finally turned her attention to Sakura.

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.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” she asked straight out, her voice tight. “I thought you were long gone. So what? You’re here to destroy *our* family again? Who invited you here?”

The brothers held their breath at the sarcastic statements fired at Sakura. The scene suddenly took them back to their childhood when Tara had unleashed her temper on little Sakura, who hadn’t been able to do anything except endure the bullying and then run 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

very well—which meant a serious action was about to be taking place. Darcy scowled and fisted his hands tightly by his sides. Hayden's, Tristan's, and Logan's faces became serious. Conrad, who'd never encountered this faceoff between Sakura and Tara before, was very shocked at Tara's despicable tone of voice toward Sakura.

"That's not very nice, Tara," Conrad said loudly.

Tara ignored him and continued glaring at Sakura.

Sakura cocked her head to one side and then gave Tara a lovely fake smile. With her voice soft and calm, she said, "I believe I live here. This is, after all, my home. And I am, after all, a Princeton."

This, of course, surprised the brothers beyond belief as they stared at her with something akin to shock. Little Sakura, after all, had never answered back. She'd just run away and cried.

Tara narrowed her eyes and shouted, "Like hell you live here! Princeton? Bullshit! You're not a Princeton. You don't even know your real last name. You're full of bullshit!"

In response to Tara's outrageous yell, Toby barked 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.

"Shut up, you stupid dog! Shut up!" she screamed. "You're giving me a headache."

"That's enough, Tara!" Nicolas's 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.

"This is no way to treat your sister," he said, his eyes narrowed dangerously.

"That was mean, Tara," Conrad said, his voice cold.

"Your behavior is uncalled for," Hayden said, folding his arms across his massive chest.

"I concur," Logan added.

"You're not pretty when you act like a bitch, Tara," Tristan stated matter-of-factly.

Sakura was completely shocked that the brothers were on her side in this unexpected confrontation. When they were young, they just pretended it never happened. *They've changed*, she thought. *They've grown*.

Toby started barking aggressively at Tara again. Sakura stroked his head, telling him to calm down. The dog obeyed her and stopped barking. She turned her attention to Tara and said, "I think binge drinking and sleeping late causes your headache, Tara, not my sweet Toby barking at you." She walked past Tara toward the stairs and then decided to add, "By the way, you really should lay off those cigarettes and alcohol because they really do give you wrinkles. Not good for a supermodel, don't you think?" With that, she headed up the stairs without a backward glance.

Toby took the opportunity to growl at Tara once again, telling her to piss off. Sakura couldn't help but smile at her little dog's aggressive behavior. Toby really did protect his master all right, as any good dog should.

The brothers were speechless. Sakura had grown—*both outside and in*—and now nothing could faze her. Conrad couldn't help but laugh.

"What the hell are you laughing about?" Tara asked him angrily.

"I think you should stay away from Toby, Tara," Conrad said. "He doesn't like you very much. You might get bitten." With that, he headed into the drawing room.

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 Sakura had disappeared from sight up the stairs and was saved from Tara's further onslaught of bullying.

"Did you see her? The way she behaved?" Tara asked the brothers.

Darcy ignored her outrageous question and headed past her up the stairs. He wasn't in the mood to interact with a bitch who was half-drunk and harassing her own adopted sister.

Nicolas frowned at her. "This is a family reunion, Tara. I don't expect such behavior from you, and I'm sure Dad expects the same. 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.*

"Don't do it again," he warned coldly, nudging his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

Tara didn't reply as she stood there, fuming.

Nicolas dismissed her by saying, "I need a shower," and headed 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.

Tara, however, didn't see it that way. She thought Sebastian was pissed with Sakura's behavior. She softened her face and asked, "How did you come back with her? I didn't even know she lives here. James and Brenda never told me."

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. She didn't care, 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 who had never really existed in her life, and she pretty much didn't care if he was dead or alive.

"We were at Lauren's birthday party," Sebastian said, walking past her, ignoring her. Then, before he disappeared down the corridor, he turned and added, "By the way, you should shower. You stink of alcohol."

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.

* * * * *

SAKURA 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 couldn't believe she'd just stood up to Tara. She just couldn't believe it. 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 heart. Toby barked to get her attention. She sat up and leaned to face him up close. "So," she said, "you don't like her much, do you?"

"*Woof,*" was Toby's reply.

"Hum, thought so," she said, nodding. Then she cocked her head to one side. "Tara!"

Toby barked aggressively and growled.

"Alaina!"

Again, Toby barked aggressively and growled.

Sakura had to laugh. "Good boy." And then to test the little dog even further, she said, "Nicolas!"

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

"Huh?" She cocked her head to the other side, confused. "Sebastian!"

Woof! Woof! Followed by tongue stuck out, and he licked her cheek.

"Conrad!"

Woof! Woof! Followed by a roll over and little legs wiggling in midair.

"Darcy."

Toby rolled over, sat up straight, and gave her the wettest lick on her cheek ever.

"Ew!" Sakura laughed and rubbed his tummy. "You're weird today." When she noted that the dog had enough tickling, she got up and said, "Right, I'm going to change out of this stupid dress. And you, mister..." She patted his head. "Stay out of trouble and stay away from Tara and Alaina. Understand?"

Toby gave her an understanding bark.

"Good," she said as she got off 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.

"All right," she said, unlocking the door and leaving it slightly ajar. "I'll leave the door open for you, but make sure you don't go and annoy Tara and Alaina, okay? You know they don't like you."

The dog barked again.

"All right," she said.

The dog ran over to his basket and made himself comfortable, afterward closing his eyes. Sakura headed into the bathroom, filled the tub with warm water, and poured in some lavender essential oil to help 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 dark and dinner was just around the corner. She didn't want to be 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 gone off to since he wasn't in his basket. She was pretty sure he hadn't gone far because she could hear him barking quite clearly 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

Toby's 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 he wasn't munching on books since she wasn't with him.

"Toby?" she called out softly as she opened 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 Conrad. The dog was lying on the floor, and Conrad was rubbing his tummy. They were having a good time, all right, and oddly enough, Sakura found that quite pleasing. Toby must really like Conrad very much to allow the brother to touch him. Normally, he wouldn't let just anyone touch him unless he knew he was safe with that person.

"Toby?" she called out again. The dog heard her immediately, his ears pricking up. He rolled himself up to his feet and barked her a happy greeting.

Sakura took another step forward, pleased to see he wasn't munching on books. Because she wasn't paying any attention to 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, she didn't land on the hard floor and turn herself into a young corpse. Instead, she landed on a large, long, lean body.

Puff!

Sakura was breathless and sprawling on top of a rather comfortable, warm, masculine being below her.

"Oh shit!" Conrad shouted, rushing over to her.

Nicolas got up and hastily looked at what damage his long legs had done.

"Get off her, Sebastian!" Conrad shouted.

Sakura 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*

fast. Oh, God! She could feel his warm, hard body beneath her. She wanted to die.

“Get off her,” Conrad shouted again, standing before them.

Sebastian, still a bit dazed that a soft female body suddenly landed on him, wondered how he could get himself off Sakura 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. He didn’t 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.

“Sakura,” Nicolas said. “I’m sorry my feet got in the way. Now, maybe you should get off Sebastian.”

Sakura blinked and then hastily pushed herself up, her cheeks red. However, she didn’t have time to remove herself completely from Sebastian when Toby jumped into her arms and started barking happily, as if inviting her to play with them.

Sakura sat there on Sebastian’s rock-hard belly, saddling him 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 woman’s place, and suddenly her insides 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 didn’t want to be turned on by his adopted sister—and in the presence of his brothers too.

His action, however, backfired. The movement caused Sakura’s little bottom to slide down his tummy and land right on his crotch.

“Shit!” Sebastian swore under his breath, almost breathless at the contact.

"Ah!" Conrad pulled at his hair as if he were going crazy at seeing them in such an uncalled-for position. "Toby! What the hell are you doing! Sebastian! Get off Sakura right now!"

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.

"Shut up, Conrad. You're giving me a headache with your shouting," he snapped lowly.

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, he was sure he wouldn't be able to control himself any longer, and his pride and joy would surely make its appearance.

Nicolas laughed. He couldn't help himself. Then to help, he scooped Sakura into his strong arms and gently lifted her up and away from Sebastian.

Once Sakura 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 pissed him off.

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to fall on you. It was an accident."

Sebastian watched her standing there above him, his heart pumping irrationally. He really wanted to pull her back down and perhaps even roll her over so she'd be beneath him. Then he'd kiss her hard on her luscious lips and take that cute T-shirt off her so he could witness her beautiful naked body. Then he'd kiss those 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.

"Oh, God!" Sakura whispered under her breath the moment she'd 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 was wrong with her? Why didn't she get up the moment she'd landed on top of Sebastian? And furthermore, she'd even sat

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.

“What’s the matter, sweet Sakura?”

Sakura 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, “No...nothing. I...I was just looking for Toby.”

Tristan cocked his head to one side, not believing her one tiny bit. “You’re blushing, Sakura. Why? Has one of my brothers harassed you?”

“I... I said it was nothing,” she muttered, her cheeks 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 responsible for his adopted sister’s weird reaction.

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.

Tristan opened the library’s door then and came to witness a most interesting scene. Conrad, who was standing, was shouting aggressively at Sebastian, who was lying down on the floor.

“I told you to get off her!” he muttered, his face red.

Sebastian wasn’t listening to his brother, though. He was dealing with his own wee problem. He had to dampen his hot, burning desire within him that had just been awakened by his adopted sister, who, he had no doubt, hadn’t a clue what she’d done.

"Shut up!" Sebastian said. "My head is aching." *No!* he thought. That was a complete lie. His head wasn't aching. His body was.

Nicolas was chuckling away enthusiastically, and when his eyes met Tristan's, he gave his brother a wink.

Oh, God! Tristan thought. It was Sebastian who was responsible. *That bastard!*

Tristan stalked in and demanded, "Did you harass Sakura?"

Sebastian took one look at his brother and moaned under his breath, "Not you, too."

Sakura, who was heading back up the stairs, gritted her teeth in annoyance. God! She just couldn't get away from them, could she? 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.

Sakura sighed. "Why are you playing with them, Toby?" she asked. "I told you before, they're not our friends. I'll let it go this time but not again, you hear?"

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

"You're a bit weird since they've arrived, you know. What's wrong with you?"

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 lately. It was the brothers' fault, of course, since it had started happening that first day they'd met on the road.

"Good," Conrad said from the distance. "Tristan will teach him a lesson. I told him to get off her, but he wouldn't."

Sakura froze in her spot. *Good God!* She didn't want to see them again so soon. She was still too embarrassed from the incident in the library and hadn't mentally prepared herself yet.

She heard Nicolas chuckling. "I'm more worried that Sebastian will bash Tristan's face in."

“Oh, yeah. Me, too,” Conrad muttered. “But he wouldn’t. They’re brothers after all.”

“Yes,” Nicolas replied.

Still on the stairs, Sakura knew she had to get away. They were just around the corner now and were getting closer. Thus she had no choice but to run up the remaining steps and then turn the corner. She was in such a rush that she didn’t watch where she was 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 wrapping her arms around the person’s neck. 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 and heavy, the feeling wasn’t at all unpleasant and was rather warm.

She opened her eyes to see mauve-gray eyes watching her. She caught her breath at the back of her throat as Darcy whispered, “You walked into me.”

She blushed and said, “You’re squishing me.”

Darcy didn’t move, just stayed on top of her and 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 Sakura had wanted to kill Alaina and he

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.

"Why aren't you getting up?" she asked. "I'm going to be a pancake soon if you don't move."

He couldn't help 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.

Darcy's smile was so beautiful that Sakura's heart skipped three 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.

"Your arms," he said logically, not at all displeased that her soft arms were wrapping around him like a lover's.

Sakura 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.

Darcy didn't want to move. In fact, he liked being in that 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, and he knew he could kiss her if wanted to. But he knew he couldn't. *Wouldn't*. Because it was wrong. *Very wrong*.

Slowly—*reluctantly*—he moved back.

Sakura breathed in relief, and before she could bring herself to stand up properly, she felt Darcy's arm around the small of her 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 Sakura in his arms, Darcy was hurting himself. He knew he was leading himself down a dangerous path that he shouldn't take, but it was just too damn tempting. He

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.

"Darcy, what are you doing?" Conrad asked from the distance.

Sakura 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 didn't want to show his 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 Darcy who didn't give a shit what everyone else thought of him.

Once he'd gained control of himself, he turned calmly to Conrad and Nicolas, who were watching him, waiting for his answers.

"She fell," he said. Then before they could ask him any more questions, which he knew they wouldn't anyway, he reluctantly removed his arm from Sakura's waist and then walked away toward the stairs.

Sakura watched Darcy go. She was relieved that he didn't growl at her for running into him. She was also relieved that, for the first time, he had smiled at her. Perhaps, just perhaps, he'd forgiven her.

"You fell again?" Conrad asked Sakura. "You should be careful."

"I'm a bit clumsy today," she said. "I think we should go to dinner." With that, she walked past them toward the stairs as well, Toby trotting after her happily.

"Wait for me." Conrad chuckled, rushing after her.

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. "Darcy," he said. "You're letting down your guard, brother."

CHAPTER 11:

Remembrance of the Past

JAMES WAS PLEASED THAT SAKURA had decided to join them for dinner this evening. He gazed at her across the dining table, noting she wasn't nervous or uncomfortable with the brothers surrounding her as she had been this morning. Mary, who kept up a constant chatter, was sitting on her right. To her left was Conrad. The moment he'd seen Sakura sitting down, his youngest son had 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, were both glaring at Sakura as though they couldn't stand to be in the same room as her. Sakura, 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.

"The wedding is going to be beautiful, Mary," Brenda said. "The cherry blossoms by the pond will be in full bloom."

"That's why I waited until spring to get married. Sakura kept telling me how beautiful cherry blossoms are in spring," Mary replied enthusiastically.

"There's nothing special about some stupid cherry trees," Tara put in, stamping her knife and fork down loudly on the table.

James frowned and said, "I disagree. I love cherry trees. They're beautiful in full bloom, like lovely pink clouds in the air, and they smell divine."

Sakura laughed, which turned the brothers' heads. Tara was aware of this, and her temper flared.

"Do you really?" she asked. "I seem to remember differently."

"Me too," Brenda said. "I think there was some muttering and grunting about the whole thing for weeks."

"I think there were some cheery trees being pulled out in the middle of the night too," Sakura said. "I found some missing the next morning."

James managed to blush at the reminder.

"Who planted the trees?" Nicolas couldn't help asking.

"It was Sakura's idea," Brenda blurted out. "She bought two hundred cherry trees with her own money and planted them herself."

"With Ned's help," Sakura put in. "He was such good help. It took us months. But it turned out nice." She bent down and gave another piece of chicken to Toby.

"If I were here, I would've helped you," Conrad said. "It sounded fun."

"This is awful," Alaina snapped. "Why are we talking about some stupid trees? And this meal is disgusting. I can't take it anymore." She clanged down her knife and fork too.

James frowned at his daughters' rude behavior and then looked over to Beth. He noted the disappointed look on the housekeeper's plump face and tightened his fingers around his cutlery. He said, his tone hard and frost cold, "Alaina, that was very impolite. Have you been away from home for so long that you forgot how to show some appreciation? I expect better from you."

"I think this meal is delicious," Sakura said loudly so everyone could hear her. She turned her eyes to the housekeeper, who was standing not too far away. "Thank you so much for preparing this wonderful chicken for us, Beth."

Beth nodded at her in appreciation. *That's my Sakura, she thought, always there to help when anyone needs help.*

"What do you think, Conrad?" Sakura asked her adopted brother.

Conrad was quite pleased that Sakura involved him in her solo conversation and gladly said, "Yeah. This chicken is awesome. Thanks, Beth."

"It's soft and tender," Darcy added. "It's perfect."

Beth blushed and grinned widely. "Thanks, Master Darcy. But you know I'm better with baking. Now there's my department. Perhaps I will bake some chocolate cake tomorrow. How does that sound?"

"Marvelous," Tristan said. "I love chocolate cake. And your chocolate cake is the sweetest on the island, Beth."

The housekeeper chuckled at his remark.

Alaina was fuming. She'd had enough of this stupid conversation. Why the hell did they have to praise the housekeeper when it was her job to cook them proper food anyway? She stood 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 door shut and dumped herself on Tara's large, soft bed.

"You were right," she said. "I can't believe that bitch."

Tara turned to look at the pretty girl she'd been manipulating since they'd been children. "What?" she asked.

"That—that silly Sally girl," Alaina snapped. "I can't believe she's back, and now Mom and Dad love her more than ever."

"I think the brothers are beginning to as well," Tara said, frowning. *Please*, she thought darkly, *not Sebastian and Darcy. Not them. Don't let them fall for her. Please don't.*

"What? No way!" Alaina said. "Not my brothers."

"Conrad," Tara put in. "He's smitten with her. Or didn't you see the look on his face?"

Alaina had noticed the look on Conrad's face. He'd looked like a boy in love. But he was only twenty years old and so technically not yet a fully matured man. Sakura, on the other hand, was

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,” Alaina suggested eagerly. “We don’t have to be in the same house as her.”

Tara frowned. “No!” she snapped. Of course, there was no way she’d leave this house when all the brothers, especially Sebastian and Darcy, were under the same roof as Sakura. She had to be there to prevent certain things—she wasn’t sure what—from happening. Then her heart did a somersault as a sudden thought struck her. *What if Sebastian fell in love with Sakura? Or Darcy, for that matter?* What would she do then?

She’d have to kill Sakura, of course. She wouldn’t let the girl she despised most take the men she loved away from her.

“So what? We’re going to stay here and endure her presence?” Alaina asked angrily. “You know how much I hate her. I can’t stand her. If you’re not going, then I am.”

Tara noted the rage in Alaina’s hard voice. *Shit!* She really must calm the young woman down *again* if she wanted things to go her way. After all, she didn’t want Alaina to leave her here by herself. That just meant she wouldn’t have any support to 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. “Do you really want Sakura to take everything away from you? First it was James and Brenda. Now it’s Conrad, your youngest brother. Then who would be next? *Darcy?*” She’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 advantage.

“No, of course not,” Alaina whispered.

“Good,” Tara said. “Then we’re staying here. Let’s work together to protect our handsome brothers, why don’t we?”

Alaina chuckled. “Yes, let’s.”

CHAPTER 12:

Mono No Aware

THE MOON WAS BRIGHT AND high above the dark gray sky. It was quiet and peaceful, and Sebastian stood there gazing out of his bedroom window, deep in thought. In the distance across the garden, he could see the slight figure of a woman. It was Sakura, and she 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 once 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 sense her smiling even though he couldn't see her face from this far, and he imagined just how beautiful she'd be. 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 pathway that'd lead him to the pond—to *her*.

He stopped at the base of the bridge, his heart thumping hard—not from the rushing, but from the sight of her before him.

Sakura was enjoying herself watching the many carp swimming in the pond. Then she felt as though someone was watching her, and by instinct she turned.

She gasped in surprise. “Sebastian!” she whispered under her breath. She didn’t expect him to be out here of all places and at this time of night too. This was after all her sanctuary, a place where she’d come to think and be alone. A place where it reminded her of her birth, of the woman who had given her life, and of the name she’d been given.

“Hi,” he said, strolling across the bridge toward her.

“Hi,” she replied uncertainly, cocking her head to one side. “What—what are you doing here?”

He stopped only inches from her—his tall, masculine body overpowering her small frame. Sakura 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.

“It’s beautiful here,” he said, noting the bright cherry blossoms that hung so low they almost touched the glassy water of the pond, the bright moon in the distance, and of course Sakura herself standing there before him. She blended into the scenery perfectly, almost as if she were a part of them, born within them.

“What about you?” he asked. “What are you doing here this late at night?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” she murmured softly. “I always come here when I can’t sleep.”

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 fingers brushed hers.

Sakura sucked in her breath and hastily moved her hand back. "Smell it," she said.

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.

"It's nice, right?" she asked.

He nodded. "So what does it mean?" he asked, snapping the flowers from the long, thick branches. "Sakura." He moved closer to her.

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

"Don't worry," he said. "I won't bite." He reached out and stroked her hair back—*gently*. Then he inserted the flower on the side of her left ear. "There. It looks perfect on you."

Sakura blushed and cast her eyes downward. "Err, thanks, I think," she said, frowning, her stomach fluttering intensely.

"So what does it mean?"

"What?" She looked up at him again, confused.

"Your name," he said. "Sakura. You said it means cherry blossom."

"Oh." She wanted to take a step back to get some space between them, but it seemed her legs were too weak to move. "Yes, it means cherry blossom in Japanese."

"And?"

She wondered why he thought her explanation wasn't enough. 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.

Well, he wanted the long answer after all, and so he'd get one whether he liked it or not. Not that he could blame her after that, of course.

"In Japanese," she began, "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 olden days when sakura also represents the life of a samurai, ready to be sacrificed for his master in a blink of an eye. It's the Buddhist teaching of *mono no aware*."

"What does that mean?"

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 they're gone."

"That's very poetic," Sebastian said softly, his warm breath fanning the top of her head.

"Not very poetic at all. It's the truth," she said.

"So I should learn to appreciate and love the things I cherish most before it's too late?" he queried.

She nodded her head. "Yes. You should."

"What other meanings does it have?"

She widened her eyes at him.

He chuckled. "Surely if the Japanese really love these sakura..." He said the word so softly and so gently that it caused Sakura's stomach to flutter deliciously. "Then there has to be more than one meaning."

Sakura cleared her throat and tried to concentrate. "It also means hope, a new beginning."

Silence—long, dead silence as they both stood there, motionless, as the breeze and cherry blossoms danced around them. Suddenly, Sebastian moved fast. Sakura 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.

Sebastian moved his face closer to hers. They were almost nose to nose and lips to lips when he said, "Then let this be a new beginning for us, Sakura."

Sakura blinked, confused, lost, and totally not in control of her own mind right now. What was wrong with her? Why couldn't 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.

"I apologize for my incompetence in protecting you when we were younger," he said. "But from now on, I will never let anyone or anything hurt you ever again."

Sakura 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.

He had always been there, hadn't he? Always somewhere in the close distance, not presenting himself before her, but had always been there nonetheless. He'd secretly helped her, hadn't he? Hadn't it been he who had stood there watching her crying in the distance after she'd had that horrible nightmare? Hadn't it been he 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 please love her only in secret because she didn't want her new siblings to hate and hurt her.

Sakura 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, angry whirlpool of water. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't control

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 she wouldn't last. She'd die soon. The water spirit would take her far, far away. She knew it would please her new brothers and sisters a lot.

She closed her eyes.

She was exhausted and couldn't fight the water anymore.

Then she stayed still. She felt her small body floating there in the deep ocean, her eyes half-closed. As she sank 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.

"Sebastian!" she screamed within her mind. "Help me!" she begged, 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.

* * * * *

SAKURA FLUTTERED HER EYES OPEN, and without her knowing it, tears flowed down her cheeks. She hadn't known she 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.

Sakura closed her eyes and felt weak and warm inside. Her whole body was trembling with reaction. She hadn't thought about that day for so long.

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.

So instead of accepting his apology and confirming his peace offering by saying either a *thank-you* or *cool, let's begin anew*, she muttered, "Good night," under her breath and practically ran from 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 him and uttering the name "Sakura" under his 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't know what the hell they were there for. In fact, he pretty much didn't care and wanted to shoo them all out.

"What were you doing with Sakura by the pond?" Conrad growled at him.

Sebastian had no idea they'd seen him from the house. Then again, it didn't surprise him because he himself had seen Sakura from his bedroom window.

"Well?" Conrad probed.

Sebastian realized he had to explain himself to his brothers. He didn't know that they were really interested in what he was doing, or more importantly he didn't know that any of them were interested in Sakura. 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.

"Well?" Logan asked, folding his arms across his chest.

"You hugged her, didn't you?" Tristan scolded darkly.

"I apologized to her," Sebastian said.

"What the hell for?" Conrad shouted.

Sebastian didn't bother to explain to young Conrad that it was because of what had happened back in their childhood days. The other brothers, however, understood perfectly.

"Then I should go and apologize as well," Tristan said. "I was awful to her."

Nicolas came to put his arm around his brother's shoulder. "I am too partly to blame. As the eldest brother, I should have done something, but instead I stood by and ignored the whole thing."

"That means all of us have hurt her in some way. There's no denying that," Logan said. "I was utterly cold toward her."

Conrad had enough. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Sakura," the brothers said in unison.

"Well," Conrad folded his arms across his chest. "If everyone of you hurt her and wants to apologize, why the hell didn't you do something about it?"

"Like what?" Logan asked.

"Like, I don't know," Conrad muttered. "If it were me, I'd take her shopping. Girls like shopping, right? And presents." Then he cocked his head to one side. "Shoes? Bags? Clothes?"

"I'll just go and apologize to her right now," Tristan announced. "And give her a peace offering—a *hug and a kiss*."

He was about to walk out the door when Sebastian jumped up from his seat and pulled his brother back by the collar of his shirt. "Now?" he asked. "It's bloody midnight. She's probably asleep."

"Sebastian's right," Nicolas said. "We'll do it tomorrow morning."

Sebastian saw the look in Nicolas's eyes and said, "You're not going to give her kisses, are you?"

"Why not?" Tristan put in. "You kissed her."

"On the forehead," Sebastian said through gritted teeth. "It was a brotherly kiss. I am, after all, her adopted brother."

“Yes.” Tristan teased him. “We shall give Sakura brotherly kisses and hugs tomorrow.”

“Like hell you will!” Sebastian snapped. “Now get out of my room.”

“Night, bro.” Tristan chuckled. And 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 Sakura. 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.

CHAPTER 13:

Cake Flavor? Sakura, Please!

BABY-BLUE EYES GLARED AT HER accusingly, and that pretty face scrunched with disgust.

"You can't steal Darcy from me!" nine-year-old Alaina hissed.

Ten-year-old Sakura looked down at Alaina's small hands that 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.

"You want me to let you go?" Alaina asked sarcastically, her head cocked to one side, her eyes narrowed darkly.

"Let her go! Let her go!" Ten-year-old Tara's voice echoed all around her, singing and laughing merrily. *"Let her fall. Let her die."*

"I'm letting you go," Alaina said. *"So go and die."*

Very slowly, Sakura watched in horror as Alaina unwrapped her hands. "No!" she screamed, watching Alaina as she slowly fell 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.

Sakura screamed, her eyes wide with fear, as Alaina was about to hit the hard ground below. Suddenly, it was Sakura who felt her own body falling—down, down, and down.

Splash!

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 she couldn't do anything about it.

Blue eyes. A pair of beautiful, sky-blue eyes were watching her. A boy's hands were reaching out for her.

"Sakura!" he seemed to be shouting. His voice, however, was muffled by the water as his hands desperately reached out for her.

"Sebastian!"

Sakura woke up with a start, her body hot and sweating and her lips chanting Sebastian's name. Her heart pounded 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-ago nightmare she thought 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.

"Sebastian," she said under her breath as she 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. "Why?" she whispered. "Why would you sacrifice your life to save me?"

Soon she closed her eyes again and returned to sleep. This time though there was no nightmare.

The next morning, Sakura felt like a zombie. She was so lost in her own thoughts that she didn't know she'd reached the dining room.

"Good morning." Conrad greeted her the moment she stepped through the door. In fact, she didn't even have time to take a seat when he instantly had his strong arms around her person and gave her a really tight hug.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked.

Sakura 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

toward her forehead. She closed her eyes, wondering what Conrad wanted to do, when she felt strong hands around her slender arms and then a hard, swift pull of her body, releasing her from Conrad's hug.

She found herself in Darcy's arms, 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, not Darcy's presence.

Without knowing it, her knees weakened and she lost her stance. Darcy swiftly tightened his hold on her, bringing her closer to him. His lips were warm near her forehead as he asked, "You're unwell?"

"Sakura, are you all right?" Conrad queried with concern.

Sakura wanted to tell him she couldn't sleep a wink because she'd 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 concerned looks on their faces, which confused her. Shouldn't they be pleased she was suffering?

"Are you sure you're all right?" Tristan asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I'm very sure." She moved away from Darcy's arms and 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.

"What would you like, my dear sister?" Conrad asked, and Tristan nearly fell off his chair. Sebastian flashed Conrad a *watch what you're saying* look. Though Conrad had seen it, he decided to

ignore it and hid a smile. Tristan laughed, and Nicolas, Logan, and Hayden watched the scene before them with interest.

"It's okay. I can take care of myself," Sakura said, somewhat confused as to why the brothers didn't seem to mind her presence all of a sudden.

What she'd just said didn't please the brothers one bit. They didn't like the fact that she thought she could take care of herself. Yes, of course she could take care of herself on most things, but certainly not one thing. She couldn't protect herself against Mark Chatsworth, whom the brothers had agreed was a wolf and out to snaffle Sakura away.

Sakura grabbed some toast and proceed to spread some strawberry jam on it, wondering where Daddy James and Mom Brenda had gone off to.

"Mom and Dad are already out," Conrad volunteered as if sensing her questioning look.

"They're early," she said.

"So," Tristan started, "what are your plans for the day, Sakura?" She blinked and then took a bite of the toast.

"Well?" he prompted.

"She's going to be busy today, boys," Mary announced at the door. "Smells good," she said as she came in to sit beside Conrad. "Hmm, I'm hungry this morning."

Sakura smiled the moment she saw her friend. "Here, eat your fill, my bride-to-be, 'cause it's going to be a day filled with chores," she said, grabbing another toast and giving it to Mary across Conrad.

"Why thank you, my dear Sakura," Mary said politely. "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 Sakura and Mary were very close friends.

"What labor are you talking about?" Logan asked, then sipped his standard coffee.

"We're going out today to do bride-to-be stuff," Mary said.

"Which is?" Hayden put in.

"Confirm the bouquets for me, the bride-to-be, the maid of honor, Katherine, and of course, the very lovely bridesmaid Sakura."

"You're going to be a bridesmaid?" Darcy asked. His tone of voice indicated that he was none too pleased.

Sakura was taken aback. "She's one of my best friends. Of course I'm going to be her bridesmaid."

The brothers nodded. But of course they didn't know the girls were best friends nor that Sakura was going to be a bridesmaid. Hence, they wondered who the groomsmen were and wondered if the bridesmaids and groomsmen had to dance together.

"Who are the groomsmen?" Nicolas asked, as if sensing what all his brothers were thinking.

"My brother Richard, and of course Peter's best friend Jack," Mary said.

The brothers seemed to sigh with relief. They knew Jack Donaldson was already married, and therefore, Sakura wasn't in danger there. And of course, Richard was Mary's older brother and was a family member, which meant no danger there either.

"Why are you all so tense?" Mary asked. Then she thought to add, "I didn't know any of you wanted to be Peter's groomsmen."

This was followed by guilty looks and an uncomfortable cough from Tristan.

"Aha!" Mary slammed her palm on the tabletop, causing all eyes to turn on her. "You feel guilty, don't you?" she said. "You're all guilty you haven't helped out. With my wedding, I mean."

Conrad laughed uneasily. "Kind of," he said. "We haven't really done anything, have we?"

"Of course not," Mary said, folding her arms across her chest. "It's a bit too late now."

"So," Logan said. "What's the flavor of your cake?"

Mary cocked her head to one side. "Ah, that." It was her turn to laugh uncomfortably. "I haven't chosen it yet."

"What?" Conrad and Logan shouted out in unison.

"You left it until this late?" Nicolas asked.

"Well, not *that* late. I just need to choose the flavor. Can't decide. That's why Sakura is coming with me today to help choose. Mrs. Waterhouse is baking us some to try."

"I'll be too happy to help you choose," Tristan said from across the table.

All his brothers eyed him with suspicion.

"I'll help, too," Conrad said. "I love cake. Nothing better than free cakes."

"Hum," Logan said, "maybe I should help, too."

"Count me in," Nicolas said. "Chocolate is my favorite."

Sakura wasn't pleased with the way things were going. She glanced from one brother to the others, wondering why they wanted to help out, and tasting cake of all things.

"Hold on," Sakura said. "There isn't enough room in my car."

"I'll drive," Sebastian offered.

"Huh?" Sakura blinked several times.

"Hold on! Wait a minute!" Mary intervened, half-standing. She looked from one brother to the others and said, "You all want to help me taste and choose my wedding cake?"

The brothers nodded in unison.

Sakura could only stare at them. *Say no! Please say no! Mary, please!*

Mary laughed. "That's great! Let's all go to The Dessert Room and eat cakes!"

Sakura's shoulders slumped. This was going to be a long day.

Not long after that, she found herself in the driver's seat with Conrad's long leg pushing behind her seat and his face close 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," Mary said. "I like chocolate, but I'm not sure if everyone else will like it."

"What else is there?" Logan asked from behind.

"Hmm, strawberry, raspberry, blueberry," she said. "All the berries you could think of."

"Vanilla?" Conrad asked. "I like vanilla."

Mary put the pamphlet down and turned to look at Conrad behind her. "Okay, Conrad. What's the gossip?"

Conrad raised his brows in confusion. "What gossip?"

"Oh, come on. Tell us about your brothers. I can't believe none of them are bringing their girlfriends to my wedding. There's something fishy about that."

Conrad laughed. "Nothing fishy," he said. "Tristan, Hayden, and Darcy all got dumped by their respective girlfriends."

Logan laughed. "Serves them right."

"And Nicolas, Sebastian, Logan, and I," he emphasized, "are still single. No strings attached." As he said this, he looked at Sakura, who was too busy looking at the road ahead.

"That is so bizarre," Mary commented. "You're all still single. Seven hot men in one house, all single." She turned to look at the scenery, wondering. "I wonder if they're gay."

Conrad heard her and shouted, "I'm not gay!"

Logan nodded. "FYI, Mary, we like our freedom."

Conrad nodded too. "But unlike my brothers," he said, again looking at Sakura, "I'll only be too happy to settle down the moment I meet the right girl."

Logan noted the meaning in Conrad's words and frowned at his brother severely. "Take it slow, puppy boy. What have you got to offer this girl you're interested in? You're still in college. Where's your plan for the future?"

Conrad scratched his head. "I'll work on one."

Mary turned to look at Logan and Conrad behind her again. "Are you sure you're not gay?" She teased.

Conrad folded his arms across his chest. "I'm positive."

It was Logan's turn to speak. "Sakura, my sweet sister."

This welcomed a surprised, weird stare from Mary, and she laughed. She said, "Sweet sister? I think Sakura is anything *but* sweet."

Sakura tightened her hands on the steering wheel. It wasn't what Mary had just said that bothered her. It was because Logan had called her *my sweet sister*.

"Are you bringing that... what's his name?" Logan cocked his head to one side, pretending to search his brain for Mark Chatsworth's name. "That doctor at the lab."

"Mark?" Mary volunteered excitedly.

"Yes," Logan said. "Are you bringing him to the wedding?"

"Naturally," Mary said. "Of course."

Conrad couldn't help himself and asked, "What? So are you guys like dating or something?"

Mary laughed. "I wish. I've been working on it for so long and so damn hard. I know in my guts that Mark likes Sakura, but she won't budge—the beam pool."

Sakura said, "I'm not ready for a relationship, Mary. I told you already. I've got other plans. And I'm not a freakin' beam pool."

"Yeah. Yeah." Mary waved. "We know you've got super-hot breasts, Sakura. But you know romance doesn't come your way every day, and besides, finding the perfect man in your life isn't that easy either." She turned to Logan and Conrad. "How about we work together?"

Conrad was momentarily daydreaming about Sakura's super-hot breasts. He wondered what they looked like and—

"Conrad?" Mary shouted.

He jolted back to reality. "What?"

"To get this friend of mine and Mark together?"

Logan frowned darkly, and Conrad said, "No!"

Mary harrumphed. "Fine. I'll work on it myself, then."

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.

Sakura 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.

"Ah. It's so good," he said.

"Come on, Logan," Mary said, pulling him by the arm. "We don't have much time. We still have to go and see the florist."

"Such fun," Logan responded.

Conrad rushed up to walk beside Sakura when he saw that his brothers were getting out of the other car parked not too far away and knew soon they'd be onto them. He had to take quick action, he decided.

"So," he said to Sakura. "It's nice today."

"Yes," Sakura replied.

"I suppose it'll be lunchtime by the time we finish."

"Yes," Sakura said, looking up at him, wondering what he was on about.

"I know a nice place," he said. "I thought maybe you and I could go. We could get to know each other a bit more."

Sakura 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.

"Well," she said.

"Please come," he almost begged her, his eyes large as he waited expectantly.

Sakura thought he reminded her of Toby and couldn't help chuckling. "All right," she agreed. "But I know a place where we should definitely go. You'll like it."

"Yes!" Conrad yelled out excitedly as though a girl had just accepted a date with him.

"Yes what?" Sebastian asked from behind.

By that time, all the brothers had caught up with them. Sakura 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

Sebastian's. *Oh, God!* Why was her heart beating so hard? Why was she finding it so difficult to breathe properly? Not to mention her stomach kept flipping again and again.

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

"Going out to lunch after this, are we?" Tristan said. "Good, I'm almost starving."

Conrad widened his eyes in surprise. "What?" he shouted. "No!"

"Actually, I'm slightly hungry already," Logan put in.

"Me too," Hayden said.

"We only just had breakfast," Darcy interjected.

"I'm still growing," Tristan replied easily.

"At twenty-six?" Nicolas asked teasingly.

"It's decided then," Sebastian put in matter-of-factly. "We're all going to lunch after this."

"What?" Conrad growled. "No!"

Mary laughed and shook her head. "You guys are hilarious!" she said through tears. "It's so much fun with you guys."

"What's so hilarious?" Darcy frowned. "These guys are a bore."

Sakura 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 Sakura was very glad indeed that they didn't have to argue about lunch anymore. However, she wasn't so glad two hours later when the brothers all stood before her and practically begged her to taste their choices of cakes—not that they were much different since they were mostly chocolate.

"I thought this was supposed to be Mary's choice, not mine or yours," she said.

"But we're helping her," Conrad said. "Isn't that right, Mary?"

Mary nodded. "My choice is chocolate."

"Me too," Tristan said. "Speaking of which..." He moved and stood so close to Sakura that he could be kissing her. "Chocolate is similar to the color of your eyes. Deep, dark, and dangerously delicious."

Sebastian wasn't pleased with his brother's use of alliteration to describe chocolate and Sakura's brown eyes. For sure, the man was flirting with her. He grabbed Tristan's arm and yanked him away from Sakura, who blushed intensely.

"Stop flirting around," he muttered.

"All right, all right," Mary said finally. "Look, we're here for almost two hours now. Surely we've reached some type of conclusion. I want chocolate." She turned to Nicolas and asked him. "You?"

"Chocolate," Nicolas said.

Mary turned to Darcy, who said, "Chocolate."

Next was Hayden. "Definitely chocolate."

Logan said, "Of course chocolate. What else?"

"Chocolate, the color of Sakura's eyes," Tristan said, winking at her.

Sebastian said, "Chocolate." He eyed Sakura, 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 knowingly.

Mary, with her head still down and jotting notes, finally asked the youngest brother, "And you, Conrad?"

"Sakura," he said softly. "I like Sakura. I want Sakura."

All the brothers felt the same way and couldn't help but look at her like little pups who wanted to be petted.

"No," Mary said, jotting down notes furiously. "You can't have Sakura. Sakura is not on the menu. It's a Japanese flower and you can't eat it anyway."

Sakura blinked and turned to look at Conrad. "Are you okay?"

Conrad blinked. "Err, yes." He chuckled uncomfortably.

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 cleared his throat. "So chocolate it is, then, Mary?" he said.

"Yes, it is," Mary replied, finally looking up and giving them a big smile. "Thanks so much for your help, guys. Now then, off to the florist we go."

"I'm no good with flowers," Sebastian said, feeling rather awkward all of a sudden.

There was something in his voice that Sakura noted that didn't quite sit well within her. Actually, all the brothers were acting a bit weird all of a sudden. What was wrong with them?

"I'm going to wait out at the beach. Come get me when you're done," he said, heading to the door.

"Me, too." Nicolas chuckled. "Not good with flowers." Then he headed after Sebastian. They both walked out the door side by side.

"Flowers aren't my thing either," Darcy said, frowning darkly. He gave Sakura a quick glance and then walked out the door. Sakura noticed him looking at her. She thought there was something in his eyes—something secretive and almost painful.

"I'm good with flowers," Tristan said happily.

"That's because you sent too many of them to your women," Logan teased. "Come on, we better leave the ladies to this." And he practically dragged Tristan out the door.

Hayden shook his head. "This turned out to be no fun and game. If I keep going, I'm going to fall really hard," he said, and before leaving the shop, he dragged Conrad out with him by hooking his arms around his little brother's neck. "Let's go join our bros," he said. "Come get us when you're done and ready for that lunch." Then they were out the door as Conrad protested wholeheartedly.

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

"Boys," Mary said. "They run away when they lose interest."

CHAPTER 14:

Coffee, Coffee, & More Coffee

“AREN’T YOU GOING TO GET that?” Logan asked Darcy, getting rather annoyed at the insistent ringing of the cell phone.

Darcy shrugged his shoulders and said, “Not that important. Whoever it is will leave a message. I’m on holiday, after all.”

“Good point,” Logan said. “Let’s just hope it’s not from the company.”

“If it is,” Darcy said, “they’d contact Hayden. He’s the boss.”

“The boss is on holiday, bro.” Hayden chuckled. “They won’t dare bother me. After all, I’ve already placed Tim in charge. He should take care of things just fine.”

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 why he wouldn’t pick up. She’d been texting him too, since the first night he’d arrived on the island, apologizing to him that she shouldn’t 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.

"We should go surfing," Sebastian suggested.

"It'll have to be on the other side of the island, though," Nicolas said. "St. Helena Beach, better waves there."

"Yeah, we could stay at the cabin in the woods," Logan added. "For a couple of days."

"Good idea," Darcy said. "I'm ready for a bit of solitude."

Yes, he thought. That was what he needed—*solitude*. More importantly, he needed to get away from Sakura. He needed to keep some distance between them, both for his peace of mind and for his heart.

It was an hour later when Mary called out to them. "Hey!" she shouted from the top of the beach. "You guys hungry or not?"

Conrad jumped up immediately. "Definitely!" He brushed the sand off his jeans and ran up to them. "Been waiting for ages."

The brothers got up as well and made their way to where the two girls were waiting for them.

Sebastian noticed Sakura 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's 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. *She's your adopted sister*, he told himself. *You can't feel this way toward her. You simply can't.*

They reached her, and Conrad quickly got to her side like a loyal pup. Sebastian couldn't help himself either and walked 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.

"Jesus! I wonder if we'll get a table," Mary said. Then she thought to add, "Or two." 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 colors which made one feel

immediately cozy. In fact, he was surprised there were so many tourists there right now. He wasn't impressed, however, when a boy of about eight years old rushed up to Sakura and wrapped his arms around her waist, giving her such a long and tight hug.

"You're back!" he said with a big grin on his face.

Sakura tousled his dark hair and chuckled. "I haven't been away that long at all. I didn't know you'd miss me that much."

"I really missed you," the boy said with the biggest, fattest grin on his face.

"All right," Sakura said. "Shall we find a table to sit?"

"Yes," the boy said, finally letting go. "Just you and me."

"And what about me?" Mary interrupted. "So you didn't miss me?"

The boy chuckled. "I missed you, Mary. Just not that much, though."

Mary laughed. "Well, if you must know, Michael, I didn't miss you that much either."

The brothers, by this point, wanted to know who the boy was.

"And us?" Nicolas asked the boy.

The boy sucked in his breath and froze in his place as he stared up at Nicolas.

"James?" he shrieked. "What have you done? You look so young."

The brothers took the opportunity to laugh at Nicolas. The eldest brother wasn't pleased with their behavior and gave them a good scowl.

"I'm Nicolas," he said to the boy. "I'm James's son, the oldest one."

Michael stared wide-eyed at the seven brothers. "All seven of you are here!" he said in awe. "Mom is going to be so pleased. Come on, I'll find a table for us."

With that the boy led them by taking Sakura's hand to the long 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 Sakura sat next to him.

Tristan said loudly, "You have competition, Conrad. Better work harder."

At this the brothers laughed again, and Conrad muttered something under his breath. Just then a pretty brown-haired and green-eyed young woman came to their table. Sakura got up and gave her a hug, which caused the brothers to wonder who this woman was.

"Hey," Sakura said.

"Hey," the woman replied. Then she moved over to hug Mary.

"I'll definitely come over tonight to try on that dress. Peter and Richard are arriving this afternoon, right?"

Mary nodded. Then she turned to the brothers. "Boys," she said, "this is Katherine Hodge. She's my maid of honor, and Michael's stepmom, by the way."

"She's a great mom," Michael said. "And I love her very much."

Sakura tousled his hair again. "Yes, she is a great mom."

"I'm so sorry, guys, but we've been flat out today, and we're also short staffed."

"No worries," Mary said, putting her hand up. "I'll help." With that, she got up and headed toward the kitchen as if she knew what she was doing.

"Thanks, Mary. You don't have to," Katherine said, running after her friend.

Sakura 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.

"Are you going to be our waitress?" Darcy asked. There was a surprised look in his eyes that Sakura couldn't quite miss.

"Yes, I am," she replied nicely. "Why?"

"Nothing," he said, looking away.

"Are you going to wear one of those cute uniforms like the rest of them?" Tristan asked cheekily.

Sakura chuckled. "I usually do," she said. "But not today. I don't have it with me."

This totally shocked the brothers, and they, especially Tristan and Logan, grinned cheekily. Sebastian knew his brothers' minds

were wandering off into their fantasy worlds involving Sakura and a sexy uniform and expressed an “Oi!” loudly to get their attention. 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. He couldn’t believe that he too had managed to lose himself to such an imagination with a simple suggestion.

“Cappuccino for me,” Sebastian said. “And an open steak sandwich.”

“Yes,” Nicolas said, clearing his throat. “A cappuccino for me and an open steak sandwich as well, thank you.”

Conrad was about to tell her his order when Michael interrupted him loudly. “I want hot chocolate and some hot chips please. Oh, and I want a cute teddy bear on my hot chocolate please.”

Sakura chuckled. “Indeed, you may have that cute teddy bear.” Then she turned to Conrad, who was riling and frowning at eight-year-old Michael. “A mochaccino and pasta, thanks,” he said.

Sakura nodded, and one by one the brothers told her what they wanted. They were very surprised to see that she didn’t write their 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.

“Cappuccino for Nicolas and Sebastian,” she said, expertly placing their drinks before them. “Mochaccino for Conrad.”

“Thanks,” Conrad said, giving her a bright smile. He took a good sip of his and smiled contently afterward.

One by one, Sakura gave the others their drinks they’d ordered. “And last but not least,” she said, coming to sit beside Michael, “hot chocolate for my dearest Michael.” She placed a cute cup in front of him.

"Oh look! It's a bear!" Michael shouted and bragged to the brothers by shoving his cup to them, pointing at the picture of a bear on his hot chocolate.

"How come mine doesn't have art on it?" Conrad asked.

"Neither does mine," Logan added sourly.

"That's because you didn't ask for it," Sakura said.

"What's in yours?" Michael asked, taking a peek at Sakura's cup.

"A swan," Sakura said.

"I think you look like a swan. You're pretty." Michael praised. "I like pretty girls."

Sakura chuckled. "Don't all boys?" she asked, looking at the brothers, remembering when they'd been children and how they always preferred pretty Tara over her—the quiet, shy, ugly Sakura who no one wanted to be friends with.

"So you made us coffee?" Nicolas asked.

She nodded. "I did."

"Is it any good?" Darcy asked, wondering if she'd deliberately sabotaged their drinks. After all, how could she know how to make proper coffee?

"James only drinks Sakura's coffee when he comes here," Michael said abruptly. "'Cause she's really good at making it."

"No, he doesn't," Sakura said. "He drinks Beth's coffee back at home too."

Michael blinked and frowned at her. "You didn't make coffee for him at home? That's mean."

Sakura chuckled. "Only sometimes." She 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 wasn't that mean.

"Well?" she said. "Drink up before it gets cold."

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

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

“Good?” Logan asked.

Nicolas nodded. Logan, knowing if it had passed Nicolas’s stamp of approval it had to be very good, quickly drank his. “Whoa! This is the best coffee I’ve ever tasted.” Then he proceeded to drink 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.

“Now I know why Dad doesn’t like Beth’s standard coffee,” Hayden said, shaking his head. “After this I don’t think I’ll ever go back to standard coffee again.”

“Me, too,” Logan said, and the brothers laughed.

CHAPTER 15:

Hayden Princeton, Prince of Rebel

THE BROTHERS HAD DECIDED THAT Sakura was in great danger where Richard Collins was concerned after all. The man was a flirt—even worse than Tristan—and they knew he had his sights set on Sakura the moment he laid eyes on her. He looked like he'd just seen an 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 Sakura 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* Sakura. 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.

"How are you, my dear Sakura?" Richard said, his voice rather too charming for the brothers' liking. Darcy narrowed his eyes dangerously at Richard. Conrad gritted his teeth in annoyance.

"Richard, you haven't changed a bit," Sakura said, all but being squeezed in Richard's arms. She chuckled uncomfortably and blushed intensely. She surely hoped the brothers weren't watching them. One glance in their direction, however, told her a different story. They looked as though they were ready for war.

"And you have changed a lot since I last saw you," Richard remarked. "What? Since you were sixteen? Look at you now, all grown up." He said the last sentence so softly and so sensually, as though he were caressing every single word with his tongue.

The brothers noticed this, and it bothered the hell out of them—especially Tristan, who scowled darkly. He decided that Richard had improved his flirting technique, and he didn't like that, especially when used on Sakura.

Sakura cocked her head to one side in thought. "Yes. It's been a rather a long time, hasn't it?"

Nicolas decided the hug was long enough and interrupted them. "Richard, long time no see," he said. He extended his hand so Richard had no choice but to move away from Sakura to do the manly, friendly handshake.

"Nicolas," Richard responded. "Man, it's been a long time." Then he turned to wave at the other six brothers who all gave him a cold greeting. He turned back to Sakura. He was about to give her another peck on the cheek when Sebastian saved her by pulling her to his side.

"Come on, let's get going," he said, leading her away.

Sakura was pleased she was saved from the embarrassment of getting another peck on the cheek she didn't want. She looked up to Sebastian and gave him an appreciative smile.

Sebastian decided to return her smile with a cold scowl and said none too gently, "Stay away from him."

She returned his scowl and muttered, "Why are you telling me what to do?"

"Because I'm your brother," he replied with a no-nonsense tone of voice.

Annoyed at how he was treating her, she shrugged her arms free from his tight grasp to tell him she wasn't pleased with his behavior.

Then she stomped past the brothers and headed straight to Mary, who was busy hugging and kissing her fiancé, Peter, as if she hadn't seen him for centuries.

"What did you say to her?" Tristan asked, interested.

"She's totally pissed," Hayden added with amusement.

"I told her to stay away from Richard," Sebastian replied. "Did I do something wrong?"

Tristan laughed at his brother's 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, "You did the right thing."

Richard came up behind them as they started heading toward the car. "So what are all my cousins up to these days?"

"The usual," Nicolas said.

"Man, I still can't believe Sakura has grown up so much," he said. "Can still remember her when she was a teenager. She was so quiet and shy you didn't even know she was in the same room."

Sebastian thought that wasn't true. Yes, she'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 Sebastian didn't know why 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, he'd 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 existence just kind of faded out of his mind.

"Took us a while to bring her out of her shell." Richard continued.

"You brought her out of her shell?" Conrad asked, appalled.

"Yep." Richard confirmed. "We did. Mary, Katherine, and I. My three little darlings, out and about doing all sorts of mischief. Mind you, I had to look after them. Sakura has always been my favorite. Once she's out of her shell, she's the most difficult to control. So much spirit in her and very wild too. I've been waiting

for so long for her to grow up.” He chuckled. “And now she has. I think she’s ready.”

The brothers didn’t like what Richard was implying. Their cousin was waiting for Sakura 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 Sakura.

“What are you implying?” Conrad, being the one who always took the bull by the horns, asked straight out. “You want to date her or something?”

Richard laughed. “Uh-ho! Is that brotherly concern I hear?”

Nicolas nudged his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Naturally,” he said. “We are her brothers, after all.”

“Come on, guys, I’m your cousin here,” Richard said.

“Shouldn’t you be more concerned about her welfare?” Darcy asked. “You can’t date her. She’s your cousin.”

“Yes,” Logan said. “Incest, my cousin, incest.”

“But she’s not related to me at all,” Richard argued.

Hayden said coldly, “Still wrong, Richard, very wrong.”

“No hard feelings, cousin.” Tristan 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.

Sakura, 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.

Mary saw her dilemma and said, “Well, that means one of you will have to stay behind or else ride in the trunk. Who’s volunteering?”

“It’s okay,” Sakura said. “I’ll stay with Katherine. She’s coming up to the house this evening to try on the dress. I’ll come up with her.”

“Are you sure?” Mary asked.

"No," Hayden put in. "I have my motorbike at the yacht. So there's no need to argue who's staying behind."

"Then that should work out," Mary said.

It was decided then, and Sebastian took Sakura by the elbow before Richard had the chance. "Come on," he said, leading her to their car.

"Wait!" Richard said. "I haven't seen Sakura for ages." He put both his hands on her shoulders and steered her toward Mary's car. "Young lady, you're coming with us."

Conrad would have none of it, however, and said, "We can all catch up when we get home." He brushed Richard's hands aside and steered Sakura toward their car. "Mind what you're touching," he said.

"What is wrong with you guys today?" Mary asked. "Maybe it's the coffee she made them," she muttered to herself. "Did she put something in it?"

Peter, who found the whole situation a bit weird, finally had to put in a word. "Two of you will have to ride with us. There won't be enough room in that car for everyone."

The brothers looked at one another.

"I'll go," Nicolas volunteered.

"Me, too," Logan said.

The two brothers reluctantly headed to Mary's car while Conrad and Sebastian led Sakura to theirs.

Sakura wasn't pleased with how things had gone so far. First there was Sebastian, who was being rude to her. She couldn't 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 she wasn't pleased and that she didn't want 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.

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.

"She's coming with me, guys," he shouted once they were safely on the other side of the street.

The brothers stood there watching them in shocked surprise. A moment later, Tristan laughed loudly. Sebastian wasn't pleased. He scowled severely. Conrad shouted, "Hayden! What the hell are you doing?"

"He's taking her for himself," Darcy said.

Sakura didn't know what was going on until they'd reached a couple of blocks away. She had to catch her breath and wriggled her hand a couple of times to get Hayden's attention. He wouldn't release his hold on her, however, though he did stop to let her catch her breath.

Sakura collapsed against the brick wall of a building. Hayden 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.

"Sorry about that." He chuckled, grinning at her.

Sakura was still heaving. When she finally stopped, she gazed up at him, confused and dazed. *What is he doing?* Why had he taken her away from everyone else all of a sudden?

Hayden moved his face closer to hers, 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.

"Wanna go sightseeing with me?" he asked.

Sakura 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—

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—dangerously near the cliff's edge, 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 to blame her for telling on him. She hadn't told on him but couldn't go against Tara and Alaina's words.

Sakura 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 of silver earrings, he threw one back at her, telling her he only needed one. To this day, she still had that earring kept safely in her secret box.

"I believe it's a yes?" he asked.

Sakura jolted back to reality. She raised her brows at him. Since when had Hayden ever asked her for her decision? She leaned back and sighed. "I suppose since you've already dragged me all the way here."

He chuckled. "Sorry about that. I couldn't possibly lose you to my dear brothers, now could I?"

Sakura didn't know how to reply to that statement and wondered why he looked so wounded when she shrugged her shoulders as if she didn't care one way or another.

It was forty minutes later, after he'd shown her the mega yacht thoroughly, that he proudly presented to her his Harley-Davidson motorbike.

"What do you think?" he asked, his chest puffing with pride like a peacock.

Sakura cocked her head to one side. "It's nice."

Hayden blinked. "That's it?"

Sakura 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 he wouldn't get any more out of her, he made her put on a helmet and told her to sit behind him. "Hold on tight," he said through his own helmet.

Yes, they were going to ride his motorbike home, and hopefully they wouldn't crash. 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.

Sakura felt rather nervous and hastily tightened her arms about his waist. Hayden secretly smiled behind his helmet, pleased with their close contact.

"Hold on tight," he said and started the engine. After engaging the accelerator a few times to get the mood going, he released the break and they were off.

Sakura gritted her teeth the faster they went and her arms tightened even more around Hayden's waist. Once they were on the highway and had the road to themselves, Hayden glanced behind him and saw that Sakura 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. Sakura stiffened and wondered why he'd stopped all of a sudden.

Hayden switched off the engine and took off his helmet. He turned around, and without her consent, pulled her helmet off as well. Sakura blinked. Hayden couldn't help but notice just how pretty she was with her hair a wild mess and her face flushed red. He cleared his throat and asked, "Do you want to try?"

Sakura cocked her head to one side, wondering what he was talking about. "Try what?"

"Driving," he replied. He stood up and, without further ado, made her sit in front of him and told her to start the engine.

"I'm wearing a dress, Hayden," she protested. "And I've never driven a motorbike before."

"It's okay." He chuckled. "I'll teach you. Here, turn this on and voilà!"

The motorbike hummed, and Sakura was rather pleased, feeling a certain type of thrill rushing through her body.

Soon after, with his help guiding her from behind, she was 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.

Sakura pulled off her helmet and couldn't help but marvel at 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.

"Did you have fun?" Sebastian asked.

Sakura couldn't believe that was the first thing he'd say to her. She blinked, and just to piss him off, she smiled at him sweetly. "Yes. It was fun. Hayden taught me how to drive his motorbike. Why are you guys in the middle of the road?"

"Waiting for you," he said, wrapping his hand around her arm.

Hayden took off his helmet and chuckled. "You guys couldn't stay away, could you? Whose idea was that?"

"It was Sebastian's," Tristan said.

"Come on, my dear lady," Tristan said to Sakura. "We can't allow the Prince of Rebel to keep you any longer."

"So said the Prince of Flirt," Hayden put in sarcastically.

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

"Come on, get in the car," Sebastian ordered gently.

"You don't need to tell her, Seb," Conrad said. "She's coming."

Actually, Sakura decided she wasn't coming with them after all. Just to show Sebastian he couldn't 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 carrying her—with the helmet still in her hands—toward the car.

"What are you doing?" she shrieked. "Put me down."

Sebastian refused to listen to her. Sakura grumbled under her breath and glared at him.

"He's carrying her again," Conrad said.

"Because he's responsible," Tristan commented, heading around to the car as well.

"Why should you feel responsible?" Sakura couldn't help asking, her voice ice cold.

"Because right now I'm the eldest brother," Sebastian said matter-of-factly.

Tristan butted in. "Don't believe him, Sakura. I believe I'm the eldest right now since I was born a full six minutes before him, so that responsibility falls to me."

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.

Sakura gritted her teeth, ignored him, and said rather too softly, "Actually, I believe none of you need to take any responsibility over me. After all, I am twenty-three and not a three-year-old child." She turned her eyes to Sebastian then and said to him, "I think I can take of myself, and I believe I'm entitled to decide how I want to get home, don't you?"

Sebastian folded his arms across his massive chest, almost in challenge. Sakura knew he wasn't happy with her announcement. *But to hell with him!* Who did he think he was? He had never cared about her welfare before, so why now?

"I think Sakura should choose how she wants to get home," Hayden butted in, giving her a cheeky smile.

"All right," Sebastian said. "Decide, Sakura. How do you want to get home? The car?" He nodded toward the back seat. "Or the bike?" He nodded to where Hayden and the bike were.

Sakura knew he wanted her to ride home in the car. Well, he could go home with his brothers without her. She held her head high and said, "I choose the motorbike."

"What?" Conrad shouted. "But we waited for you."

Sakura felt bad. It was even worse when Conrad gave her the puppy-dog look. But she hardened herself against her tender heart. After all, it was Sebastian's fault. If he wasn't acting so overbearing, then she would have gone with them, and Conrad needn't be so upset.

"Sorry, Conrad," she said softly and moved to Hayden, who was smiling at her with glee.

Sebastian watched her go, his face impassive. "Get in the car, everyone," he said as he tossed the keys over to Tristan. "You drive."

Tristan knew Sebastian was pissed even though he wasn't 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 Tristan didn't expect, however, was for Sebastian to go up to

Hayden and say, "You too," and take Hayden's helmet without asking.

All Hayden could do was look at his older brother, stunned.

Sebastian put on the helmet and got on the bike. Sakura was so shocked that her mouth hung open in disbelief.

"Well?" he asked. "Or have you changed your mind already?"

Sakura couldn't answer. Sebastian decided for her by nudging her to him and made her sit behind him.

"See you at home," he said to Hayden. Then he started the engine and drove off so fast Sakura had to quickly wrap her arm around his waist so she wouldn't fall. 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. But it wasn't home that they were heading to. Sebastian deliberately missed the turn and headed straight toward the beach on the other side of the island.

Sakura tugged at his jacket to get his attention, to tell him he'd 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.

Sakura couldn't help herself. She hastily got off the bike, pulled off the helmet, and confronted him.

"I can't believe you did that, Sebastian. I just can't. Oh my gosh! Who do you think you are? You deliberately missed the turn, didn't you? And you deliberately waited out in the middle of the road too. I can't believe this. And what is it all for? Is it because of last night? Is it? Is it because we agreed to start anew? Is that why you're doing this? I can't believe it. You never, ever noticed me before and now all this? This..."

Sebastian wasn't paying any attention to her tantrum. He was too busy admiring her sensual lips. He wasn't sure why she was overreacting, though. After all, he'd only wanted to protect her from Richard—and Hayden, of course.

She finally stopped ranting when she realized he wasn't paying attention. "You aren't even listening to me," she muttered under her breath.

He chuckled. "Why are you so riled up?"

Sakura 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 waist. "Sorry," he said, almost too gently for her liking.

She knew he didn't mean it because he was still smiling. *What the heck is wrong with him?*

"Did I annoy you?" he asked softly.

"You annoyed the heck out of me, Sebastian. I might have to tell Daddy James what you've done to me. Like I always did when we were children."

He chuckled. "The likes of you telling Dad? Not a chance. You'd rather suffer in pain than tell anyone about it."

Sakura frowned in confusion. "What do you mean? I told on you a lot when we were little."

He looked at her for a long while. "I may have been a child back then, Sakura," he said seriously, "but I wasn't stupid, and neither were my brothers."

"But—"

"It was better to leave you in peace than to make things worse," he said. "Sorry we forgot all about you."

"So you did forget about me, eh?" She confirmed, nodding her head.

"Yes," he said. "I admit that. But now we're making it up to you. How about that?"

"A bit too late for that now," she said. "And I'm not interested. When the wedding is over, I'm gone."

She shut up immediately and blushed.

“Gone? Where are you going?”

She changed the subject. “Let’s go home. I’m sure everyone is worried.”

He wouldn’t have it. “Where are you planning to go?”

“It’s none of your business, Sebastian,” she said and unconsciously played with the pendant of her necklace, nervous all of a sudden.

Sebastian noticed. “Do they know about this? Mom and Dad?” he asked suspiciously.

“I haven’t told them yet,” she muttered. “I will later.”

“I suppose you’re old enough to go wherever you want,” he said finally, disappointed, his heart beating painfully.

“Yes, I am old enough to go wherever I want and do whatever I want,” she said. “And now I want to go home.” She finally 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 flower. Hadn’t she always been wearing that, since she was a child? It must have meant something to her, and he decided he’d find out later.

CHAPTER 16:

Calamity

JAMES EYED BETH'S STANDARD COFFEE warily and wondered where Sakura had gone off to. He needed her delightful, full-flavored, aromatic coffee—not this tasteless, muddy-black water that didn't deserve to be called coffee.

Beth saw the sour look on his face and said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Princeton, but Sakura isn't here. My standard coffee it is this afternoon."

"Where is she?" James demanded, scowling darkly. "I thought she would have been back by now."

Brenda, who was sitting beside him, knew her husband was having his craving once again. She chuckled and said, "James, do control yourself. Your sons are here after all. I'm sure Sakura will make you a cup after dinner."

James didn't like the sound of that. Dinner was still four hours away, too long for him. He turned 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.

Mary glanced up in time to see her uncle addressing her. "Don't look at me," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "Ask your sons. She was with them the last time I saw her."

James glanced over at his sons. Darcy didn't pay them any 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 on his youngest son's mind.

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 didn't look happy-go-lucky at all. In fact, he looked worried. And thirdly, Tristan was the devil-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.

"Well, Tristan?" James voiced, causing Tristan to jolt back to reality.

"What?" he asked.

"Sakura. Where is she?"

Tristan scowled then—*darkly*—as if her very name bothered the hell out of him. "The last time I knew, Sakura was with Sebastian." Then he added coldly, "He stole her away."

Logan scowled. "Sebastian stole her away? Sebastian again, eh?"

Tara choked on the hot coffee she was drinking the moment she heard Sebastian's name. She coughed loudly, and after she'd managed to compose herself, she muttered under her breath. Alaina glanced over at her adopted sister with concern.

"Speak of the devil," Conrad said, stood up, and rushed out 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 Sakura 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 Sebastian's stance, the way his brother turned his torso toward Sakura, Darcy knew Sebastian was interested in Sakura personally. What really bothered Darcy was the fact that Sakura was responding, even if she didn't know it herself. From the looks 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 Sakura? No. No. No. How?* Oh, God help her. She was going to go crazy in a second.

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

"Sakura!" Michael shouted the moment she stepped into the drawing room. He got off his seat and raced to her, hugging her around the waist. Conrad couldn't help but feel a bit jealous of little Michael.

"Hey, Michael," Sakura said warmly.

"You could've come up to the house with us." Michael pouted, gazing up at her. "There was lots of room in our car."

Sakura laughed. "I know, but... erm—"

Hayden, who'd suddenly stopped biting his nails, turned around and said, "I stole her away, and then Seb stole her away from me."

"You know what?" Mary put in, looking up at the brothers. "You guys are weird today. It's like you're either trying to take Sakura away for yourself or else protecting her from someone else. It confuses the hell out of me."

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

"Now then," Mary announced, turning her attention to Sakura. "My dear bridesmaid, we've been waiting, you know. Shall we go and try on our dresses?"

"Yes," Katherine said, getting up, noticing the sudden tense 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.

"Can I come, too?" Michael begged Sakura.

Peter chuckled. "Why don't you stay here with us, Michael? I'm going to teach you how to be a proper ring bearer."

Michael's eyes lit up then, and he rushed back to Peter. "I'm staying here."

Sakura laughed. "As you please," she said, and as she turned, her eyes met Darcy's. Her stomach fluttered the longer they gazed at each other. There was something in his eyes that she couldn't 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.

"Come on," Mary said, dragging her by the arm out the door, leaving Conrad to stand there all by himself, looking at Sakura with a sad expression on his face. Katherine was following behind them, chuckling at Mary's impatience.

Some half an hour later in Mary's bedroom, Sakura 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. It was beautiful, and Sakura couldn't think of any other dress that fit Mary that perfectly.

She, however, couldn't say the same of her own bridesmaid's 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-line silhouette gown didn't fit her. *Period!* It was far too big on her person.

"Sakura, did you lose weight?" Katherine asked, watching Sakura holding on to the material of the dress that was threatening to fall off her any moment now.

"I don't think so," she replied, gathering the material of the skirt and turning herself around to look at the full-length mirror. When she saw herself, she wanted to shriek in dismay. She looked like a little girl wearing her mother's dress.

"Are you sure you gave the designer the right measurement?" Mary asked, suspicious.

"I'm pretty sure," Sakura said. "Or maybe I didn't. Or maybe I did lose weight," she admitted. "Oh hell! What are we going to do? The wedding is only a week away."

"What else? Fix it!" Mary said. "Beth knows how to sew, doesn't she?" She came over to Sakura and pinched out the material in her hand so the dress sculpted perfectly about Sakura's slender body, showing off her hourglass shape. "Yes. Just a bit on the sides and you'll be fine."

Sakura nodded, understanding what her friend meant.

"You'll look great. No worries," Mary said. "Now then, shall we find our lovely Beth and see what magic she can do?"

Katherine chuckled. "You better take off your wedding dress before we go down."

"Yes, of course," Mary said.

Approximately fifteen minutes later and in her own bedroom, Sakura found herself being inspected by Beth's critical eyes. Mary

and Katherine, on the other hand, left once again after informing her they had to help Brenda prepare dinner since Sakura had stolen Beth away from the kitchen. Sakura chuckled and said loudly before they closed the door, "Not my fault. Yours, Mary, yours!"

"Stop talking, missy," Beth muttered under her breath. "And stay still."

Sakura hid a smile as Beth pinched the silk material out from the side of her waist.

"What did I tell you?" She went on. "You never eat right. What with you missing lunch here and there. Now you've lost weight and who's to blame but yourself?"

"I didn't think I'd missed that many lunches," Sakura murmured.

Beth stood straight, her plump face sour. "It's all that Ned's fault. If he hadn't taught you how to draw and paint, then you wouldn't have become so obsessed and spent hours on them."

"I like my paintings, Beth," Sakura said. "And you do, too."

Beth scoffed. "Me? Don't you dare contradict me, missy. Now, my dear girl, you've got to fatten up. Otherwise, what man's going to ask you to marry him?"

Uh-ho! Here we go again.

"Mark is a good man," she continued. "He doesn't mind that you're a bit on the thin side. He hasn't proposed yet, has he?"

Sakura cocked her head to one side. "What makes you think he'd propose?"

Beth looked up to her. "You two are dating, aren't you?"

Sakura chuckled. "No, of course not."

She frowned. "I thought so."

Sakura blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Beth cocked her head to one side. "You don't actually like Mark like that, do you?"

"Beth, you're the first person who's said that."

"Ah, I see. So it's the brothers, then?"

"Huh?" Sakura blinked, wondering where Beth was going now.

"Which one is it?" Beth teased. "They're all mighty handsome and still single. God bless them. Now then, tell me your pick."

Sakura laughed. "Beth, I think you're actually going senile."

Beth was offended. "I may be old, but I'm not senile, my girl. Conrad seems to be taking a liking to you, but then again, he's too young. Now Sebastian, that man is to die for. If you have your eyes on him, better make it quick before he's snaffled away. Yes, he'll make you an excellent husband. A perfect husband, no doubt, who would love you and cherish you until the day you're gone from this earth."

Sakura laughed. "Really?"

"Stop contradicting me, my girl. Now Darcy, there's my man. Dark and mysteriously handsome. He doesn't show much emotion, but we know he's very sensitive and sincere. Once he loves you, my girl, he'd never let you go nor will he ever lay his eyes on another woman. Now that's what I like about a man. And yes, he will love you and cherish you to bits."

Sakura 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 they didn't 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 if they had to endure one another's presence, then a word here and 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 seeing their faces in her mind's eye—especially Sebastian and Darcy. Was it because seeing them again brought back so many unpleasant memories? Or was it something else?

"Nicolas, now there's a good man for you. He'd look after you well if he's your husband. He'd love you to bits, very much like James. He'd protect you and your children. You'd never have to worry about a thing."

"Have you finished your lecturing yet, Beth?" Sakura teased.

Beth frowned at her and pulled the material a bit too tightly to show Sakura that she wasn't pleased. "Listen to your elders, my girl. I'm only telling you what's good for you."

Sakura laughed.

"Now, Tristan is a bit of a flirt, but he'll settle down when he finds *the one*. And Logan, he's just like Tristan. Hayden, on the other hand, we know he's a bit wild. He'll settle down when he finds his girl."

Sakura cocked her head to one side. "So at the moment, none of them have found their so-called girls yet?"

Beth thought about that for a moment. Then she stood up and harrumphed loudly. "They seemed to be settling down. They seemed to have changed. Maybe they have." She looked at Sakura closely. She wondered if the girl the brothers had all fallen for was in fact their adopted sister.

"Are we done?" Sakura asked, wondering why Beth was looking at her so weirdly.

"Yes, just about," the housekeeper replied, pulling the material of the dress this way and that again and Sakura along with it. A few moments later, she said, "Now you wait a minute while I go and get my sewing basket."

Sakura nodded, and the woman left. Alone, she sat down on her bed and sighed with relief. She hoped when Beth returned she wasn't going to continue with her lecture.

Out of the blue, her mind—of its own accord—started wandering off to la-la land again. It was Sebastian who came to her 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 she didn't notice the door open. When she heard it closing again, she expected Beth to return and hastily got up, readying herself for the woman to do her magic. But it wasn't Beth who came in the door. It was Alaina and Tara.

“Good Lord!” Tara said. “Is that the dress you’re wearing for the wedding?”

Alaina chuckled. “Well, ugly dress for an ugly girl.”

Sakura knew the moment they stepped into her room that they were there to hurt her. She braced herself for the oncoming bullying and said, “Who told you to come into my room?”

Alaina cocked her head to one side. “No one, bitch. But this is my house, so I go into any room I want. You don’t belong here. You know that.”

Sakura decided she’d cock her head to one side to show them she was no longer afraid of them. And to that she added a smile as well, for good measure. “I believe I belong here, Alaina. After all, I have been living here for the past few years, and you haven’t.”

Alaina couldn’t help herself. She charged forward like a raging bull and slapped Sakura on the cheek, causing the girl to swing her face to the right.

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

Sakura felt pain burning her cheek. She closed her eyes and counted to ten because otherwise she’d surely explode and retaliate. She didn’t want to do that. Not yet anyway. She could still handle this. She didn’t want to make a big deal out of this. After all, they’d only be here for another week, and once the wedding was over, they’d be gone, out of her life once again. Yes, she could do this.

“I’ll let it go just this one time,” she said under her breath.

“Let what go this one time?” Alaina snapped. “Why are you being such a bitch? Don’t you get it? No one wants you here. Everyone hates you.”

Sakura didn’t respond to that. She simply glared at Tara, who was sniggering behind Alaina.

“Do you have something to say, Tara Byrd?” Sakura asked, knowing the other woman hated it when people reminded her of her real last name.

“Shut the fuck up, bitch,” Tara shouted at her. “Who do you think you are? Living here like you own the place. And of all things, rubbing in with James and Brenda as if they’re your real parents.”

"I can't believe you're friends with Mary," Alaina said. "I can't believe she didn't see you for what you really are."

"Did you beg her to be her bridesmaid?" Tara asked. "Oh, I could just see it. Mary must have felt so sorry for you."

"Hmm," Alaina said. "Maybe we should help her fix it."

"Fix what?" Tara asked, pretending confusion.

"Her dress," Alaina chuckled. "It's awfully big on her, don't you think? Not suitable for her at all. Mary would be ashamed to see her bridesmaid wearing such a hideous dress at her wedding."

Sakura's heart skipped a beat. *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.

"Where do you think you're going, Silly Sally?" Tara shouted. "We're going to help you with that dress."

Sakura wasn't listening. Oh, she knew they were going to ruin her dress all right, and there's no way she'd let them do that. Not this time. Not Mary's choice of dress.

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! She couldn't believe they hadn't changed. Not one bit.

"You're still running the same old route, my dear Silly Sally," 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 Sakura.

Sakura wasn't thrilled, however, and felt *that* fear again like she'd always felt when Tara and Alaina were harassing her. Oh, God! What was she going to do? She couldn't possibly run into the drawing room and accuse Tara and Alaina of wanting to hurt

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 the two women wouldn't find her here.

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's and Alaina's laughter not too far away, and only moments later the door was thrust open from the other side, throwing her off balance.

"Aw," Alaina began the moment she saw Sakura, who was looking at them with fear in her eyes. "You ran to hide in the wrong room."

"What do you want?" Sakura asked, her voice quivering.

Tara shrugged her shoulders. "Just want to help out, dear sister. After all, that dress is awfully pretty on you."

Sakura couldn't help herself and decided she had enough of this stupid harassment. She wasn't going to run any longer and stood her ground.

"You know what?" she said, her voice stronger now as she stood there, her head held high and her whole body stiff and tense. "I never said this to you before, but you two are bitches. So if you want to beat me, there you go. I'm right here. But don't expect me to just stand here and allow you to beat me senseless like before."

Tara cocked her head to one side. "Oh, we know you've grown up, Silly Sally. We know you've grown your broken wings."

"And we also know you'll never tell anyone about how we treated you," Alaina said. "Because it's just you, dear sister."

Sakura gritted her teeth. Her heart was pounding hard as she glared at them, her hand fisted tight.

"I think that's enough talking," Tara said. She stalked forward and pulled Sakura by the arm. Because Sakura was smaller, she couldn't really offer much resistance and found herself being dragged along. Alaina helped by pulling at her gown, ripping out the beautiful, expensive material from her shoulders.

"Stop it!" Sakura screamed. "You're ruining my dress!"

Alaina chuckled merrily. "We're just fixing it for ya. Now don't move, dear sister. You'll look very beautiful in a minute. Isn't that what you want?"

Sakura couldn't help herself and she slapped Alaina in the face, sending her staggering backward. Alaina touched her cheek and glared. "You bitch! You slapped me!" She marched forward and sent her hand smashing on Sakura's left cheek. Tara held on to Sakura, allowing Alaina to slap her again.

"Have you learned how to swim yet, my silly girl?" Alaina asked, her eyes on the deep pool just a step away.

Sakura's eyes widened in fear as the meaning of Alaina's words sank in. She shook her head, fear rising within her chest.

Tara felt pleasure rushing through her veins once she saw the look on Sakura's beautiful face. Alaina was laughing like some maniac, which also pleased Tara.

"You haven't?" Alaina asked. "I can't believe that. After all these years, after what happened that last time, you still haven't learned?"

Sakura 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 James hadn't arrived on time, she would have drowned and died back then.

But no one was here now. No one would hear her. No one would see her. She'd really die here if they did throw her into the pool.

She shook her head. "Don't. Please don't."

Alaina shook her head and her lips turned downward, as if she were imitating Sakura. "Don't? No, don't. No, please."

Tara couldn't hide her excitement when she saw the wild look on Alaina's face. "Throw her in, Alaina. Throw the bitch in."

Alaina chuckled. "Time to go say hi to your maker," she said to Sakura and forcefully shoved her back.

"No!" Sakura screamed as she fell backward into the deep pool, her hands reaching out for them to help her. All she could see, however, were Tara and Alaina standing there, smiling as they watched her struggling in the water.

Sakura 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.

“Mom,” she whispered 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.

CHAPTER 17:

Savior

“SHIT!” DARCY SWORE UNDER HIS breath. He shouldn’t have picked up the phone. Shouldn’t have at all, and now, what was he supposed to do? *Hang up!* That was what he was supposed to do.

“Hello? Darcy, is that you? Darling, please, I’m so sorry. Please talk to me. I’ve missed you. I’m very sorry for what happened. There’s no excuse for what I’ve done. I know I slept with the guy, but I swear I’ll make it up to you. I swear, Darcy, sweetheart. Please talk to me.”

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*. The ex-girlfriend whom he’d 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!*

He’d 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. He had gone along without realizing it because Tara and Alaina had been pulling him along since Kate was their friend.

He gritted his teeth. *Shit!* She was still going on about her mistakes, begging him to come back to her. He was sick and 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 Sakura.

Sakura. 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 riding on Hayden's motorbike? Why had his heart beat so fast when he'd seen Sebastian holding Sakura's hand? Why had he held his breath when Sakura looked at him?

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.

No! Don't be stupid, Darcy! the voice in his head shouted. *She never wanted you. She hated your guts.*

"Shit!" he swore under his breath. He needed to get away. He needed to be in his comfort zone, and his room wasn't his comfort 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 he'd 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,

put both his arms under his head, and closed his eyes. Instantly, Sakura's face conjured up in his mind, and his heart started to beat irregularly again, almost painfully.

"Sakura," he 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 didn't want it to ever end. He turned his eyes to the left, and his heart glowed with joy as his eyes met his pretty adopted sister's.

Ten-year-old Sakura was watching him, a beautiful smile on 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.

"You're awake?" she asked softly.

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 fingers. He didn't know why, but he just loved being with her. She made him feel wonderful.

"Did you have a good sleep?" she asked.

"Yes," Darcy replied.

"Did you have a good dream?"

"Nope."

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

"I don't have good dreams either," she whispered softly, gazing off into the distance.

Darcy looked up at her, noting her sorrowful expression, which in turn caused his own heart to throb with pain. Of course, he didn't understand why.

"Do you have nightmares?" he asked.

He watched her nod her head.

"Well, if you have another one, I'll come and sleep with you. I'll protect you from your nightmare. I'll be your bodyguard. I'll be your prince, Snow."

She laughed. "You're only a little boy, Darce."

"I don't care. I'll still protect you even if I'm just a little boy," he said firmly, giving her a dashing smile. He moved his hand from her hair to touch her face, his fingers caressing her skin.

"You're such a nice brother, Darce," she said, returning his smile.

Darcy's expression quickly changed to a scowl. He sat up abruptly, which caused Sakura to gasp in surprise. He turned to look at her long and hard, his mauve-gray eyes intense on her face. "I'm not your brother," he muttered darkly.

Sakura was taken aback. "But—"

"I don't want to be your brother—ever!" he said firmly. "I want to be with you forever, but I don't want to be your brother."

"Darce," Sakura whispered, her face pale and sad. "But I thought you liked me."

Darcy panicked. *No! No! No!* He didn't want to upset her. He just didn't want her to be his sister; that was all. So why was she so upset? Oh no! She was going to cry.

"I do," he protested, trying to soothe her sadness. "I like you a lot."

"Then why?" she asked. "Why, Darce? Why can't I be your sister like Alaina and Tara?"

Darcy watched two fat tears roll down Sakura's cheeks. He didn't understand why himself, but he just knew he wanted to stay with her forever and that he didn't want her as his sister.

"Because I..."

* * * * *

“STOP IT! YOU’RE RUINING MY dress!”

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

Sakura? No. Surely he hadn’t been daydreaming and was now hearing Sakura’s voice? Surely not.

He heard a woman’s voice chuckling away merrily.

“We’re just fixing it for ya. Now don’t move, dear sister. You’ll look very beautiful in a minute. Isn’t that what you want?”

“You bitch! You slapped me!”

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 Sakura standing dangerously close to the pool. Before Sakura were Tara and Alaina, threatening her. He watched in horror as Alaina marched forward and sent her hand smashing on Sakura’s left cheek. Tara, meanwhile, held on to Sakura tightly so the girl wouldn’t be able to escape. Alaina slapped Sakura again.

“Have you learned how to swim yet, my silly girl?” Alaina asked. “You haven’t? I can’t believe that. After all these years, after what happened that last time, you still haven’t learned?”

Darcy gritted his teeth as he realized what was going on. Tara and Alaina were bullying Sakura again. *At this age?* They were all adults now, for Christ’s sake!

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

“Don’t. Please don’t,” he heard Sakura beg.

“Sakura,” he said softly. “Don’t let them bully you. Don’t let them hurt you.”

Darcy felt an uncomfortable feeling rising in his gut. *Shit!* He knew something wasn’t right. Knew something horrible was going to happen to Sakura.

“Don’t? No, don’t. No, please,” Alaina imitated Sakura.

“Throw her in, Alaina. Throw the bitch in,” Tara urged.

“Time to go say hi to your maker,” Alaina said to Sakura. Then forcefully, she shoved Sakura back.

Darcy watched in horror as Sakura 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.

"Sakura!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, his body tense 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 Sakura, 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.

Sakura sucked in air as they emerged from the pool. She coughed and spluttered water as she instinctively wrapped her arms around Darcy's muscular neck, holding on to him tightly for 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.

"Sakura?" he said softly, his lips warm and his breath hot against her forehead. "Sakura?"

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

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

"Breathe slowly," he said. "Don't force yourself."

Sakura, still dazed and lightheaded from the experience, did as she was told, the fear in her heart slowly fading away. She liked Darcy's gentle, feathery touches on her face because it helped calm her down. By instinct, she snuggled her face against his chest, her body shaking uncontrollably.

Darcy responded by tightening his arms around her, drawing her even closer to him. He kept her within his embrace until she breathed normally again, until he was sure she wasn't going to faint, until her slender body stopped shivering.

Sakura turned to look at him, her eyes large. It broke Darcy's 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 against the nape of his neck. Sakura couldn't help herself, and tears began to pour from her eyes.

She softly sobbed in his arms.

"Darcy! What the hell are you doing?" Alaina shouted.

Darcy couldn't control the raging of his beating heart, nor could he control the anger welling up in his chest.

No, he'd deal with them later. Now, however, he needed to comfort Sakura. 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 Alaina and Tara's 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 Sakura and Darcy without a second thought.

"What the hell happened?" he asked.

Toby begged for Sakura's attention by touching her arm with his wee paws.

Sakura turned to Toby. Her eyes were red and her cheeks were raw from crying.

“Sakura!” Conrad shouted her name, his voice wavering with concern. He came to kneel by her, searching her face. “Are you all right?”

Sakura nodded as she tried to control the tears that just kept on coming.

“You’re obviously not all right,” Sebastian said, a dark scowl on his face. “What the hell happened?” He looked at Darcy for an answer.

Darcy didn’t reply; he was staring at Alaina and Tara, his face a mask of anger. Sebastian understood immediately.

Nicolas narrowed his eyes and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Should take her up,” he said.

Sebastian nodded. He gently pulled Sakura from Darcy’s arms and lifted her.

Sakura wrapped her arms around his neck and hid her face against his chest. “This is so embarrassing,” she muttered under her breath.

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” he said kindly as he 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.

“What?” Alaina asked, folding her arms across her chest.

“You nearly killed her,” Darcy shouted. “How could you do that?”

“Oh, come on!” she snapped back. “She so can swim. She was just pretending. You know how—”

Darcy couldn’t control himself. His palm smacked against Alaina’s right 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.

"Don't touch her again," he said coldly. "If you do, you'll regret it."

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.

"Why the hell did you hit me?" Alaina shouted, tears pouring out of her eyes. "Because of her, is that it? Why? Darcy! Why? She's 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. We used to be really close, Darcy, you and I. But ever since she came, I lost you to her. To that motherless bitch!"

"Shut up, Alaina!" Darcy shouted. "Just shut the hell up! I said before if you ever lay your hands on her again, you'll be sorry." With that, he walked out the door.

Nicolas watched his brother go, and once they were alone, he stepped toward his sisters. "You know," he said, "I expected more from you. I thought you'd changed, and you too, Tara." He 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 been reeling with anger. Though his way of dealing with unpleasant business looked as though he hadn't done much, she knew the consequences of not following his orders were enormous. And Tara had learned that early on. Nicolas was a pleasant adopted brother to be with, but you wouldn't want to cross him.

"So you heard him," Nicolas said. "He doesn't want you touching Sakura again. That much is obviously clear. You know how Darcy is. You're his twin, after all." He pulled his glasses from 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 dirt, and when he couldn't find any, he put them back on.

"And I want the same thing. Sakura is our sister, after all, and we don't want her getting hurt." He glanced from Alaina to Tara, who stared at him as if he'd gone senile. He chuckled. "You know

Sebastian owns that apartment of yours in New York, and from the looks of things, he's taking a real liking to Sakura."

Alaina harrumphed. "He'd never like her."

Nicolas cocked his head to one side. "No?" he asked, begging to differ. In fact, he'd known all along, since they were children, in fact, that Sebastian had always liked Sakura, though he had hidden his feelings from his siblings well because he'd been afraid of their disapproval.

"You understand my meaning, Alaina? Tara?" He watched them closely. "A word or two with Sebastian could save you from the streets."

"What are you implying?" Alaina shouted.

"That he knew exactly what you did, and I don't think he likes it."

Alaina snorted. "He wouldn't throw us out. We're his sisters."

Nicolas sighed. "Maybe he wouldn't. But who knows? His behavior seems to have changed a lot since we got here. By the way, I don't suppose you know Dad has given me full control of the family trust."

Alaina gritted her teeth. "Nicolas! You wouldn't! You wouldn't cut off my money. I have a right to it."

"Seeing how fast you spent it, Alaina, your portion will *not* last very long," he said. "Now then. Do we understand each other? It's a warning, Alaina. I rather like Sakura now."

Alaina couldn't say a word because if what Nicolas had just said was true, then his words were law. She said through gritted teeth, "Come on, Tara!" Then she dragged her adopted sister by the arm and stalked out the door.

Nicolas watched them go and shook his head. They hadn't changed a bit where Sakura was concerned.

CHAPTER 18:

Protection

SAKURA 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.

Sakura didn't like that. She didn't like it one bit because she knew he felt sorry for her. Instantly, she was pissed with the whole situation. No, she didn't want Sebastian—or any of the brothers for that matter—to feel sorry for her. She wasn't weak. She was a strong woman. Well, at least she thought so. She wasn't a child who needed strong men to support her. Nor did she need a strong man to carry her.

She cleared her throat and said softly, "You can put me down, Sebastian. I can walk."

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

"Sebastian?" She tried again, thinking he didn't hear her the first time. "I can walk. You can put me down now."

He continued to ignore her.

"Sebastian!" she said again, tugging at the collar of his shirt to get his attention.

Sebastian finally turned his attention to her.

"Put me down," she begged.

"No," he replied simply.

Sakura blinked. "Why not?"

"Because you're still in shock, and your dress is too big and long," he said.

Sakura blinked again. "I beg your pardon?"

My dress is too big and long? What did that have to do with anything?

"You'll trip."

She frowned. Of course she wouldn't trip. She wasn't a toddler who had just begun to learn how to walk, for God's sake.

"I can carry you if you don't want Sebastian to," Conrad offered happily.

"She's fine," Sebastian said, heading straight to Sakura's 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.

Sakura pulled the oversized dress around to properly cover herself. "Thanks for bringing me back," she said, her eyes on the carpet where her soaked dress dampened it.

"Go get changed," Sebastian said. "You'll catch a cold if you don't get that dress off."

The moment he said dress, she looked down at herself, the bridesmaid's gown clinging to her. She was a sorry sight all right.

"I'll find you something to change into," Conrad offered, marching up to her wardrobe.

"No!" she shouted. "It's okay. I'll do it myself." But it was too late already. Conrad had the wardrobe door wide open and was searching through it.

"Well, go on," Sebastian said, nudging her toward the bathroom. When she didn't move, he wrapped his hand about her

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

"What are you doing?" she asked, confused.

"Helping you," he said. He gently twisted her around so her back was to him. Then, without warning, he unzipped her dress all the way down her back.

Sakura wasn't prepared for that. In fact, she wasn't prepared for the big dress to fall from her person either. She screamed in fright, then caught it in the nick of time, at her waist.

Sebastian wasn't prepared, either, to see her half-naked in front of him. He couldn't help but notice the smoothness 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 perked at just the right angle. Perfect in a man's hand. *Perfect in my hands.*

Sakura 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, please get out," she said quietly, her cheeks blushing. "And bring me a towel."

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 he'd brought home those occasional women for the night, but 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 sweat. This one made him hard on sight. And she didn't even do 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.

"I got the dress," Conrad called out.

Sebastian heard him coming toward the bathroom, and before his brother had the chance to peek inside, he grabbed the dress from Conrad's hand, said, "Towel!" and slammed the door shut again.

Sakura relaxed, thinking Sebastian had left. She gathered her long hair, bunched it up, and let it rest over one shoulder. Then she proceeded to turn to the running shower.

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.

"Where's the towel?" Conrad called out from the other side.

Sakura 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!" she shrieked, her voice husky. "What are you still doing in here?"

Sebastian tried to sound as normal as he could and managed a cool reply. "Waiting for the towel."

Sakura tightened her grip on the dress at her chest and glared at him. He couldn't blame her for that. He was rather thankful she couldn't see him going hard with desire for her.

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 his attention to Sakura's bedroom and was 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

neatly arranged on the antique desk. He especially loved the flower arrangement sitting to the side, magnolia and cherry blossoms. What a beautiful combination.

"I hope she's all right," Conrad said.

Sebastian glanced at Toby, who was having a nice, relaxing time on Conrad's lap.

"Me, too," he replied.

Darcy, now dressed in a pair of dry jeans and T-shirt, burst through the door. "Where is she?" he asked.

Sebastian nodded to the bathroom.

"Is she all right?" Darcy couldn't help himself.

The brothers didn't answer. Truth be told, they didn't know.

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, Sakura opened the door, and they all hastily stood.

Sakura was so shocked to see three men in her bedroom waiting for her that she couldn't do anything but stare, momentarily 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 Conrad hadn't given her any underwear. *And why would he?* He hadn't a clue as to where they were and probably didn't think she 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 bloody see her skin beneath. And yes, that damn cotton material was rather thin, and since her soft, smooth skin was still bloody wet

from the shower, it was showing the shape of her breasts and nipples very clearly.

Yes, she was enchanting. She would tease any man's senses. *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. Sakura glanced up at him, wondering what his problem was since he was now scowling at her again. She wasn't in the mood for his nastiness and took a step to one side.

He blocked her by taking a step as well.

"What are you doing?" she asked tiredly.

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 she was wearing what Conrad had found for her. He didn't even have the sense to give her underwear. And apparently, neither did he.

He softened his face and gave her a smile instead. "Go back in," he said, gently nudging her around and back into the bathroom. "I'll find underwear for you."

Sakura twisted around so fast her head spun. "No!" she said. "I mean, I'll do it myself. Why don't you guys go down? I'll be there soon."

Darcy wasn't having any of it. He folded his arms across his chest and told her with his stern face that he wasn't going anywhere.

Conrad nodded. "Can I sit on your bed, Sakura?"

Sakura sighed. "Look, I'll be fine."

"They might come back," Darcy said. "I won't allow them to—" He broke off, glancing away. His heart wrenched with pain at the thought that she might have just died if he hadn't happened to be there. That just meant Alaina would be a murderer too. His face became even grimmer at the thought. "Go back in. Sebastian will

find your underwear. You don't look presentable enough to come down for dinner."

Sakura sighed. "Okay."

"Can I sit on your bed?" Conrad asked again. "I like your bed."

Sakura couldn't help herself. Despite being so tired, she smiled at Conrad and said, "Yeah," before turning back into the 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.

Sakura 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 smile. He didn't know why, but he liked the fact that she was still a virgin.

Darcy picked up Sakura's photo album sitting on the desk and 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—

Sakura opened the door and came out. Darcy put the photo album back in place and stood up, his whole being shaking involuntarily.

"Do I look much more presentable for dinner now?" she asked.

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

looking at her? But why did he feel pleasure, too? And why did he want to be with her so badly? Only moments before—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.*

He cleared his throat. “Yes,” he said and then walked out the door.

Sebastian turned to her. He touched her arm and said, “It would be better to lock your door from now on.”

Sakura wasn’t happy with that idea. “What? Suddenly I’m not safe in my own house anymore?”

“That’s not it,” Conrad said from the bed. “You are safe. But it’s them.”

“They’re your sisters, Conrad,” Sakura said. “As I am.”

Conrad didn’t know whether to smile, scowl, or cry at her remark. Yes, Alaina was his real sister. Tara was his adopted sister. But Sakura? The reality suddenly hit him. She was also his adopted sister. But that wasn’t what he wanted.

His face was serious, and he hugged Toby tighter.

“Sakura,” Sebastian said, noting that Conrad had gone silent. 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. Sakura shoved away his hand, furious at the whole situation.

“Please be careful from now on. We can’t protect you—”

“No!” She cut him off. “I can look after myself. After all, I didn’t have you guys to look after me when I was younger. I’m sure I won’t die just yet. Now please leave because I’m tired and need to rest. And please tell Daddy James and Mom Brenda that I’m not feeling well. Good night.”

She took Toby from Conrad and walked to the window, staring out, tears in her eyes.

Sebastian was pissed! Yes, he was pissed because he hadn't protected her when she was younger. He was pissed because she had been so used to being alone and dependent on herself that she didn't want his or his brothers' help. He was also pissed because she had called his parents Mom and Dad. Yes, technically they were her mom and dad, too. The truth was, however, he didn't 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 didn't he want her to be his adopted sister? Why didn'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 going to be all right. Yes, Conrad didn't care that he had to be her adopted brother. Nope, he didn't at all. All he knew was that he wanted to protect her. So he came up behind her and hugged her, his arms wrapping around her form.

"It's okay, Sakura," he whispered into her ear. "You can cry. It's only me here."

Sakura didn't need any more encouragement. Tears poured 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.

"You're so nice to me, Conrad, even when you were very small. Your brothers ignored me, pretended I didn't exist. But you were different. You knew I was here. You secretly played with me when they weren't around, and I thank you for that."

Conrad gave her a smile. "Well," he began, his eyes twinkling, "I don't actually remember much of that."

She managed to laugh, and he liked that. Yes, he made her smile and that was enough for him. *For now at least.*

“Yes, it was because you were very small, so you wouldn’t remember.”

He wiped her tears from her cheeks and chuckled. “Like Darcy said, you need to look presentable for dinner.”

“Do I have to go down?” she asked weakly.

“Are you afraid?”

Sakura automatically lifted her chin a notch higher. “No, I’m not afraid.”

Conrad smiled. “Good. Then let’s go.” That said, he grabbed her hand and led her out the door.

CHAPTER 19:

Nightmares

SAKURA MANAGED TO COMPOSE HERSELF by the time they got to 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, but he wouldn't let her 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.

"Hey," she said excitedly. "How's your day been, Conrad?"

Conrad managed to give her a smile. "Hey, yeah. Good."

Lauren noticed Sakura and poked her head over and said, "Hey, Sakura."

Sakura turned to Lauren and managed to give the girl a weak smile. "Hey, I'll go and get your dress."

"Don't worry just yet, Sakura. We can take care of it after dinner." That said, Lauren promptly turned back to Conrad and

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 Sakura's mood and appearance. They'd been her friends since they had been young and knew that something wasn't right. Though they didn't say 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.

"You've got yourself a dedicated fan, Nicolas," Peter said.

"Yes, I think so too," Nicolas replied, and Michael smiled up at him with delight.

When the maids brought in dinner, everyone ate and chatted, enjoying themselves. James, however, noticed that Sakura was rather quiet. He also noticed that Alaina and Tara were behaving oddly. They kept staring at Sakura 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 Sakura just gave in. She was just too tired and couldn't pretend that nothing had happened 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, but 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 Sakura in the corridor.

"Sakura!" he called out.

She turned and gave him a weak smile. "Are you being my bodyguard or something?"

He chuckled. "Kind of."

She cocked her head to one side. "Well, I'm fine. But since you're here, mind doing me a favor?"

"Sure, anything," he replied.

"Okay," she said, leading him up the stairs.

Once they were in her bedroom, she gave him Lauren's dress. "Can you return this to Lauren for me?"

Conrad stared at the dress. "Is that all?"

She laughed weakly. "What else do you expect?"

"I dunno," he said. He was hoping she'd ask him to protect her by letting him stay in her room or something so they could spend time together.

"Thanks a ton," she said. Conrad looked decidedly wounded.

"Don't you look at me like that, young man." She chuckled. "I promise I'll be fine. Good night."

Conrad nodded and with the dress in his hands reluctantly left the room.

Once she was alone, Sakura sighed. She eyed Toby, who was already sound asleep in his basket. She went to kneel beside him and petted him. "Good night, Toby," she said and went to brush her teeth and change into her pajamas.

Tonight she slipped on her Victoria's Secret cotton Mayfair 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.

She didn't know how long she lay there, listening to the humming of human conversations floating through the ceilings from downstairs. She certainly didn't know when she had fallen asleep either, and when she did, she had a nightmare.

* * * * *

THIRTEEN YEARS AGO, SUMMER

"SNOW," NINE-YEAR-OLD DARCY SAID SOFTLY, his eyes on Sakura's sleeping form, his finger gently touching her silky black tresses. 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 through the library's windows, making her even more beautiful, just like a little angel. He hadn't seen her in a year and now look at how grown up she'd become.

Ten-year-old Sakura 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, and it caused Darcy's heart to flutter with joy.

"Darce," she said softly, sitting up. "You're back from boarding school."

"I am," he whispered.

"Well? How was it? Did you like it? I haven't seen you for so long. What?" she asked, noting that he was staring at her for a bit too long.

He grinned and held up a book. "Read this to me," he said instead. "I missed you reading to me."

She noted that the book was old. She smiled when she saw that it was *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare.

"All right," she replied, taking the book from him. In an instant, the book was snatched from her hand and thrown to the floor.

Sakura 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.

“Get away from her, Darcy!” she said. “She’s the devil’s daughter, don’t you remember? Or have you gone away for so long that you’ve forgotten?”

Alaina said, “Yeah, Darcy. She’s the devil’s daughter.”

“She’s not.” Darcy protested, frowning at the girls. He got up and glared at them. “Now leave us alone.”

“No! We won’t leave you alone,” Tara said. “Can’t you see? She’s here to take your mommy and daddy away. Didn’t you see how your daddy loves her? And your mommy too?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Darcy said, picking up the book.

Alaina snatched the book from him, then started ripping out the pages in anger.

“Alaina! Stop it. What are you doing?” he asked.

“I hate this book,” Alaina shouted, furiously ripping the book even faster, venting all of her anger and frustration. Once she was finished, she threw the torn book at Sakura, smacking her in the face.

Sakura was sore. She bit her lip and held back tears that began to well up in her eyes.

Darcy gritted his teeth. “Why did you do that?”

“Because I hate the book and I hate her.” Alaina pointed a finger at Sakura. “Please, Darcy, hate her. She’s here to steal Mom 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 lied to Mom and Dad that I did things I didn’t do, Darcy. Please believe me. If you don’t believe me, ask Tara.”

“Please, Darcy,” Tara said, touching his arm. “She is evil. Just come with us. Don’t go near her.” She turned to Sakura and sneered. “God will never forgive you for what you’ve done, bitch.”

“Come on, Darcy,” Alaina said, pulling Darcy by the hand and leading him out the door. “You’ll see one day. She’s evil.”

Darcy looked over his shoulder at Sakura, 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 Sakura in a tree house.

"Go on," Alaina said. "What ya waiting for? Get out of here. You don't belong here. Daddy made this tree house just for us. Not you. Now get out!"

Sakura blinked back tears. "But Daddy James said I can play, too."

"Daddy James?" Alaina shouted at her, smacking her fist against Sakura's face, sending her against the wooden wall. "How dare you call our daddy *Daddy James*? He's not your dad. He's ours!" she screamed.

"Why don't you just piss off and die?" Tara said to her. "Go jump off the tree house. Just kill yourself already. The world would be better off without you."

Sakura blinked back tears and gently rubbed her sore cheek.

"Oh, God! You're pathetic," Alaina said.

"Why don't we help her kill herself?" Tara suggested.

"Yeah, why not?" Alaina said. "Come on, witch. Go and hang yourself or something." She grabbed Sakura by the collar of her shirt and pulled her forward.

"No, please don't!" Sakura screamed. "Please don't!"

They wouldn't listen to her, however, and laughed as they dragged her to the door of the tree house. They tried to shove her out so she could fall backward down the tree, but Sakura 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 length of the lawn toward the tree house, calling Alaina's name. Obviously, he was looking for her.

"Darcy!" Tara screamed out at the top of her lungs. "Help us! Please! She's trying to kill us!"

Alaina caught on instantly. She glanced over and saw her twin brother racing at full speed toward them. She smiled gleefully, adrenaline coursing through her veins. "Now he'll find out just how evil this bitch is." She chuckled to Tara.

Tara nodded, and on cue they both screamed at the top of their lungs, "Help us! Darcy! She's trying to kill us!"

Darcy raced to them and stopped at the bottom of the huge tree, looking up. "Alaina!"

Tara chose that moment to take action. *This is it*, she thought. She let go of Sakura's hand and shoved her back into the tree house, causing Sakura to tumble and hit against the wall.

Sakura fell and landed on her backside, confused that she hadn't yet fallen off the tree house. Then she watched in horror as 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 by Darcy's feet. She couldn't help feeling the excitement within her when she saw the surprise, the shock, and the fear on Alaina's beautiful face.

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.

"Alaina!" Darcy screamed, his face white with horror as he picked up his unconscious sister in his arms. "Alaina!" he cried. "Please don't die!"

Tara managed to compose herself from her excitement. She rushed down the tree house and pretended to cry her heart out. "Alaina! Alaina! It's her. She's trying to kill us. Can't you see, Darcy? She's the devil's daughter. She's here to kill all of us and take our mommy and daddy."

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 Sakura and shouted at her. "Why? I never

believed them before, but now! Why? How could you? How could you?" Then, as if he were revolted by her, he shoved her from him.

Sakura landed against the wall. She hugged herself into a ball, rocking herself as she whimpered, "I didn't do it. I didn't. Please believe me. I didn't."

* * * * *

THE WHIMPERING SOUND ECHOED IN Darcy's head, and he woke with a start. He flashed his eyes open and sat up, his palm against his chest, feeling the continuous 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. Suddenly, as if he couldn't stand 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? He hadn't thought about that day for so long. *So why now?*

It hurt. His heart hurt. Why had he hurt Sakura when she hadn't done anything wrong? Why had he hurt her when he loved her so much? *Why?*

Yes, he was a monster. He was a heartless, malicious monster who didn't deserve her love or kindness.

Darcy's whole body shuddered in anguish and tears burned within his eyes.

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THIRTEEN YEARS AGO, SUMMER

THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD SEBASTIAN WAS WATCHING SAKURA 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,

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 because he didn't want Hayden to get Sakura 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's lies that it had been Sakura who had told on him. Now Hayden really hated Sakura.

Then there were Tristan and Logan. His stupid teenage brothers had a bet on who would get to kiss Sakura first. He suspected they hadn't had enough kisses 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 Sakura, 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 Sakura even more, believing Sakura 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 Sakura 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.

He didn't know how it happened. Perhaps he'd been too engrossed in watching Sakura that he didn't know Tara and Alaina were there until they were behind Sakura. 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 Sakura had pushed her off. Sebastian knew it

was bullshit. He knew Tara and Alaina lied. But then again, Darcy wouldn't lie. Darcy never lied, and so he wasn't sure.

He made his way across to get closer, to hear what they were saying because he was curious. He also felt as though something wasn't right. He didn't know why, but he had to. It was stupid to spy on your own siblings, but he just had to.

"See what you did, you bitch?" Tara shouted. "You pushed poor Alaina out of the tree house, and now look at her arm. It's broken!"

"You have to pay, you bitch!" Alaina yelled, pointing a finger at Sakura.

"But I didn't," Sakura said, moving backward as they advanced toward her, her legs inches from the edge of the cliff. "I didn't push you off."

"Stop arguing and just go and die!" Alaina screamed. "No one wants you here. No one!"

"You're better off dead anyway," Tara shouted, her face red.

"You have to pay for what you did to me," Alaina said. "Now go and die!"

Sebastian watched in horror as Alaina pushed Sakura back then, with all her might, shoved Sakura into the sea. "Just die already!" she screamed.

Sakura didn't shout for help. She just gasped as she found herself falling backward.

Splash!

Her body hit the water, and she began to struggle trying to climb back, but she found she couldn't. She was drowning, 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 Sakura. 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,

filled with dread and fear. Then he found he couldn't go any 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 Sakura. 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.

"Come on," he heard Nicolas say faintly against the howling wind and smashing waves. He tightened his arms around his brother's neck as they both struggled their way across to the beach.

"Sakura!" he shouted, his heart thundering loudly within his chest.

"Dad," Nicolas replied between taking deep breaths.

Once they'd reached the shore, Nicolas helped him onto the sandy beach. Sebastian didn't even care that he could have just died if it weren't for his brother. He was more concerned about Sakura, 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. *Sakura! Please wake up. Don't you die on me! Sakura, please don't go. Please, don't go.*

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.

“Come on, Sakura,” James said in anguish. “Sweetheart, wake up.”

Sebastian felt dark and hollow within his stomach. The world around him felt cold, and at the same time, he felt angry with himself. He was angry because of what he couldn’t do. He couldn’t even protect her. He couldn’t even save her. He felt tears sting 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’s arms.

James sighed with relief, tears in his eyes.

Sebastian couldn’t control himself and cried, tears rolling down his cheeks. He felt Nicolas’s arms around him, comforting him.

“Sakura,” he whispered, staring at her pale face. “Don’t leave me.”

* * * * *

“SAKURA!” SEBASTIAN SHOUTED, WAKING HIMSELF 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.

“Sakura,” he said softly under his breath. “I’m sorry I couldn’t save you.”

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 because every time he got into the water, he’d see little Sakura again, see her drowning and begging for his help. Thus he’d use all his power, kicking and stroking faster and faster in order to redeem himself, in order to save her. But he had never saved her, and

instead he'd won so many races, so many trophies. It had never been the trophies, however, that he wanted. It had always been Sakura. Yes, Sakura was his real trophy.

Eventually he quit swimming professionally, as Sakura 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?

"Sakura," he whispered under his breath. "I couldn'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, and as if they understood each other without having to speak, Sebastian opened Sakura's door and hurried inside. Darcy followed.

She wasn't in bed. They found her hugging herself and Toby, 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.

He pulled her to him so he wouldn't alarm her. She didn't fight him, and he was pleased.

"It's okay," he said softly. "It's just a nightmare."

Sakura shook her head and bit her lip. "The water! It was trying to take me. I can't go. Not yet. I can't leave Toby behind."

In response, Toby rubbed his head against her chest, telling her he understood.

"Shh... It's only a nightmare," Sebastian said. "See, you're still here."

She looked up at him and blinked. "You're not Daddy James."

The situation was serious, yet Sebastian wanted to laugh. If Nicolas were here, she would have thought that he was Daddy

James and wouldn't hesitate to go into his arms and let him comfort her.

"No, I'm not," he said softly. Suddenly she surprised him by 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 wasn't her Daddy James.

Oh yes, he remembered that time long ago when Sakura 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.

Then only love me in secret. I don't want to hurt my siblings.

"You're Sebastian." Her voice penetrated his mind. He watched her as she gazed up at him, her eyes large and glistening with tears. "You're Sebastian," she repeated weakly. "Sebastian who saved me. 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 me, but you don't like me as your sister. I was so sad, so very sad. But you kissed me. Then I was happy again, so very happy." She moved her face and sleepily looked at Darcy. She whispered, "Darce. My Darce. But you're no longer my Darce. You hate me now. Why?" She turned and snuggled her face back against Sebastian's warm chest. "Please don't kill me yet. I want to go to Mary's wedding first, and I want to meet my real mother... Then you can kill me, Tara, Alaina. I want to meet my real mother," she murmured softly. "She gave me my name. Sakura means cherry blossom. She gave me my necklace. I'm going to find her. I want to call her *okasama*. It means mother in Japanese. Yes, I want to call her *okasama* so much..."

The brothers noted that her eyes were now closed and she was rocking herself back and forward. Darcy bent down and took Toby

from her. The dog groaned, wanting to go back to his master, but Darcy was firm.

"Hush!" he said to Toby as he petted him.

"Yes," Sebastian said, placing his hand under her slender legs. Then he lifted her. "You'll meet your real mother soon. You'll find her."

"Yes, real soon," she murmured under her breath. "I'll meet her real soon."

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.

A few moments later, after they were satisfied she wasn't going to have another nightmare, the brothers headed out the door.

"Want some coffee?" Sebastian asked at the corridor.

"Yeah, why not?" Darcy said, leading the way with Toby in his arms.

"Can't guarantee it'll be as good as Sakura's, though," Sebastian said. "By the way, maybe you should put on a shirt. It is rather cold."

Darcy nodded and gave Toby to Sebastian.

Sebastian said before his brother could disappear, "Don't forget. We have our hair appointment at ten."

Darcy groaned. "Shit!" he muttered under his breath.

Sebastian laughed. "It's for our dear cousin's sake. You know Mary'll flip if she sees you with such long hair at her wedding."

"Speak for yourself," Darcy said. "Yours is almost as long as mine." With that, Darcy disappeared into his room.

CHAPTER 20:

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.

“Chest infection,” Dr. Young said. “Pneumonia. All she needs is an antibiotic and a lot of rest.”

“It must be from the drowning,” James said.

Darcy felt tears sting his eyes and his stomach hollowed. At that moment, 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 weakling who didn’t deserve to be called a Princeton.

Ashamed! He was ashamed of himself.

He hugged himself into a ball in the corner of his room and cried his heart out, crying for his Snow and hating himself at the same time.

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 and Tara? He'd punish them; he was sure, which they deserved. *And Sakura?* What was going to happen to her after this?

It was dark, and Darcy couldn't sleep. His heart was still racing and his mind was still on Sakura. That was when he couldn't take 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 to Sakura's room 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.

"Snow," he whispered.

He slid 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.

"Snow," he said, tears brewing in his eyes. "Please be all right."

"Darce," she whispered softly in her sleep. "I didn't do it. I didn't push Alaina."

Darcy bit his lip, his heart trembling with pain in his chest. "I know you didn't," he said, his voice shaking. "I know you didn't."

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.

"Snow," he whispered. "Snow."

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 body against his, he hugged her tight. "It's all right, Snow. I'm here. You're safe with me," he whispered against her forehead. "You're safe with me."

A few moments later, she calmed down. "Darce," she whispered. "Please don't leave me."

"I won't leave you," he replied, tightened his arms around her. "Please love me," she begged.

Darcy's heart was crying out in agony, and his body shook with the powerful emotion. "I love you, Snow," he said. "I love you so much it hurts." Then he moved his lips to her forehead and kissed her there. Slowly, he moved his lips down to her nose and kissed her there, too. Then, as if he couldn't control himself, he moved 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 his name. "Darce, you do love me. I'm your Snow."

When he moved his lips back, he whispered, "Yes, you're my Snow. You'll always be my Snow."

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, as if this was her final hour. He panicked, rushed out of bed, and ran to get his parents.

Oh, God, he thought, please let her be all right. Please!

Alone, Sakura 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.

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.

She didn't know where she was going, 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 I'm 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. Sakura couldn't help herself and reached 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 she 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.

"Sakura?" A voice echoed from the distance. "Sakura?"

Sakura stopped, wondering where the voice had come from. "Sakura?" She heard it again. "Sakura?"

Sakura searched around for the owner of that familiar voice, but he was nowhere to be found. Suddenly she saw azure eyes and a hand reached out to her.

“Sakura?”

She felt hands touching her face. Sakura blinked. In her dazed and feverish state, she felt herself being lifted and then positioned on someone’s back. She felt the person running, his breathing hard and labored. He smelled nice, of earth and pinewood. She loved his smell.

“Don’t die on me, Sakura,” she heard him say.

She didn’t know how long he’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.

“Hold on, Sakura. We’re almost there,” he said.

Oh no! Too cold now. Too much rain. She shivered. No! Way too cold now.

“Shit! A storm? 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 fear.

“We’ll have to stay there for the night,” he said. “It’s too dark. And the storm...”

Some more running, and then she couldn’t feel the rain anymore. She felt him gently lay her on the cold, hard ground. She tried to open her eyes but found she couldn’t and 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 person’s neck and her body against that very warm, inviting naked

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.

"You have a fever," he said softly, pulling his jacket on top of her as a blanket.

"Sebastian," she whispered.

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 the rain stopped, he'd take her home, 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. He just hoped she'd survive the night. *No*, he told himself firmly. *She will survive this night.* He'd make sure of that.

Sakura moved and touched her cold hand against his warm, bare chest. "Why did you come after me?"

He softened his face and asked, "Why did you run away?"

She bit her lip. Her heart hurt. "Because no one wants me. I don't want to burden anybody."

"That's not true," 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 they couldn't find her.

She looked up at him again, tears in her eyes. "No one wants me."

"What about Mom and Dad? They love you very much, Sakura. They'd be devastated if you're gone."

She groaned. "Mom and Dad," she whispered. "I love them so very much too." Then she looked up at him. "What about you? Do you love me?"

Sebastian swallowed. He hesitated. His hands fisted tight. His heart trembled.

"I see. You don't even like me? Just a little? As your sister?"

Sebastian slowly shook his head. No, he couldn't lie to her, not even in her state of sickness. "Sakura, I'm sorry."

Her heart retched with pain. "I see," she whispered, 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.

Tears burned in Sakura's eyes. *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 before, and Sakura 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 with love, she smiled up at him. "Thank you," she said and then slowly closed her eyes again.

Sebastian knew she wouldn't remember their kiss when she 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 forehead. "I love you," he whispered.

CHAPTER 21:

The Best Man Wins

WHEN SAKURA 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. Why she was touching her lips she wasn't sure. She was sure, however, that she'd had a dream. What was it? Why couldn't she remember?

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.

She couldn't believe it. She just couldn't believe she couldn't defend herself. She was now a twenty-three-year-old woman, and Tara and Alaina had still managed to bully her. This was unacceptable. Why did she let them bully her? It just wasn't right.

She gritted her teeth. *No!* From this moment forward, she would no longer allow those two vile women to hurt her. *Nope! Not anymore.*

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 they'd just returned from their very unpleasant hairdressing experience, looked up. What they saw nearly sent them to heaven.

Sakura 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, it looked as though she wasn't wearing any 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'd finished chewing his sandwich and awkwardly swallowed, he cleared his throat and told his brothers to quit staring.

Nicolas cleared his throat also and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, returning his attention to his tablet. "You're messing up the tablecloth, Logan!" he said.

Logan blinked, turned his attention to his coffee, and when he realized what he'd done, he swore under his breath. Tristan laughed at his brother.

Sakura closed the door behind her and announced to the room, "I've decided to learn how to swim."

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 Sakura, pulled her into his arms, and hugged her real tight.

"Good morning, Sakura," he said into her ear, his warm breath fanning her skin.

"What the hell are you doing, Tristan?" Conrad asked.

"Err, good morning, Tristan," Sakura replied uncomfortably, realizing he'd had a haircut. She blinked and turned to look at the brothers and noticed they all had their hair cut. Sebastian's blond hair was now cropped to just past his neck and cleanly styled, which made him look even more handsome than ever. Darcy's very 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 so 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.

"Morning hugs," Tristan said. Then he cheekily added, "And now for the morning kisses."

Within a second flat, Hayden was out of his chair and shoving Tristan back. He pulled Sakura into his arms and hugged her tightly. "I'm giving her morning hugs, too."

"Why, you brat!" Tristan snapped.

Hayden laughed. "Go lie down, you old dog." Then he turned his attention to Sakura and said softly into her hair, "Good morning, Sakura. Did you have a good sleep last night?"

Sebastian and Darcy eyed each other with concern.

"Err, good morning, Hayden. Yes, I did," she said, giving him a cute smile.

Sebastian and Darcy eyed each other again. They wondered if she'd forgotten about her nightmare from last night and them in her room.

"Oi, Hayden!" Logan called out. "Let her go. You're suffocating her."

Hayden scowled at his brother and finally did let her go, reluctantly though. Tristan put his hands on her shoulders and his face beside her nape as he said, "Come along now. It's lunchtime." He gently nudged her toward the table.

Sakura felt rather weird that he was so close to her. She grinned politely and said, "But I'm only here to ask Sebastian a favor."

Sebastian choked on his coffee and coughed loudly. Darcy frowned darkly. Tristan decided to look jealous, and Logan chuckled.

"Be careful," Nicolas said. "It's hot. *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 attention to her and asked, "What is it?"

"Can you teach me how to swim?" she asked, her eyes pleading. "I'll pay you."

Tristan made her sit beside him. "Why him, Sakura? I can teach you how to swim." He leaned closer and said softly, "I can teach you how to put on a swimsuit and take it off again."

Darcy growled at Tristan, completed with a good scowl. "Any one of us can teach her how to swim," he said coolly. "It's not that hard."

"I can teach you how to swim, Sakura," Conrad said. "I'm totally a good teacher, and I won't charge you."

"Lay off it, puppy boy," Tristan said. "Sakura wants me to teach her. Isn't that right, sweetheart?"

Sakura blushed. The brothers knew Tristan was flirting with their adopted sister again.

Nicolas finally put down his tablet and said to his audience, "Since I'm the eldest, I'll take the responsibility." He turned to smile at Sakura. "I'll be your swimming instructor, Sakura."

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 his head. "Don't you think that's rather unfair?"

Nicolas cocked his head to one side. "Your meaning?"

"Even though you are the eldest, it doesn't mean you're the best at swimming or any good at being a swimming instructor."

Sakura glanced from one brother to another, confused. Good God! She was only here to ask for one favor and now look at where it got her. She didn't like it one bit that they were fighting over who got to be her swimming instructor. She stood up and was about to say something when Hayden said loudly, "Logan has a point."

"All right, we'll toss a coin." Tristan suggested.

"No!" Conrad put in. "I'll be Sakura's teacher."

"How about a bet?" Tristan suggested again.

"How about a race?" Sebastian put in.

The brothers stopped arguing and looked at Sebastian, their faces impassive.

"Four hundred meters, freestyle," he 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 shook his head and chuckled. Darcy said calmly, "You're on."

Sebastian nodded and turned his attention to his other brothers. "Well?"

Tristan waved at him to just go ahead and shoot him.

Conrad said, "It's not fair. I wish I'd trained to swim professionally."

Hayden said, "I'm in."

Nicolas got up from his chair and headed out the door. "Let's go, then."

Sakura 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 closely to her ear, "Let's go. The race is about to begin."

Sakura blinked. "But—"

"Don't argue now. You know we don't like to be kept waiting," Tristan said, pulling her out of her chair.

Sakura 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 my gosh! Sebastian looked amazing with just his jeans on. His muscles were toned and well shaped, not to mention his six-pack. Sakura 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's. His abs were very prominent and caused Sakura's breath to catch at the back of 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

weren't going to go totally 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 cheekily, "How about a kiss for good luck?"

Sakura blushed. "I'm not kissing anybody, and what are you guys doing anyway? I've already asked Sebastian to be my swimming instructor."

"Ah," Nicolas said, taking off his glasses. "It's already been decided." He gave her a grin.

Sakura gasped. Oh gosh! Nicolas looked so different without his glasses. He looked very handsome. His eyes, though perhaps he couldn't see properly, had that twinkle in them.

"If you guys keep doing this, I'll ask Richard to teach me instead," she said loudly, almost in 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, Sakura, breathe*, she told herself.

The brothers weren't listening to her. Sebastian jumped into the pool with his jeans still on, followed by Conrad and Hayden.

Sebastian said loudly, "Richard is a lousy swimmer."

"Yes, he is indeed," Logan said, shoving Tristan to the side. "Now then," he said, leading Sakura by the wrist to the seat near the pool. "You just sit here and enjoy the race, eh?"

Sakura didn't want any part in their competition and was about to run when Logan chuckled and said, "You know it makes no difference whether you want us to race or not. It's just us brothers. When we want something we like, we compete for it. And it doesn't matter if we know we're going to lose. We'll still give it our best shot. So just sit there and enjoy the race. There's a good girl."

When he saw Sakura wasn't going to argue 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.

"Darcy?" Sakura voiced, surprised to find him kneeling before her.

Darcy picked up her left foot and pulled his sock on it. "Your feet are freezing cold," he said, his warm palms on her skin.

Sakura 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 within his chest, and he couldn't tear his gaze from her.

Sakura 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.

"I wish I was wearing socks," Conrad said.

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.

"On my count," Nicolas said. The brothers nodded and got themselves ready.

Sakura felt her heart start to thump faster and faster. Her body tensed and stiffened as she waited patiently.

"One," Nicolas said loudly. The brothers bent forward.

God, Sakura 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.

"Two," Nicolas said.

Sakura gritted her teeth and perched up on the seat, her heart pounding and pounding and pounding.

"Go!"

Suddenly, they all dived into the water. *Splash!* From Sakura's 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

pool, and then swam toward the other direction. Darcy wasn't far 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. Sakura panicked because she thought he was drowning. She watched him climbing out of the pool. He seemed to be having trouble breathing.

"I can't go on any longer," he puffed out. He was starving for air, and his chest was heaving with exertion. "Sorry, Sakura," he managed.

Sakura 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.

A few seconds later, Nicolas climbed out. He wasn't at all breathless. He said, "I can't see a damn thing. I need my glasses."

Conrad gave him his glasses, and after he'd 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 wasn't far behind him. They only had another lap to go, and then it'd be over. Sakura watched, her stomach flipping and her whole body tense with anticipation. She didn't know why she was so anxious. Perhaps she was in the competition as well. Although, to be honest, she didn't really care which of the brothers 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 the end first, followed by Darcy. Hayden wasn't far behind and Tristan after that. Logan was the last to finish, by a mere five seconds.

Sakura was amazed as she stood there breathless. *What an experience*, she thought. It was something she'd 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'd reached the end, she stopped breathing completely.

"I can't believe I'm last," Logan muttered under his breath.

Tristan, Logan, and Hayden climbed out of the pool, and they all lay down on the marble floor, trying to catch their breath. Sebastian, however, wasn't even breathless. His face showed it was nothing to him.

Nicolas said, "He didn't do his best."

Sakura was confused as she stared wide-eyed at Sebastian's powerful, handsome body climbing out of the pool. Her whole body trembled with longing. She didn't understand why, but she 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 longingly. *Holy shit!* He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Did she know she was staring at him that way, that she was practically ogling him with desire?

Conrad's words penetrated Sakura's muffled mind. "He isn't usually that slow."

"Why the hell did you do that?" Darcy shouted from the pool.

Sebastian glanced away, knowing very well that his body had willingly responded to his adopted sister's intense stare, to what those beautiful eyes of hers were implying. He distracted himself from her by saying, "What? I won, didn't I?"

"You were mocking us, Sebastian," Logan said none too gently. "What? Because you didn't want to make a fool out of us in front of Sakura? Oh, thanks a lot, dear brother."

Sebastian wasn't listening to them. His mind was elsewhere. 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.

He came up to her, standing mere inches from her, his massive height easily towering over her form.

Sakura 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 couldn't handle how intensely he was staring, 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 growl than anything, "Monday morning, ten o'clock sharp, we begin our lessons." Then he turned on his heel and walked out the door.

Sakura stared after him, confused. "What happened? I don't understand?" she whispered to herself.

Nicolas said, "If he were to put in all his effort like he used to, he would have finished before any of us even got halfway."

Sakura wasn't referring to that. She was referring to her own response to seeing Sebastian in such a state. "Right," she said, nodding her head but still confused.

"Oh well," Tristan said. "I did try my best." He got up and walked to the door. "It's shower time."

One by one the brothers headed out the door.

Sakura 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 whole body buzzed with a warm sensation, and she felt lightheaded all of a sudden.

"You should go and have lunch," he said. "You haven't eaten anything since yesterday."

Sakura cleared her throat. "Yes, I will later."

He nodded at her and then left.

Conrad came up to her and asked, "So what are you going to do this afternoon?"

"I have to fix my dress," Sakura said without thinking, her mind still on Darcy.

"I'll help," Conrad announced.

She chuckled. "How?"

"Dunno. But I'll help."

"I'm meeting up with Beth, Katherine, and Mary later. They're here to see how I got on with the dress. I'll have to tell them about what happened."

"Are you?"

Sakura laughed uncomfortably. "To the dress. Don't worry. I'm not about to spread rumors about your sisters attacking me. See ya later," she said, heading out the door.

Conrad had a sad look on his face as he watched her go.

CHAPTER 22:

Punishment

ALAINA WATCHED IN HORROR AS James's palm flew toward her and then—

Slap!

Her face twisted to the side. Pain burned 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 mask of anger.

Alaina's hand shook as she touched her sore cheek. "Why did you slap me?" she screamed.

James narrowed his eyes dangerously at his daughter, his voice cold when he said, "You know what you did, Alaina. Have I not warned you many times I do not tolerate your sadistic behavior toward Sakura? I thought you'd changed. I've always known you would never accept her as your sister, but at least leave her be, for God's sake. What has she ever done to you to make you treat her that way?"

Alaina gritted her teeth. "She took Darcy from me, that's what. He's my best friend, Dad! My best friend! She has taken him from me since the first day she came into this house."

James scowled darkly. "And you still have a grudge against her because of that?" he asked, incredulous.

"Yes, Dad!" Alaina shouted, tears in her eyes. "I hate her. Why did you adopt her in the first place? Everyone knows she's a criminal. Everyone knows she burned down the orphanage and killed poor Tara's mother."

"Alaina, that's enough!" he said sharply. "I want you to go and apologize to her, now! And I mean now!"

Alaina held her head high as she stared at her father. "I will never bow to that bitch."

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. "That's unfortunate," he said quietly.

Tara took a step forward, suddenly interested in what he was trying to say.

"What do you mean?" Alaina asked, a hint of panic in her shaky voice.

James sighed again. "I was hoping it wouldn't come to this."

"Come to this?" Alaina shouted. "What do you mean?"

James looked her straight in the eye and said, "I'm cutting your inheritance in half, Alaina."

Alaina gasped in shocked surprise. "What do you mean? What the hell do you mean?"

"I've decided to cut your inheritance in half," he said simply.

"But, Dad! Why? I'm entitled to it. It's mine."

"No, Alaina, it's mine, and it's my decision how I share it with my children. You've never proven yourself worthy. Nicolas has told me about your spending habits, Alaina, and to be honest, I don't like it."

"It's all because of her, isn't it? That bitch Sakura? You're giving my inheritance to her, is that it? How could you do that? You and

Mom have raised her like your own child. Isn't that enough already? Now you're giving her half of *my* money? I won't stand for it. I'll take her to court if I have to!" she yelled, her face red with anger.

James lifted his palm and slapped her again. He felt his heart pounding hard and fast within his chest. *Oh, God!* He'd slapped his own daughter yet again. But how to discipline her? How? Especially when she was a grown adult.

"Don't shout at me, Alaina. I do not tolerate that type of behavior, and you know it." Once he saw her stepping back and regretting her action, he said, "If you do happen to take Sakura 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 brought up, including the fact that you've tried to kill Sakura not once, but twice. How do you think that'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 said, "Sakura is nothing like 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 the luxury you take for granted."

He thought back to when his adopted daughter had been much younger. Sakura 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 Sakura, then James knew he'd die a happy man. But so far, that was not to be.

"It's a warning, Alaina. If this ever happens again, I will disinherit you completely," he said calmly.

Alaina could only stare at her father, shocked. "Dad?"

"I mean what I said," he said softly. "You're my only daughter, yet you truly disappoint me."

Alaina couldn't say a thing. Her heart was pumping so loud and fast within her chest that she thought she was going to have a heart attack and die any second now. She couldn't believe it, couldn't 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.

"I tried to stop her," she began softly. "But Alaina, she just—" She broke off, pretending to be really upset.

James saw through the act immediately. God, he was sick of it—sick of Tara, her *poor me* performance, and her manipulation of the people around her. He couldn't 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 it hadn't been long after that he'd seen through Tara's façade, and all too soon, the girl had little Alaina wrapped around her little finger, using her as though the girl were her puppet.

"You're twenty-three now, Tara," James said.

Tara looked up and cocked her head to one side. "Er, yes?" she queried.

"A fully grown adult," James murmured. "Too old to play those silly acting games, don't you think?"

Tara gritted her teeth. *Shit!* He was onto her already. No, wait! He must have known for a long time now. So why hadn't he kicked her out of the family already? Was it because of Alaina?

"True," she said and cocked her head to the other side. "But it's fun."

"I don't expect to see you ever again after the wedding," James said. "I'm sure you understand what that means."

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.

"Completely," she said and turned on her heel. As she left the room, she silently murmured, "But before I'm gone, there's going

to be a big show, and I'm sure you won't like it, James. You won't like it at all. All too soon, your golden girl too will be gone." She smiled slyly, her eyes narrowed.

She rushed up the stairs and headed to Alaina's room. She 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 stroked the younger woman's hair. "Hey," she said softly.

Alaina looked up and wiped her tears. "I can't believe it. Just can't believe it. Now I hate that bitch more than ever."

Yes, Tara thought, *hate her. Hate her. Hate her.* God, that felt good. So very good.

She said, "But we can't touch her. She's his golden girl."

Alaina harrumphed. "I know we can't!" she snapped, fisting her hands tight. "But I'm sure Kate can."

Tara cocked her head to one side, catching on Alaina's meaning immediately, but pretended she didn't understand. "Meaning?"

"She rang me complaining about Darcy not returning her calls or talking 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 now we need her."

Tara chuckled. "Yes, I'm sure you've seen how Darcy looks at Sakura. He's smitten with her."

"I know," Alaina said through gritted teeth. "That's why Kate is going to come. She's going to teach that bitch a lesson she'll never forget."

"But I thought you never liked giving Darcy to Kate," Tara probed.

"I don't, but Kate is better than Sakura, isn't she? Besides, Darcy doesn't like Kate any more than you or I. When this is all over, Darcy is still my Darcy and Sakura can just go and die and leave all of us to live in peace."

Tara chuckled. "Then we should give Kate a call ASAP."

Alaina nodded and picked up the phone.

* * * * *

BETH DIDN'T LOOK VERY PLEASED when Sakura showed her the ruined bridesmaid's gown. It was beyond fixable. Of course she knew what had happened yesterday, along with James and Brenda, who had a serious meeting with Alaina and Tara early this morning. Though Beth hadn't a clue as to what had been said, from the look on the two women's faces she surmised it wasn't good. They had looked as though James had given them a sentence worse than death itself. *Serves them right*, she thought secretly, *for behaving in such a distasteful manner and bullying Sakura, even at this age*. Had they forgotten how James and Brenda loved Sakura?

What Beth couldn't believe also was the fact that Sakura didn't tell her friends, Mary and Katherine, who naturally had already found out. Sakura just told them she'd had an accident and now the dress was ruined.

"We have to fix it," Mary said. "It's too late to find you another one that will actually fit you."

Katherine said, "I'm sure between the four of us, we could figure something out. Maybe cut something out. I mean, Sakura's dress and mine don't have to be in the same design, right?"

"Yes, it doesn't have to be in the same design. The color alone is enough," Mary said, nodding her head.

Sakura sighed with relief that her friends, especially Mary, the bride-to-be, weren't pissed with her. After all, most brides would have flipped by now when their wedding was a mere week away and the bridesmaid's dress was completely and utterly ruined.

Then Sakura 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 skipped a beat at that thought, and she wasn't sure what that 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 Sakura.

"So I heard you had a race," James said. "Should've told me."

"It was an urgent matter," Nicolas put in.

"I can hardly imagine that choosing a swimming instructor for Sakura is an urgent matter. Don't you think, Brenda?" James asked his wife.

Brenda nodded and said, "I don't understand why Sakura didn't come to you if she wanted to learn how to swim. You could have easily taught her."

Sebastian said, "She asked me."

James chuckled. "And you being the noble one decided to put up a race instead?"

"Hayden said it wasn't fair," Sebastian put in.

"Ah," James said. "A race sounds fair enough in this case."

"Oh well," Conrad said easily as he got up. "Seb won so he's still her teacher." He headed toward the French doors leading into the house. "I'm off."

Tristan eyed Conrad suspiciously. He knew the youngest had something up his sleeves. He couldn't help himself and got up as well. "I'm off, too," he said, going after Conrad.

James hid a smile. "Ah, such a lovely day." He reached for his cup of coffee and observed as one by one his sons left them.

"Where do you think they're going?" Brenda asked as she watched them disappearing into the house.

"Do you know, Brenda, that our sons never agreed on anything before?"

"What do you mean? Of course I know that."

"They've changed," he said. "They never go anywhere together unless we make them. But recently they hang out a lot. Not that I'm complaining."

"What brings them together?" Brenda asked.

"Something they're all interested in," James said, smiling.

In the house, Tristan caught up with Conrad and yelled out, "What are you up to, Conrad?"

Conrad jumped and cursed under his breath. "Nothing!"

Tristan hooked his arm over his younger brother's neck and eyed him closely. "Come on, brat. Tell me what's going on here. You're hiding something."

Conrad went red as a beetroot.

"Stop pestering him," Sebastian said, coming toward them.

"Yes, stop pestering me," Conrad muttered darkly. "And leave me alone. I have important things to do."

"Like what?" Logan asked.

Conrad clamped his lips together and marched past them.

"He's going to see Sakura," Nicolas said easily.

"Now," Hayden said, "we can't let that happen."

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 Sakura's bedroom. He was about to open the door when Tristan coughed loudly, intentionally.

Conrad turned and glared at them. "What the hell?"

Tristan chuckled and said, "What?" and opened Sakura's door and walked in.

"What are you guys doing?" Conrad shouted, which of course drew the attention of the occupants from inside.

"Helping Sakura fix her dress," Darcy said and walked in as well.

Conrad sighed, his face still flaming red as he watched his brothers filing into Sakura's room. He gritted his teeth and entered as well.

Sakura wasn't pleased when her room was filled with men. *Young. Hot. Princeton. Men.*

"What are you guys doing here?" she asked none too gently.

"Helping you," Tristan said. "Fixing that horrid dress."

Sakura gritted her teeth. "I have enough help here," she announced. "Now please leave my room. And there isn't enough space for all of you here."

It was true. Her room wasn't that large, and with all of them there, there was absolutely no space to move.

"Then let's move to mine," Mary offered. "Mine is bigger." Of 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.

"Let's go, then," Tristan said, pulling Sakura by the hand and leading her out the door.

"Isn't that nice?" Beth said to Katherine. "The brothers are here to help their sister out."

Sebastian and Darcy didn't like the sound of that and didn't bother to hide their scowling.

A few minutes later, Sakura found herself standing before the full-length mirror and everyone inspecting her.

"I think it should be shorter," Tristan said.

"How short?" Beth asked.

"Short short," Tristan said.

"Not that short," Sebastian put in.

"I like it short," Logan said. "Just above the knees."

"No," Tristan put in. "Shorter."

"I don't want it short," Sakura said. "Mary?" She turned to 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 head to one side, Sakura said, "I thought the bridesmaid's dress was supposed to be long."

"Well—" Mary started, but Tristan cut her off.

"Of course not," he said sharply. "It suits you better short." And he grabbed a bunch of the material on her and ripped off the bottom bit.

Sakura sucked in her breath. "Tristan!" she screamed. But he wasn't paying her any attention. When she turned to look at the other brothers, they too weren't shocked to see the material being ripped off from her person. Now she stood before them, her long legs bare.

"Honestly," she said. "That's it. I'm not in this anymore." She took one step toward the door before Darcy caught her wrist and pulled her back.

"Be patient," he said. "We're fixing your dress."

She blinked and wanted to laugh. First, they'd forgotten she ever existed. Second, they had a swimming competition to see who

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, Sakura! 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. Then the inspection proceeded.

"I think it should be strapless," Hayden said. All the brothers noticed Sakura had very nice shoulders and thought they were better bare.

"I want straps, thank you very much," Sakura said. "And it's my dress, so I do have a say in it." She eyed Hayden, telling him she meant what she'd said.

He chuckled. "Of course."

It was two hours later when the final design was done, mostly by Tristan, and by then it was nearly dinnertime.

The brothers went off down to the dining room with Mary and Katherine while Sakura went to change. The brothers were expecting her to join them, but she never turned up.

"Where is she?" Conrad muttered under his breath.

"Who?" Mary asked.

"Sakura," he said, agitated.

"If you're waiting for her, she's not coming," Mary said. "She said she's been slacking around for a couple of days now, and she needed to get back on with it."

The brothers weren't happy with the sound of that and wondered what she was doing.

CHAPTER 23:

A Tormented Love

“YOU’RE FROWNING,” NED FABRE SAID from across the room. “It doesn’t become you. Stop frowning.”

From across the studio, Sakura glanced at the man who had been like a second father to her. She saw that he wasn’t actually 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.

“How did you know I was frowning when you’re not even looking?” she asked, returning her eyes to her canvas. She cocked her head to one side, wondering if she had overdone the green leaves.

“I can tell when you’re frowning,” he said, carefully moving the tiny brush downward. *Ah, the rose looks perfect now*, he thought with a smile.

“Really?” Sakura asked, eyeing the photo she’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,

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, finally eyeing her. "So what's bothering you?"

Sakura 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 to stay in the background.

Sakura 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 Sakura 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," she said, gently stroking the paintbrush against the white sheet, making another tiny green leaf.

"You're lying," Ned said. "I can tell it in your voice."

Sakura chuckled. "It's hard to hide anything from you, Ned dear."

"You're mocking me, Sakura. I've known you since you were a wee girl, hiding behind the house crying your wee heart out 'cause Tara hit you and the boys wouldn't play with you. Why you didn't tell James is beyond me. But you know as well as I that he knew what was going on. Otherwise, he wouldn't have sent you so far away to that bloody boarding school."

Sakura chuckled again. "Did you miss me that much, Ned dear?"

"Bloody well I did, young missy, and bloody worried about you, too. Who's to say you don't get bullied again, even though that little brat Tara wasn't there with you."

"Well, I'm glad Daddy James sent me away to boarding school. I met my two best friends, Mary and Katherine," Sakura said. "They're very nice to me."

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. "Let's just hope Tara and Alaina don't go whispering nasty things about you and turn their heads against you."

Sakura frowned at that. "That won't happen."

"Who knows?" Ned said. "Here."

Sakura eyed the envelope in Ned's hand with confusion. "What's that?"

"Open it," he said.

Sakura put down her paintbrush and took the envelope. She opened it and took out some papers. She flicked through them and widened her eyes in surprise. "Ned!"

"Yes," he said. "It's your birth mother. You did ask me to help you find her, didn't you?"

"Well, yes, but I didn't expect you to go this far. I mean, you got her name and everything."

He laughed. "There isn't much I can't do for Sakura." He patted her head like he would his daughter.

"How did you do it? I mean, I've e-mailed so many people, but—"

"Now." Ned chuckled. "You were just a wee baby when your mother was here, leaving you there at the orphanage doorstep. I'll 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, mind you, they weren't very cooperative either."

"I see," Sakura murmured, her heart pounding in her chest. She couldn't believe it. Couldn't believe Ned had found out who her mother was. "Thank you so much, Ned."

Ned chuckled. "Now, don't you give me those distasteful big eyes. It's disgraceful."

Sakura chuckled, too. Ned always said that every time she was about to cry. But this time she wasn't about to cry because she was

hurt. No, she was about to cry because she was happy. She was happy with gratitude.

"You're wonderful, Ned."

"Nope, I ain't wonderful. I'm awful. I should have found this out a long time ago."

Sakura read the name on the paper. It said Haruka Tanaka. Was that really her mother?

"Now then, what are you going to do about that?" he asked, watching her carefully.

Sakura put down the paper and stared at the half-finished painting. "I'm going to find her."

"It's all in there," Ned said. "She's here, in America. New York City, to be precise."

Sakura felt her heart quicken. "Here? In America? But I thought she lived in Japan."

"It seems she's just moved. She's working for some Japanese fashion designer. They're opening another headquarters in New York. I heard they're opening a new store soon. Supposedly the guy she's working with is very famous in Japan."

"I see. That'd make things a lot easier, wouldn't it?" Sakura asked herself. "Yes. After the wedding."

Ned smiled. "You know, setting up that gallery for you isn't that easy either."

Sakura blinked and turned her attention to him. "Ned! You didn't!"

He chuckled. "Of course I didn't."

She sighed. "If you did, it'd be so much work and—"

"Didn't want to waste your talent."

"Ned!" Sakura was shocked. "You?"

"Yes, I did. Set up a gallery for you. Your paintings are all there, ready to sell. Got a sales assistant all set up at the shop, too."

"Oh, Ned." Sakura jumped up. "But rent in New York? It's so expensive."

"Ha-ha! Made a contract with one of your patrons, I did. He loves your work. Bought most of them online. He's some real estate tycoon of some sort."

Ned didn't dare explain to her that their landlord was Sebastian Princeton, the man who was infatuated with her paintings. If he told her, she'd flip and tell him to stop everything immediately.

"Whoa!" Sakura couldn't believe it. She placed her hand on her chest. Suddenly, she was feeling just a bit dizzy. "My mother and my paintings, both in New York."

"Waiting for you," Ned said, chuckling.

"Thank you, Ned," Sakura said, tears in her eyes. "Thank you so much."

"Didn't I tell you you look disgusting when you have tears in your eyes?" he scolded.

Sakura chuckled. "You did indeed, Ned dear."

After that, they both returned to their paintings. Sakura was so engrossed that she'd forgotten about the time until Mary texted her.

"Oh, damn!" she muttered under her breath.

Ned glanced up. "Must be dinnertime," he said. "Mother hen looking for her chick."

Sakura laughed. "Mother hen Mary," she said. "Hold on. It is rather late. I better tell them to start without me."

"You're not eating properly again," Ned said. "This is when a husband comes in handy."

"Not interested," Sakura said as she began to text Mary back.

"That Mark person is interested," Ned said. "So I heard."

"This Sakura person *isn't* interested," Sakura replied, packing up her gear.

"Well, good luck with that," Ned said. "Now home with you and stop bothering me. You're wasting my electricity and paints," he muttered.

Sakura laughed. "I shall indeed come and waste more of your wonderful electricity and paints." She grabbed her satchel and headed to the door. "See ya later."

"Say hi to Beth for me. Tell her she's been neglecting me again. Tell her she's starving me. Tell her I don't miss her."

"Will do," she said, waved, and left the cottage.

Sakura couldn't believe it. She'd spent her whole Sunday with Ned, painting. Although she admitted that she had thoroughly enjoyed it, and not seeing Alaina or Tara was the best part.

The sun was setting on the far west of the island, and Sakura couldn't help but fall in love with the glow of 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 when Beth snapped at her. "You're late for dinner."

Sakura chuckled. "Of course I am. It's all your fault, Beth dear. If you hadn't neglected your brother for so long, then I wouldn't have to be there looking after him. If you must know, he's starving for your affection."

Beth chuckled. "Affection my ass," she said. "All that brother of mine wants is your delicious coffee, just like everyone else. Now they're complaining about my standard coffee. Give them a cup and they'll be good for the day." She grabbed Sakura by the arm and nudged her to the coffee machine that apparently only Sakura knew how to make do magic. "Now redeem yourself and make nine cups of coffee before they all die of disappointment."

Sakura snapped her head up to look at Beth in shocked surprise. "Nine? Nine cups?"

Beth folded her arms across her chest. "Now either that or you go in there and have a proper dinner with your family."

Sakura pulled her face. Beth knew she didn't want to go in there and have her dinner with certain people, and she was making a threat. "Okay," she said. "Once I'm done with the coffee, I'm off to my room. No disruption please."

"Of course. You have my word." Beth said. She even crossed her heart.

Sakura put her satchel down on the bench top and made her way to the coffee machine. Just when she was starting to grind the

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, and she didn't recognize the phone number either. She didn't remember giving her phone number to anybody lately. Curious, she went ahead and read the message.

Where are you?

Huh? Sakura couldn't help herself and texted back: *Who is this?*

A second later she got another text, and it read: *Doesn't matter. Where are you?*

She gritted her teeth. What absolute nonsense. Was somebody playing tricks on her? She texted 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: *Sakura, where are you? You missed dinner. And I want your coffee with a teddy bear on it like Michael's. Please come soon.*

Sakura cocked her head to one side, wondering. *Conrad?* But how on Earth did he get her number?

She texted back: *I'm in the kitchen, making your coffee. Yes, you will get a teddy bear.*

She turned off the phone so she wouldn't get disrupted again. She went back to making coffee, and two cups later the door burst open and Conrad rushed in.

"Hello," he said, a cheeky smile on his face.

Sakura nodded. "I'm doing yours now. A teddy bear? Are you sure?"

"Nope, I'm not sure," he said. "Come to think of it, teddy bears are for kids. How about a dragon?"

Sakura laughed. "I can't do a dragon. It's too complicated. How about a swan?"

"Okay. Swan is good. No, wait. I want to learn how to make coffee art." He rushed around the bench and came to stand behind her.

He watched her make the coffee, then she handed him the jug of hot milk.

"What?" he asked.

She pushed the jug to him. "You did say you want to make your own. Here." She made him hold the jug and then with her hand on top of his, she guided him. "You have to do it quite fast. See?"

Conrad wasn't paying attention to what she was demonstrating to him. He was watching her, and he had a big, fat grin on his face.

"See?" she asked again, looking up at him.

He nodded, still grinning like an idiot. Sakura couldn't help smiling back. She thought he looked adorable.

"What?" she asked. "Why are you smiling like that?"

"Nothing," he said. "You got something on your nose." He 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.

"Is it all over my face?" she asked.

Instead of agreeing with her, which would be a lie, he just nodded.

Sakura blushed. "I don't usually make such a mess."

He just kept on grinning as his fingers and thumb moved to her forehead, pretending to wipe nonexistent dirt. Then he moved his thumb to her lip where he couldn't help himself and caressed it.

"There, too?" she asked, uncomfortable because his thumb was in the way as she spoke.

"Yeah, there too," he said, moving his head closer to hers.

Sakura gazed up at him, her heart pounding as he came closer and closer and then—

"Ah-hem!"

Conrad jumped. He hastily turned to the door and saw Sebastian there, scowling at them.

"Why didn't you tell me you were in the kitchen?"

Sakura thought Sebastian was talking to Conrad, but then he said, "Why didn't you text me back?" That was when she realized he was talking to her. *Oh!* So that first unknown number was his?

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 Sakura and picked up his coffee. "I like swans," he said and took a sip. "Hmm. Delicious."

Sakura returned to making more coffee as Tristan walked in. "Are you making one for me?" he asked, coming to stand behind her. Then, before she knew it, Logan and Hayden turned up as well and crowded the kitchen.

"Smells good," Hayden said.

"What are you guys doing here?" she asked. She just wanted to get this done quickly and then disappear into her room.

"Pass me that cup," Logan said, reaching out. No one was paying him attention, however, and he stretched out his hand for the cup. He accidentally shoved Sakura's bag to the floor, her stuff flying out everywhere.

Sakura gasped, stopped what she was doing, and rushed around the corner.

"Oh, shoot! Sorry." Logan crouched down and picked up her bag for her.

Sebastian helped by picking up the pieces of papers that were on the floor. Sakura 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.

Sakura put her bag farther away from them and returned to her coffee.

"So what have you been doing this whole day? You just disappeared on us since early this morning," Logan asked, leaning across the countertop.

"Things," she said and didn't bother to explain.

"What kind of things?" Hayden asked. "Have you had dinner yet?"

"Nope. But I'm sure I can as soon as you guys leave me alone to finish this."

Tristan chuckled. "Touché."

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.

"Am I allowed one more?" he had the gall to ask.

Sakura scowled at him. "Too much coffee is bad for you." She turned to the others. "Now off with you. Take them. I'm off." She 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 didn't care anyway, but she didn't want people to know what she was up to. It was her business 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 though still slightly damp because she couldn't 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 Darcy's room. She lightly knocked, hoping like hell he wasn't in. 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. It wasn't locked. She turned the knob and slipped in.

She wasn't surprised at all to see that his room was meticulously 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 sanctuary, his private haven, and of course Sakura didn't want to

get caught red-handed. He'd probably get so pissed with her that he might just—

She paused. What would he do now that he was a grown man if he were to catch her in his room? She didn't know and didn't 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 king-size bed sat to one side while the study desk and 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. Sakura 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 and Hayden's gaming company.

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 impression he'd use it to slay any monsters that dared to come his way. The other of his long, masculine hands was embracing the beyond-beautiful maiden. Sakura 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

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 flowed down to her waist, and her slender arms embraced the knight, her face soft with love as she gazed up at him.

Sakura's breathing suddenly became short and fast. She was lost in a different world as she continued to stare at the poster.

Suddenly, the door opened and Sakura 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, 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.

"Is he in?" Conrad's voice traveled to them from outside the bedroom door. Then a triple knock followed.

Sakura gasped. She realized Conrad was about to come in.

"He's not in," they heard Hayden mutter. "And why do you want to see Darcy's new project? He's still working on it."

"Just want a peek," Conrad said. "You did say he printed out some of the artwork, didn't you? And you did approve him to continue, so I want to see since I'm going to be your beta tester. Besides, it was your bloody fault. If you hadn't told me there was a character that looks exactly like me, then I wouldn't have been so curious."

Suddenly the doorknob wriggled.

Darcy took action. He grabbed the surprised Sakura by the arm and pulled her along with him toward the walk-in closet. He shoved the door open and hastily nudged her in.

Sakura 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

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!*

“Darcy?” Conrad’s voice came through to them. A moment later, “He’s not in.” They heard the brothers coming into the room, their feet loud on the floor. Then they heard Hayden’s voice saying, “He’s probably at the pool, fantasizing about his characters again.”

Conrad laughed. “That means we have plenty of time to sneak around.”

Sakura felt Darcy’s body stiffen. She wanted to laugh at Conrad’s words. It was so like him to do just that, poking around his brother’s room. She also knew Darcy didn’t like people 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 his chin. She gasped and automatically touched his face. “So sorry,” she whispered, her warm breath tingling his skin.

“I can’t find it!” Conrad announced loudly.

“It might be in the closet.” Hayden suggested.

“Oh, you’re right,” Conrad said, chuckling.

“Shit!” Darcy swore under his breath. The closet door suddenly yanked open, and Darcy thrust himself in farther, squeezing Sakura even more against the wall.

Thank God for the many clothes hiding their bodies so Conrad couldn’t actually see them. He was too busy searching for the folder containing Darcy’s character sheets for his new project.

Sakura found she couldn’t breathe, and her face was literally snuggling against Darcy’s chest. Oh, God, she could smell him.

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 a boy's hand touching her face.

"You're crying, Snow," he said softly.

Sakura had turned to look at him. "I had a nightmare," she told him.

He smiled at her and hastily settled himself between the sheets beside her. "I'll protect you," he said, pulling her into his small arms.

Sakura 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 Sakura 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?

His heart trembled with longing and he couldn't control 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

beautiful. She smelled of spring. His insides ached to hold her, to kiss her, to make love to her. But he couldn't. He wouldn't because she hated his guts. She would refuse him. And what if he couldn't 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 Sakura in the darkness.

"I can't find it," Conrad said loudly.

"Maybe it's better if we ask him," Hayden suggested, heading out the door. "Besides, I don't think he'll let you see it until he's sure it's ready."

Conrad muttered under his breath. "What did he call his new project again?"

"Snow White and the Seven Knights," Hayden said, managing to hide a chuckle.

"Snow White and the Seven Knights?" Conrad laughed. "Sounds so cliché."

Darcy wasn't paying attention to what Conrad said. In fact, if he were to pay attention, he would have jumped out of the closet and bashed 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.

The door closed. Darcy didn't move and stood there, gazing down at her.

Though she didn't want to move from the spot because it felt so right for them to just stand there, their bodies so close they could be connected, Sakura knew it wasn't right and thought perhaps Darcy was just dying to get out. So she cleared her throat and said softly, "I think they're gone."

Darcy got his wits back and reluctantly moved, pulling her along with him out of the closet.

Outside, Sakura didn't dare look at him for fear that his angry face would scare the hell out of her. Instead she picked up the socks she'd dropped and handed them to him. "Sorry I came in without permission."

Darcy wanted to tell her that she could come in whenever she liked, preferably at night, and that he wouldn't mind her sleeping on his bed either, like she had when they were children.

"Thanks for the socks," she said and hastily walked to the door.

Darcy desperately wanted to pull her back into his arms, but it seemed he couldn't move from his spot. 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'd drawn of the knight and the maiden. At the bottom, it read *Snow White and the Seven Knights*.

"Snow," he said softly under his breath.

CHAPTER 24:

Sakura & the Prince of Hearts

SEBASTIAN WAS WAITING PATIENTLY IN the pool for Sakura 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.

“What are you doing here?” Sebastian asked, his voice cold as he watched his brother taking off his shirt and throwing it to the marble floor.

“Thought I’d take a swim. After all, I have nothing better to do,” Tristan replied lightly, then jumped into the pool. Sebastian scowled as Tristan proceeded to swim around.

Logan turned up a second later. “Such a nice day for a swim, isn’t it?” Then he jumped into the pool as 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 himself. “Why does it have to be Sebastian who has to teach her?” He sounded pissed and tired. He was tired because he hadn’t been able to get to sleep last night after Sakura had left his room. He was pissed because his body was aching—*aching for Sakura*.

"Because he's the best swimmer out of all of us," Nicolas said behind him.

Darcy ignored Nicolas and climbed up the ladder to the diving platform above.

"And you? What are you doing here?" Sebastian asked.

"Practicing my somersault," Darcy shouted down. "Or you can't tell?"

Sebastian really couldn't do much at this point as Nicolas 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.

"Ah, that's better," he said, making himself comfortable on the settee. Then he turned on his tablet.

A moment later, Hayden and Conrad rushed in and jumped into the pool. Sebastian wouldn't be surprised if his student 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, Sakura 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.

"Thanks, Toby," she said and walked out the door.

She knew Sebastian was very punctual with his appointment, so she made sure she was fifteen minutes early. After all, she didn't 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 he wouldn't witness her in a swimsuit half-naked, which she felt rather uncomfortable in.

Her plan, however, came crashing down on her the moment she stepped into the pool area. She wasn't alone as she'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.

Conrad waved at her. "Hey, you're here," he called out.

Sakura 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 to her. "Come on," he said, taking her hand.

"Conrad," she began uncertainly. "What are you guys doing here?"

"Swimming," he said. He was about to pull her forward when she snapped her hand back.

"No, I mean—I'm fine. I mean, erm—"

"Do you want to learn or not?" Sebastian asked from the distance.

Sakura blushed. Of course she did, but she didn't want to take lessons when there were so many of them around. After all, she didn't want to make an ass of herself in front of them.

"Of course I do," she said, walking toward them.

Conrad came running after her, and once he was by the edge of the pool, he did a good flip before diving in.

"Show off," Darcy said under his breath.

Sakura 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 relief. At least she wouldn't freeze to death.

She proceed to slide forward and then—

"Err," Tristan began from the other side. "You're not going to take off your robe?"

She stopped in time before the robe got wet. "Huh?" She 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 something wasn't right. She glanced up and saw all seven of them watching her. She blinked. She blushed. They looked

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. She, however, wasn't fast enough at getting into the pool because the brothers were watching her again. There were a lot of gasps the moment the robe hit the floor.

Sakura 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 were Sakura, 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 the pool that she had forgotten she didn't know how to swim. She found herself sinking right to the bottom of the deep pool and couldn't get back up. She was fighting with all her might but just couldn't seem to get herself back to the surface.

There I go, she thought. She'd die drowning because she was 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, Sakura sucked air into her starved lungs, and at the same time she swung her arms around Sebastian's neck, drawing herself against him.

"You okay?" he asked.

She was breathing heavily and managed to nod. She looked around behind her and saw the brothers still watching her. She blushed, totally embarrassed.

"Why does it have to be Sebastian?" Conrad muttered to himself.

"Because he's the fastest," Nicolas supplied logically.

Sakura tightened her arms around Sebastian's neck, unaware that he was watching her intently and that he was pulling her even closer to him now. She said to the brothers, "Do all of you have to be here?"

"What do you mean? We're here to help you learn," Conrad said.

"I can teach her by myself," Sebastian put in. "And Sakura doesn't need you watching her every move. Can't you tell she's embarrassed?"

Sakura bit her lip. That was exactly what she wanted to tell them. God, drowning right in front of them was bad enough. She really didn't want to make a fool of herself in front of seven men.

Nicolas switched off the tablet screen and stood up. "All right. I'm going to play pool. Anyone care to join me?" He left his invitation hanging in the air and walked to the door.

Logan sighed and pulled himself out from the water. "Coming." He followed Nicolas to the door.

Tristan shook his head and swam toward Sebastian and Sakura. He said softly behind Sakura, "Come to me if he's a lousy teacher. I'll teach you how to swim properly." He patted her cheek 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. Sakura caught his eyes and felt her heart fluttering. Her body became stiff in Sebastian's arms. She licked her lips and watched him go.

Hayden chuckled and shook his head. He hooked one arm over Conrad's shoulders and dragged the youngest brother out of the pool.

"Have fun, Sakura," Conrad said. "See ya in an hour."

Once the door was closed and the pool was again quiet, Sakura finally managed to calm down and sighed in relief. That was when she became aware of Sebastian's toned body against her. Her heart started to race, and her body began to tingle. She wanted to let go of him but was too afraid she'd just sink right to the bottom of the pool again.

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.

"We'll start with floating," he said softly. "Can you float?"

Sakura shook her head, feeling her hands slipping from his muscular neck. Sebastian moved his hand down her back slowly, as if caressing her. Sakura caught her breath at the back of her throat.

"Floating is easy," he said.

Sakura bit her lip. "Easy how?"

He chuckled because she looked so cute frowning at him. "Just imagine you're light, like a feather floating in the air or something."

Sakura cocked her head to one side and tried imagining that. She giggled. "Me? A feather?"

Sebastian smiled. He liked her giggle. It sounded like music to his ear. "And move your legs, like kicking the water below you."

"Oh," she said, looking down at herself. But all she could see was his muscular chest. It was so hard and so smooth, and oh, God, she could feel her tummy fluttering and her fingers tingling.

"Go on, kick!" he said.

Sakura refused to look at his face because she was embarrassed. Obediently, she kicked, back and forth, back and forth.

"Now imagine you're that feather," he suggested.

"No, I'm not a feather. I'm a sakura," she said, smiling and closing her eyes.

Sebastian didn't understand what she meant but didn't ask, as she was doing rather well.

What Sakura 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 his heart glow, and he couldn't stop watching her.

When she opened her eyes again, she noted he was a good distance away from her and gasped. "I'm floating!" she shrieked excitedly. "I'm floating!" She laughed merrily.

Sebastian thought his heart would really burst if it swelled 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. "I can float! Yay!" She giggled some more.

"How about floating on your back now?" he suggested.

She blinked. "Huh?"

"On your back," he said, coming toward her.

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 her bend back. "Here, lie back," he said.

Sakura 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 nape of her neck, his fingers caressing her skin. "Now imagine you're that feather again, floating."

Sakura closed her eyes, trying to ignore Sebastian's hands 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 adopted brother, after all. But oh, God! Was she really attracted to him? She growled in frustration.

He chuckled. "Come on now. You did it before."

She wanted to tell him it wasn't the floating, but because of him. He frustrated her. He confused her.

"Right. Imagine you're that feather again," he said.

Sakura 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.

Sebastian couldn't help himself. The serene look on her face 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

think such horrible thoughts about her when she trusted him to teach her?

He gritted his teeth and let her go. She didn't sink, and he was glad.

Silently he cursed himself. Silently he prayed she wasn't his 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.

Sakura 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. "Yay!" 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.

Then he couldn't help himself. He moved his hand to hold the 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.

Sakura couldn't breathe, 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. Sakura felt like she was in heaven as millions of thrilling sensations exploded through her being. She tightened her arms around his neck, never wanting to let go.

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.

Sakura 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.

"I think that should do it for today," he said, pulling himself up. He grabbed her robe and wrapped it around her. "You okay to go back?" he asked, avoiding her eyes.

Sakura, still lightheaded and totally confused from the experience, nodded.

Sebastian dived back into the pool and started to vigorously swim his heart out. Sakura watched him moving his powerful arms as he propelled 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 heavily, his toned muscles twitching. "Why are you still here?" he growled from across the pool. "Go! Get out of here!"

Sakura realized he was pissed. *With me?* Her body trembled in response.

Fine! He didn't want her to stay.

"I'm going!" she shouted, 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 swim until he got so tired that he couldn't think of the kiss 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 he'd 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.

CHAPTER 25:

Snow & the Prince of Darkness

STILL SEBASTIAN LAY THERE, STARING up at the ceiling, his heart thumping loud and fast and his body exhausted from swimming. It wasn't long 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.

"You're training awfully hard," she said, "considering the fact that you're not entering any competition. But then again, you're too old for that now. So what's this for? To keep fit? Or was there something else bothering you?"

"I'm not training," he said, closing his eyes so he didn't have to see Tara's annoying face.

Oh shit! He could see Sakura in his mind's eye. Her glossy black 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.

"You've changed," she said softly. "All of you've changed since we got here. What happened?"

His scowl darkened. "What?"

"It's because of her, isn't it?"

Sebastian gritted his teeth.

"None of you ever wanted her as part of the family before. So why now?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Tara," he said coldly.

Tara couldn't care less what was happening now. All she wanted 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.

"I want you, Sebastian," she said softly near his lips. "Have always wanted you for so long."

"Tara," he began. "What do you think you're doing? You're my sister."

She giggled. "Adopted sister. Not blood related."

"Tara," he said through gritted teeth. "This is wrong. *Very wrong*. I don't know how you feel about me, but I definitely don't feel the same way about you."

Tara gritted her teeth and yelled, "You kissed her! So why the fucking hell couldn't you kiss me?"

Sebastian was shocked into stillness.

"You like her, don't you? It's not fair, Sebastian. Not fair. You kissed her!" She tightened her arms around his neck, her long fingernails digging into his skin. She brought her lips down and kissed him hard.

Sebastian didn't respond. He didn't feel anything for her, didn't feel anything when she touched him.

No, he was wrong. He felt something all right. He felt revolted. He felt disgusted. He couldn't believe Tara 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 get hold 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 this weird incident behind. He didn't get far, though, and stood rooted in his spot when he noticed Sakura at the door, watching him.

His stomach flipped. *Shit!*

"So you have the habit of doing that to your adopted sisters?" she asked.

Sebastian understood the meaning of her words immediately. *Bloody hell! No! Of course not!*

"It's not what you think it is," he said.

"Sebastian Princeton," Sakura said, her voice quivering, her heart trembling, her whole body shaking with anger, frustration, and confusion. "Allow me to get one thing clear for you." She glanced at Tara, who was now posing elegantly before them. She even managed to give Sakura a leering grin.

Sakura turned her eyes to Sebastian, who seemed to have become as stiff as a rock. "I'm not a toy to be played with. I'm not about to commit incest." She nudged her head a little higher as she stared at him, tears brewing in her eyes. "And by the way, I no longer want you as my swimming instructor. I'm going to ask Darcy instead. Sorry for interrupting your wee party." She tried so hard to control her emotions, but she just couldn't. She turned on her heel and headed back out the door.

"Sakura! Wait!" Sebastian shouted.

Sakura wasn't listening to him, however, and blindly 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

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, hoping she didn't look like she'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 couldn't her stomach settle down? Why couldn't her heart slow down? She felt sick. That scene was still fresh in her mind. She couldn't believe it. Just couldn't believe it. *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'd had a big breakfast before—

She paused right there. *Don't think about it, Sakura. Just don't!*

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 she'd 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 proceeded to take pictures. Soon she was lost in admiring the

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, Sakura 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. Now, however, he found he didn't have the guts to talk to her, knowing very well she didn't want 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, Sakura 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. She couldn't 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, she'd miss this place dearly once she was gone, and she felt rather sad about that. Slowly she closed her eyes, and it wasn't long before she actually fell asleep, smiling, thinking about her mother, the woman whose name was Haruka Tanaka.

* * * * *

“SNOW,” THE WORD FORMED SOFTLY between Darcy’s lips as he gazed down at Sakura from where he was on the top tree branch. She looked just like Snow White lying there under the cherry tree.

He’d 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. He’d been sitting on the third branch, hiding amongst the cloud of pink flowers, thinking about Sakura. He’d almost fallen asleep when she had announced her presence with her soft footsteps and the clicks of her camera. He hoped she wouldn’t capture him 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 wouldn’t wake her. He came to sit beside her. *Dear Lord*, he thought, *she looks so innocent and beautiful*. He couldn’t help himself and brushed the back of his knuckles against her cheek.

She groaned.

His stomach flipped.

“Snow needs to be woken up with a kiss,” he whispered. 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 couldn’t stop himself from kissing her 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 Sakura 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.

"Darce?" she whispered softly.

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.

Sakura sat up properly, blushing. She couldn't believe he'd witnessed her sleeping in the woods alone. How embarrassing. Then again, he wasn't supposed to be here. This was her turf.

"I love this tree," he said quietly.

She nodded. "Me too. I planted it when I was little with Ned's help."

He turned to her. "You did?"

She didn't reply, and he knew it was uncomfortable for her to talk to him about her childhood. He cleared his throat and said awkwardly, "Sakura, I never hated you."

She caught her breath, her heart thumping hard and fast.

"I'm sorry for what I did to you," he 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.

"I was young and stupid. I shouldn't have been so horrible to you. I didn't know you hadn't done anything wrong. I'm sorry. I never hated you. You were my Snow and will always be my Snow."

He couldn't stop himself and pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight. Sakura 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'll make it up to you. I promise. I won't ever hurt you again. I won't let anybody or anything hurt you again."

"Darce," Sakura whispered.

Darcy moved back, his hand cupping her face. "I hurt you. I'm so sorry."

Sakura gave him a weak smile. "It did hurt, but that was a long time ago. We were but kids. We're both grown up now so—"

"So?" he asked, brushing his thumb gently across his cheek.

"So you're forgiven," she said, giving him a smile.

Darcy's heart did a triple somersault. "You're going to forgive me just like that?" he asked to make sure she had really forgiven him.

She nodded, chuckling softly.

Darcy's face became serious and dark as he gazed at her, his mind made up. "I'm going to kiss you, Sakura."

Sakura 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.

Sakura 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 Darcy's 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.

Sakura 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. He didn't want to hurt her.

Oh, God! He couldn't help himself. He had loved her for too long. He'd 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, and lips to lips. He kissed her again, pouring out all of his passion for her, showing her just how much he loved her.

Sakura 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. Sakura groaned softly and sighed breathlessly. Was this it? The beginning of lovemaking? *Darce. My Darce*. He'd come back to her. He'd 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, he'd make her feel even more wonderful 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 Sakura, he could very well lose everything, and he couldn't have cared less. He wanted her that much. He loved her that much.

He moved his lips to her ear and whispered softly, "I'm not sorry I kissed you, Sakura."

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. "Just so you know, that wasn't a brotherly kiss either because I never, ever think of you as my sister." He slowly moved back, his mauve-gray eyes—dark and full of passion—on her. Then he stood up. "Come," he said, pulling her into his arms. "We should start heading back."

Sakura found herself clinging to him because she wasn't sure if she'd be able to stand up properly after the kiss. She took a deep breath and said, her voice trembling, "It's okay. You go on ahead. I have to do some more photo shoots."

Darcy smiled at her. It was a very handsome smile that caused Sakura's heart to flutter.

"Then I'm staying with you," he said, grabbing for her satchel.

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.

Sakura was trying her best to persuade Darcy to leave, but he wouldn't budge. Hence they spent another hour together in the woods, her taking photos and him following her around. Then Darcy decided he'd be the photographer instead and took the camera from her.

"Darce?" Sakura was shocked.

He chuckled, holding the camera up to his eyes. "You're my model. Now pose."

Sakura scowled at him. "I'm not pretty enough to be a model."

He cocked his head to one side. He wasn't surprised that she 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.

"Darce!" she shrieked.

He laughed and continued clicking. *Click! Click! Click! Click!*

Sakura reached out to get her camera, but Darcy only laughed. Then when she wasn't prepared, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her so damn passionately and wildly that Sakura had to cling onto him for dear life. What Sakura didn't know was that Darcy 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 thumb, his eyes glowing with love as he gazed at her. She didn't know it, but Sakura herself was gazing at him, her eyes large.

Click! Click! Click! The camera continued to record.

Then she laughed. Sakura never thought she could be this happy with Darce—her dear Darce. Then suddenly her happiness was snatched away from her as she realized this couldn't be. This

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! She didn't want to hurt herself any more than she'd already been hurt. Even more so, she didn't want to hurt Darcy. She never ever wanted to hurt him.

She cleared her throat and said, "I think we should be getting back now."

He smiled sadly. "Yes," he said.

Sakura 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.

"Are you coming?" She turned back to look at him.

Darcy looked up. "Yeah," he said and rushed up to her. He took her hand in his and led her back home.

CHAPTER 26:

Brothers' Conflict

"SHIT! SEBASTIAN, YOU DON'T HAVE to kill me for the ball," Tristan shouted in the distance.

Sebastian wasn't paying his brother any attention, 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.

Sakura and Darcy came out into the clearing just then and found almost everyone at the basketball court near the house.

"Over here!" Conrad shouted to Richard. "I'm open!"

Sakura was fascinated as Richard threw the ball toward Conrad, but before Conrad could get his hands on it, Sebastian intercepted his brother and caught the ball first. He then dribbled it as he raced to the other side of the court again and threw forcefully. The ball went into the hoop straight on.

"No fair!" Conrad shouted.

"Bloody hell!" Tristan shouted.

"He plays like someone stole his girlfriend," Logan said to Tristan.

"As if he has one," Tristan chuckled.

"I heard that!" Sebastian shouted, his face a hard mask. "Quit moaning like an old woman just because you're losing."

Logan ignored Sebastian and shouted, "Darcy! You're back. Join our team and beat the crap out of Sebastian!"

Sebastian turned to Sakura 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 Sakura and hugged her tight. Darcy scowled darkly. So did his brothers on the other side of the court. Sebastian wanted to punch Richard in the face. Then he decided he'd do that on the court instead since they had a game to finish.

"Richard, you're suffocating me," Sakura said. "And you're very sweaty."

Richard pulled back and laughed. "We're losing. Come on, let's play."

Sakura chuckled. "Me? What makes you think I want to play?"

"Because I know you want to play," he said teasingly.

He was right. She did want to play. She hadn't played 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.

"Come on, then," Richard said, pulling her along to the other 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.

Sakura didn't give a care about their hateful stares. She kept moving toward Mary.

"All right. We've got a new team member," Richard said to his teammates, who were Tristan, Logan, and Conrad.

"Wait a minute," Sakura said. "I didn't say I'd join in."

Conrad said, "We're never going to beat them. They have Darcy as well as Sebastian. That's no fair!"

Tristan cocked his head to one side and said, "How about Richard, you swap with Darcy?"

"Huh?" Richard shook his head. "No."

Tristan, however, ignored him and shouted to Darcy, "Oi, Darcy, wanna join our team?"

"Good with me!" Sebastian shouted back, his eyes dark on Darcy.

Darcy was very aware that Sebastian had something against him and was only glad they weren't going to be in the same team. He ran over to where the other team was. The moment he got there, he said, "Hey," to Sakura and gave her a handsome smile.

"Hi," she replied, giving him a lovely smile in return as if she were very glad indeed to see him.

The brothers noticed and were instantly suspicious.

"Did you see that?" Logan asked Tristan quietly.

Tristan nodded. "They're friendly," he said in awe.

Conrad frowned at Darcy and instinctively moved closer to Sakura, as if to shield her from Darcy.

"I have to work harder," Tristan said to himself.

Logan chuckled at Tristan's statement. "Seems so," he said, then turned to Richard. "That means you're now on Sebastian's team, Richy boy." He slapped Richard's shoulder and nudged him to start heading that way.

"I got it," Richard reluctantly said and ran over to the other side.

Logan turned his attention to Sakura. "Ready?"

"I'm not playing," Sakura said, moving back a step. "Go find someone else. What about Mary?"

Mary laughed from behind. "I'd love to, but my wedding is in five days, my dear friend, and Peter won't tolerate any accidents."

"You're expecting an accident on the court?" Sakura asked.

"From the looks of things," Mary said.

"Sebastian is ready to kill everyone," Tristan said. "Even his team members."

"He'd better not touch Peter," Mary said, "or he'll have me to answer to."

“Oi!” Sebastian called out, frowning darkly from the other side. “Are we playing or not?”

“Yeah!” Tristan shouted back.

Sakura noted that all of the men on the other team—Nicolas, Sebastian, Hayden, Richard, and Peter—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.

“All right, let’s go,” Tristan said, taking off his shirt too.

Sakura wondered what was going on when Darcy and Logan took off their shirts as well.

Conrad said, “Show off!” And he, too, disrobed.

Tristan turned to her. “And you.”

Sakura glared at him. “Not me, and I’m not playing.”

“Oh, come on.” Mary chuckled. “Remember how we used to play back at the farm? You always beat us despite your small frame.”

Tristan laughed. “Is that so? Now don’t disappoint me, Sakura. Come help me beat the crap out of them.”

Sakura mumbled under her breath. “Fine. If we win, you owe me. Both of you.”

Mary laughed. “Not me, just Tristan. I’m voting for Sebastian and his team since Peter’s there.”

Sakura sighed.

“Oi!” Sebastian shouted impatiently.

“Coming,” Tristan yelled back and pulled Sakura along with him onto the court.

Sebastian, Nicolas, and Hayden stared in shocked surprise to see Sakura with them.

“What the hell?” Sebastian growled.

“Sakura is our team member,” Tristan announced.

“She can’t play,” Sebastian said coldly. “Sakura, go back to the sideline. Tristan, find someone else or you forfeit.”

Tristan laughed. “Forfeit! No way in hell.”

Darcy, who now stood beside Sakura, asked, "Why can't she play?" His eyes were intense on his brother. Their stances indicated they were ready for a fight.

"Sakura knows how to play," Richard put in. "She's very good at it."

Sebastian glared at Darcy, and he had the urge to punch his brother in the face. *That sneaky bastard*, he thought. Just because he'd kissed her didn't mean they were a couple and that he had to defend her.

Sakura wasn't happy with the way Sebastian was talking to her. To show him that she wasn't going to back out, she stood her ground and said, "I'm playing."

Sebastian gritted his teeth and stared at her long and hard. Darcy, feeling protective over Sakura, clasped his hand over hers. Sebastian noticed and nearly exploded.

"Let's start!" he snapped.

For the first half of the game, Sebastian and Darcy were at each other'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 Sakura 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 Sakura.

It was the second half of the game that Tristan's team started losing because Sebastian was even more aggressive, and it seemed the rest of his teammates decided to join in the aggression.

Sakura 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.

"Look at him go," Tristan said behind Sakura as they watched Sebastian expertly throwing the ball into the hoop once again.

"That's it!" she said, walking back to Mary.

On the other side, Tara and Alaina laughed.

"How stupid. A girl playing basketball with men," Alaina said.

"Serves her right," Tara said.

Sebastian watched her heading back to the sideline, glad. He was glad she wasn't playing anymore. Glad that she wasn't there to torment his mind and his heart. Yes, now his heart could slow down its beating, even just for a bit.

On the other side, Sakura asked Mary, "Can I borrow your hair tie?"

Mary laughed. "Sure." She pulled her hair tie and gave it to Sakura.

Sakura pulled her shirt off as Mary laughed. "You're getting serious."

"We're losing," Sakura said. "And I'm not losing to the likes of that man."

"Which man?" Mary asked.

Sakura didn't answer. She was now only wearing her white tank top and super skinny jeans. She breathed a sigh of relief because her body was covered with sweat. She pulled her hair back and formed it into a loose bun at the top of her head. She didn'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'd played basketball.

Mary wasn't wrong. Richard swallowed hard the moment Sakura returned to court. Conrad blinked and then couldn't stop staring. Tristan and Logan chuckled and eyed each other. They suddenly realized there was a possibility they could win the game.

Sebastian wasn't pleased, 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.

Darcy felt his stomach flip. Suddenly, he wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her again until they were both breathless.

Sakura stood in the middle of the court, her hands on her hips. "Are we playing?" she asked no one in particular.

Sebastian wanted to lift her over his shoulder and take her away—where, he didn't know. Just away from here, 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 gritted his teeth and growled, "Let's go!"

The game continued, and Sakura somehow found that the men weren't as tough as she thought they'd been. Even Nicolas was toning down his aggression. But not Sebastian. He was still as hostile as ever.

Conrad threw the ball at her. Sakura 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.

Sakura could feel his manly strength above her. She could feel his naked skin, warm and sweaty, against her palms. She fluttered her eyes open to see his face close to hers, his eyes watching her intently.

"Are you all right?" Nicolas asked from above, his voice loud with concern.

"Get off her, Sebastian," Conrad said, pulling Sebastian back.

Sebastian sat back and watched her. Sakura tried to sit up, but pain shot through her ankle. She gasped.

"You sprained your ankle?" Tristan asked.

Darcy rushed over and came to support her from behind. "You okay?" he asked with concern.

"I'm all right," she replied brokenly, giving him a reassuring smile.

"Bloody hell!" Sebastian grunted, and without further ado, he scooped her in his arms. Before anyone could say anything, he carried her back to the house.

"Game over, then?" Logan said to no one.

"Game over," Tristan said. "We lost."

"Shit!" Logan swore.

Darcy watched Sebastian go, his eyes dark.

On the other side of the court, Tara gritted her teeth and wanted to scream. "Bitch!" she hissed under her breath.

Sebastian came into the drawing room and put her down on the seat near the empty hearth.

Sakura sighed. "I'm fine. No need to fuss."

Sebastian ignored her.

"I'll find an icepack." Hayden volunteered.

Conrad came to sit beside her and put his arms around her shoulders.

Sakura chuckled. She thought he looked rather cute so worried about her. "I'm fine," she said. "It's not serious."

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. Sakura bit her lower lip after gasping out, not from pain, but from the uncontrollable sensation that rushed through her every nerve.

Conrad noticed her hiding her gasp. "Is it painful?" he asked.

"Be gentle with her, Sebastian," Tristan said. "Look, how about I do it."

Sebastian shoved him off by saying, "I'm not hurting her."

"I'll be all right, seriously," Sakura said, looking up. Suddenly 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 greeting. Conrad picked him up and laid him on Sakura's lap.

"Hey," she said. "Did you miss me?"

Toby barked again and rubbed his head against her chest, his tongue licking her collarbone. She giggled. "Stop that. It tickles," she said.

Sebastian increased the pressure on her ankle. She gritted her teeth at the pain.

"It should go away by tomorrow," he said.

James and Brenda came in at that moment.

"Good Lord, what's going on here?" Brenda asked, taking in her sons—all shirtless. Then she spotted Sakura on the sofa, with an icepack at her ankle.

Conrad explained. "Sebastian knocked her over."

James hid a smile.

"Why are you being so aggressive, Sebastian?" Brenda asked. "It's unlike you."

"His girlfriend dumped him." Tristan volunteered.

Sebastian gritted his teeth. "I don't have a girlfriend."

"Well, you sure did act like you just got dumped." Logan teased.

Brenda came to the other side of Sakura and did a good fuss. "I do hope it'll heal by Saturday. We can't have you limping on Mary's wedding day."

"I'll be fine, Mom," Sakura said.

The brothers all looked at her, silent, as if the president had just announced to them that World War III had just begun. None of them liked the sound of Sakura calling their mother *Mom*.

Brenda noticed the dead silence and cleared her throat uncomfortably.

James said to the room at large, "Shouldn't you boys go and shower? Dinner is in half an hour."

Nicolas nodded and headed out the door. He was followed by a string of his brothers, Hayden, Tristan, and Logan.

Darcy hesitated. Sakura caught his eyes and gave him another reassuring smile. He smiled back and then left the room as well.

Richard said, "It was my fault. I persuaded Sakura to play. Now look at what happened."

"It's all right, Richard," Sakura said. "Go."

Richard obeyed and left the room.

“You be careful with your leg, okay?” Conrad said. When she 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.

“Thanks,” she said, avoiding looking at him directly. Sebastian didn’t reply. He stood up and left the room.

CHAPTER 27:

Nicolas Princeton, Prince of Guardian

SAKURA STAYED IN HER ROOM for most of the next day, working on her old photos while everyone was busy preparing for Mary's wedding. That night 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 good time and wouldn't miss her.

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.

"Huh?" She brought the camera up to her eyes and looked closely. "Fudge?" she swore under her breath, realizing the memory stick had disappeared. "That's twice this month," she muttered. And she still hadn't found the one Toby had taken from her yet. When and where could she have dropped this latest one? She sighed and decided she'd search for it tomorrow. She was sure it was probably still somewhere on the pathway leading to the house from the woods.

Once 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

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 pages.

Half an hour later, she was feeling drowsy and decided to lie back. Two seconds later, she was fast asleep. When she woke up again, she felt someone was watching her. She blinked and then smiled. "Daddy James?"

The person came closer. "No. Unfortunately, I'm not."

"Nicolas?" She sat up and touched her head, feeling drowsy. "What time is it?"

"Three in the morning," he replied. "I couldn't sleep."

"Oh, it looks like I'm the opposite, sleeping anywhere."

He grinned. "Want some help getting back?"

Sakura shook her head. "You can read this if you want. It's really good." She exaggerated the really good part.

"Really?" He raised his brows.

Sakura couldn't help but smile up at him because he looked so much like James. "Yeah," she said. "Really, really good. Not exaggerating."

He laughed. "No. You're lying. Otherwise you wouldn't have fallen asleep that easily."

She stood up and threw the book onto the sofa. "Oh, yes. It's really good." She grinned, staring up at his great height. "At putting me to sleep. I'll place it number three on the list of books that put me to sleep."

He cocked his head to one side. "What's number one and two?"

"Shakespeare is number one. I couldn't 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 Mary and Katherine were there to help."

"Whoa, I had no idea."

"Of course you didn't," she said. "You know it's odd, but I can still remember Hamlet's speech."

"Yeah?" Nicolas asked, couldn't help that he couldn't stop himself from looking at her. Her eyes were bright and her smile was contagious. He felt his heart warmed. "Recite it for me."

She blinked. "Are you sure? It might put you to sleep like it did me."

He chuckled. "Then all the better."

"Okay," she said. "Here goes."

Nicolas nodded.

Sakura cleared her throat and began to recite the passage.

"To be, or not to be..."

Nicolas watched her closely. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks were flushed. 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.

Sakura stopped. Nicolas noted that her eyes were brewing with tears. He didn't dare say a thing. She was in her own world.

"I lied," she said suddenly. She looked up at him. His heart missed a beat. And Nicolas's heart never missed a beat. "I love Shakespeare. He's wonderful. I love his work. There's so much meaning, like the one I've just recited. What is the meaning of living? Why live when there is so much suffering? So much pain? Sometimes it's unbearable. Perhaps if you die, then it's probably better. You wouldn't feel the pain anymore, at least. But then the uncertainty of death itself is very scary and probably worse than living, don't you think?"

Nicolas couldn't help himself. He pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight.

"Stop it," he said softly into her hair. "Life is full of fun and wonderful things. What happened to you when you were younger is beyond repair, but you choose your own path. Yes, you didn't know who your real mother was. Yes, there were problems with us, but you make yourself happy, Sakura. You choose, and I promise I'll do my best to make you happy, too."

Sakura chuckled. "You, Nicolas? You are ever so much like Daddy James." She glanced down, embarrassed. "Sorry. I'm so used to calling him that. I know you and your brothers don't like it."

Nicolas didn't deny that. "Yes, we hate it."

Sakura frowned. "He is like a real father to me though."

"I know," he said.

"You know, inside me I'm still hoping you and your brothers will still accept me as your sister," she said softly. Instantly, she 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.

Nicolas sighed. "No. I don't think that will ever come to be, Sakura."

She looked disappointed. "Even you?" she asked, gazing up at him.

Nicolas gritted his teeth. How could he tell her that he and his brothers wanted her all right, but not as their sister—as a woman?

"I see," she murmured under her breath. "Well, if you do want to read that book, it is good at putting you to sleep." She looked up and gave him a smile. "Good night, Nicolas."

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.

Sakura gasped as Nicolas scooped her up in his arms. She didn't know what to say and stared at him in shock.

"You're injured," he said and headed up the stairs.

"You know you don't have to be nice to me just because you've hurt my feelings." She paused and frowned. "What I mean to say is you didn't hurt my feelings at all. I'm used to being rejected by you brothers. So you can put me down, and I'll walk to my room myself."

"Why don't you just be quiet?" He suggested. "Or you'll wake everyone up."

"You're being like Daddy James," she said and noticed that he frowned. *Oops!* She shouldn't have said that.

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.

Nicolas said, "She was in the library. Stupid girl." He headed straight to Sebastian and unceremoniously dumped Sakura on his brother. "Take her. I need that book." Then he headed back down.

Sakura bit her lip and wiggled her body. Sebastian tightened his grip on her.

"You can put me down now. I can walk," she said coldly.

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 Sakura gasped in fright.

She still didn't relax as he tucked 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, Sebastian was in her room, wasn't he? He was comforting her, wasn't he? And Darcy as well? Yes, she remembered it now.

Sakura shut her eyes tight, trying to make the images go away, but they wouldn't, and in fact, they came even stronger.

She felt warm breath on her skin and flashed her eyes open. Sebastian's face was mere inches from hers, his nose nearly touching hers.

“What are you afraid of?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said, breathless all of a sudden. “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, his face a dark mask. “What were you doing in her room?”

“She was stupid enough to go to the library and couldn’t get back to her room herself,” was his reply, and then he went into his own room.

Darcy frowned and went back into his room too, his heart hammering in his chest.

CHAPTER 28:

A Passionate Kiss

SAKURA SPENT THE NEXT DAY with Ned at his cottage, painting. She'd been lucky since everyone had left the house early to meet up with Mary and Peter's parents, who were arriving early that morning. Then of course they'd go to the Princeton Hotel and Resort on the other side of the island, finalizing everything for the wedding reception.

"You could never stay put, could you?" Ned asked, watching her from his side of the room.

"No, I can't," she replied. "And stop lecturing me. Be nice since I've brought you carrot cake."

"Did you make it?"

"Of course not." She chuckled. "Your dear sister did. She told me to tell you to stop telling everyone that she's neglecting you."

"She's a good girl," Ned said. "I'm going to make lunch. What do you want in your sandwich?"

"Ham," she said, doing a little dot of pink to make the cherry flower on the canvas.

"Okay, be back in a minute," Ned said and then disappeared out the door.

They had lunch in quietness and afterward continued with their paintings. It was late by the time Sakura decided she had enough and headed back to the house.

"I'm driving you there," Ned said and made her get in the car.

Sakura shook her head and just did what he told her to do. Once they got to the mansion, Sakura cursed loudly.

Ned chuckled. "I thought I taught you better than that," he said. "Next time use a better swear word."

"Aye, aye, captain," Sakura said, eyeing Sebastian getting out of 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.

Sakura turned to Ned and said, "Why don't you come and say thank you to your sister for the cake?"

Ned chuckled. "Scaredy cat."

Sakura bit her lip and muttered, "I'm not a scaredy cat."

Of course, he gladly came to her side and escorted her toward the house.

"Ned Fabre?" Nicolas asked.

Ned chuckled. "Master Nicolas, how are you? And Master Tristan, Logan, Sebastian, Hayden, Darcy, Conrad?"

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.

"Why is Sakura with you?" Conrad asked.

"She's my student. Such a slow learner, she is."

Sakura folded her arms across her chest. "Excuse me, but I am not a slow learner."

"What are you teaching her?" Hayden asked.

"Painting. She loves to paint the sakura tree," Ned said.

"Sakura tree?" Logan asked. "That's her name."

"Cherry tree," Sebastian said, and the brothers nodded in understanding.

Sakura said, "Ned dear?"

"Yes, Sakura dear?" Ned turned to her.

"Beth? Cake? Thank you?" She gave him a fake smile.

"Ah, of course." He turned to the brothers and said, "Must thank my dear sister for the cake she gave me." With that, he nodded at the brothers and headed into the house. Sakura quickly followed him, still limping a little. The brothers headed into the house as well.

After saying good-bye to Ned, Sakura lied to Beth that she was hungry and thus had her dinner in the kitchen before everyone else.

"Tell Mom Brenda and Daddy James I've already had mine," she said, heading out the door. "I'm going straight to bed now."

"But it's only six o'clock," Beth argued.

"Yes, I know, but I'm tired," she said, hiding a smile. "Good night, Beth."

"I swear to you, Sakura, you're very odd these days. Eating and sleeping at the oddest hours," Beth mumbled to herself.

Sakura 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 do. Then she thought of something. She'd go down and practice her floating. Then the thought of Sebastian and Tara flashed into her mind. She cursed under her breath.

Stop thinking about him, Sakura. You've got to stop. He's a stupid man anyway.

She couldn't find her swimsuit anywhere and cursed fluently this time as Ned had taught her to. Fifteen minutes later, she gave 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 switch on the light.

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 she didn't drown, she giggled. *Yes!* She was floating.

Happily, she floated her way around the pool. Now and again, she'd open her eyes and stare up at the high 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, shining in through the skylight. It was beautiful. She couldn't believe she'd 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!

Sakura searched around as the person disappeared underwater. Perhaps she should take the chance and run off. After all, it wasn't 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.

Sakura 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.

"Darcy?" she whispered softly.

The body stiffened. Sakura watched in awe at the muscular arms that came up and trapped her on both sides. She licked her lips.

“No, not Darcy.”

Sakura felt her stomach flip. It was Sebastian.

“You were hoping it was him?”

She blinked. “I thought—”

“Well, that’s too bad for you. I know how you wanted it to be him.” Sebastian cocked his head to one side. “And here the girl who said she’d never commit incest is doing the very thing.”

Sakura bit her lip. “What are you talking about?” She shoved his right arm so he’d move away from her. He wouldn’t budge. He chuckled.

“Sebastian,” she began again, licking her lips, staring up at the dark form of his face. “I’m going now.”

“But I thought you were here practicing your swimming.”

“I’m done practicing.”

“How much has Darcy taught you, Sakura, apart from kissing you, that is?” he asked sarcastically.

Sakura gasped. “What?”

“Twice, I think,” he continued.

“Sebastian, can you just stop it?” she snapped, her voice quivering.

“Stop what?” he asked easily, though his voice was cold and hard.

She stared at his chest. “I don’t know.”

He pulled her to him, his strong arms at the small of her back. Sakura was squeezed up against his massive form, and she couldn’t struggle free.

“What are you doing?” she asked, panic in her voice.

“Teaching you how to swim, which Darcy has neglected to do,” he said, pulling her along with him. He swam on his back, drawing her on top of him. “Pretend I’m a floating board. Now kick your feet.”

His arms tightened about her waist so she wouldn’t slip away from him. Sakura could feel the length of him against her.

"I'm not in the mood to learn," she snapped and then hit his chest with her small fist.

He just laughed. "Go on," he urged. "Hit harder."

"You're crazy," she said.

"I suppose I am," he replied easily. "About you and Darcy and those kisses."

Sakura struggled in his arms again as he kept taking her around the pool, his arms tight about her.

"Do you like him kissing you?"

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.

"So what if I do?" she asked. "Now stop pestering me." She 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.

Sakura wasn't prepared for his brutal kiss as he assaulted her 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.

He sighed and closed his eyes. No, he shouldn't 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.

Sakura 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!* She couldn't. This was wrong. *Very wrong.*

When she felt his pressure on her lips lessen, she knew this had to stop because otherwise she'd be totally lost. She took the chance and moved back, pretending to be angry. Yes, it was better that he thought she didn't like him. That way he wouldn't pursue this weird relationship that she knew was likely to happen if she didn't put a stop to it. That way she wouldn't hurt him in the long run. That way she wouldn't hurt herself.

"If you ever kiss me again, Sebastian Princeton, I'm going to bite you," she said.

He stared at her, his face a mask. His eyes, however, spoke volumes because they were flashing blue fire.

Sakura 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.

Sakura couldn't do much more 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.

"You didn't bite me," he said, a devilishly handsome grin on his face.

Though her head still felt somewhat light, the meaning of his words didn't miss her. In retaliation, she moved her head to his shoulder, opened her mouth wide, and bit him hard.

Sebastian gasped but didn't move as 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.

Sakura 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.

Darcy didn't miss the bite marks on Sebastian's chest. "Looks like you had an accident."

Sebastian stiffened. "Yeah. Dog bite."

"Must be a very angry dog," Darcy commented.

Sebastian didn't say anything and headed out. Alone, Darcy sighed, his heart hammering in his chest uncomfortably. He knew, oh yes, he knew Sebastian had fallen in love with Sakura too. He knew that she too felt something toward him. But the realization only pained him even more. How could he let Sakura go when he had loved her all his life?

Shit! His head hurt. His heart ached. His whole body trembled with confusion.

“Snow what am I going to do? He’s my brother,” he whispered softly.

CHAPTER 29:

Tormented Heart

SAKURA WOKE UP LATE THE next morning, feeling extremely tired and extremely pissed. She was tired because she couldn't get to sleep until four in the morning and pissed because Sebastian and his stupid kiss 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 didn't know what to say to her. She'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 stiffened as if he didn't want to know what happened.

Her stomach fluttered. "Darce," she whispered under her breath. Why did she feel like he was upset with her? *Oh, Darce.*

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 disappear from her mind by sleeping. But of course she couldn't 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

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.

"No, you may not," she said. "You stay put and be a good boy, okay?"

Toby sat obediently and licked her hand. "Good boy." She got 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.

"You look horrible," Mary teased. "I hoped you're not going to look like that on my wedding day."

Sakura chuckled. "No need to worry. After all, a makeup artist does do magic."

"What happened?" Mary asked. "You look like you haven't slept."

Sakura sighed, got up, and washed her dishes in the sink. "I was working a bit late last night."

"On your online business again?" Mary asked.

"Yeah," Sakura lied. *Damn!* She couldn't believe she was lying to her best friend.

"Well, as long as it's going great," Mary said. "Are you ready to leave?"

"Yeah, I'm done," Sakura said, grabbing her bag.

Once they were in the car, Sakura said, "So just curious and all... Where's everyone else?"

"Out," Mary said. "At the hotel."

"Right," Sakura replied and then drove out.

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

minutes later, she came into the main hall on the first floor where the wedding reception was to be held. Sakura was surprised to find that both Richard and Peter were already there, talking to the wedding planner and the hotel manager.

"Hi," Mary said, kissing her future husband on the cheek.

"Sweetheart," Peter said. "What do you think?"

Both Sakura and Mary looked around the great hall. It was beautifully 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 Sakura stuck around, trying to help out with ideas as best as she could. When by lunchtime they finished, Sakura 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.

Sakura bit her lip and her heart thundered within her chest the moment her eyes met Sebastian's. 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 that she wasn't in the least bit pleased to see him, however. Nicolas, on the other hand, was oblivious to their silent bickering and gave her a smile.

"Sakura, what are you doing here?" he asked.

"Er, Daddy James?"

"Meeting with Mr. Marlow," Nicolas supplied.

"Oh, right." Sakura turned to go.

"No, wait, come in here."

"What?"

"Dad said you've been helping out a bit at the hotel."

Sakura shrugged her shoulders. "Just here and there. Nothing special."

"Dad's asking me to take over."

Sakura raised her brows. But then again, she wasn't surprised. "I see."

"What do you think?"

"It's great. He's ready to retire. I think you should," she said.

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.

Sakura 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. Sakura gritted her teeth and glared at him.

"You think I should?" Nicolas voiced loudly, interrupting her anger simmering nicely.

She quickly turned to smile at him. "I definitely think you should. I mean, if you don't take over, then who will?"

Nicolas relaxed back in his seat. "Thing is, I'm not sure if I'd do a good job."

"It's all from experience, isn't it? You can't quit before you begin. You won't know if you don't try."

Nicolas chuckled. "Since when did you become so philosophical?"

"Oh, I've always been philosophical. Daddy James always asks me for advice, not that I'm very good at it. But I think it helps him see things from a different perspective." She turned to smile at him then, her head cocked to one side. "To be, or not to be, that is the question," she said softly. "To take over, or not to take over, that is the question."

Nicolas felt a thrill of warmth coursing through his being. His silvery-gray eyes lit up, and he chuckled softly. He turned to Sebastian then. "Well, what do you think, Sebastian?"

"I already told you," Sebastian said. The bite mark on his shoulder hurt. He glanced at Sakura, 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.

"There you are, Sakura," James said as he walked through the door. "I was looking for you."

"Hey," she greeted him.

James took one good look at her and said, "You look dreadful. Didn't you sleep last night?"

Sakura chuckled, her cheeks burning hot at the reminder.

"Working on your photos again, are you? How many did you sell this week?" he asked.

"A few. My regular doesn't seem to be interested for a few weeks now. Maybe he didn't like the last one."

"Maybe you need help with Internet marketing," James said. "Nicolas has online businesses." He turned to his son. "Maybe you could help Sakura."

"I'd be glad to," Nicolas said. "What do you sell?"

"Photos and some of my paintings," Sakura said. "But that's okay. I'm going to shut it down soon anyway."

"Oh?" James turned to her. "Why? It's making you good money, isn't it?"

Sakura nodded. "I have other plans."

"Mind telling me what they are?" James asked curiously.

Sakura cast her eyes downward to avoid his gaze. Her heart suddenly ached in her chest. She couldn't possibly tell him now, could she? He'd be very upset, and she didn't want him to be upset, especially when the wedding was so close and all.

James understood immediately. He sighed. "I see." There was an uncomfortable silence in the room as the brothers wondered what was going on. Finally, James said, "Why don't we go to lunch?"

The brothers agreed. Sakura 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 Sakura the moment he saw her and grabbed her wrist, leading her to the buffet area. As she took a plate, Sakura felt Darcy's intense gaze on her. Her stomach flipped, and her heart raced.

He'd 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 Sakura kept taking peeks at Darcy, who now and again also happened to catch her eyes. Instantly, she'd flicked 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, which Sakura couldn't seem 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 Sakura from Sebastian? They were family. But he loved this woman. *Shit!* His heart hurt.

Sebastian, sitting beside Nicolas and Conrad, noticed Darcy and Sakura staring at each other and gritted his teeth.

A voice sang to them then. "My, my. The whole family here at the hotel?"

Sakura looked up to see Alaina walking toward them. Behind her were Tara and another woman Sakura thought looked oddly familiar to her. As they came closer, Sakura 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 Kate. "Shit!" she swore under her breath.

“What’s wrong?” Peter asked his fiancée.

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.

“Holy cow!” Hayden shouted out. “It’s Kate!”

Darcy went rigid instantly and his impassive face turned even colder. Since his back was to the door, he was glad he didn’t have to look at his ex-girlfriend.

“Hi, everyone,” Kate said pleasantly as she scanned around the long table. Then she spotted Darcy and smiled with delight. The smile, however, didn’t last long as she spotted Sakura opposite her *boyfriend*.

Oh, Tara and Alaina had told her all about her ex-classmate all right, that the bitch Sakura was trying to steal Darcy from her, and that was why Darcy wouldn’t return her calls. Kate wanted to snort with disgust. There was no way she’d let someone like Sakura 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 she’d do anything to get her Darcy back, even if it killed her.

She cleared her throat and said loudly so that everyone could hear her, “Darcy, darling!” Then she rushed over and hugged him from behind, kissing his cheek in front of everyone.

Sakura 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, didn’t know it was because of what Kate had implied about her relationship with Darcy. Sakura wasn’t afraid of Kate, as Mary thought.

Sakura glanced up and her eyes met Darcy’s, intense and blazing.

“Did you miss me?” Kate asked, snuggling her face against his neck.

Tara and Alaina looked at each other, smiling, pleased with how things had gone so far.

James cleared his throat. "I'm afraid we haven't met," he said.

Kate chuckled and said to James, "I'm Kate, Darcy's girlfriend."

Sakura sucked in her breath and wanted to die right there and then. Why she had such a reaction she didn't know, but God, how that very statement really affected her. So that was why he was keeping his distance. She couldn't believe it! Couldn't believe he had kissed her, yet he was dating Kate.

Darcy scowled darkly. He was still staring at Sakura, his eyes intense. *Please, Sakura, don't get the wrong idea*, he wanted to shout out. But he didn't, and Kate giggled as she kissed him on the cheek 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 wasn't going to back out now.

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 Sakura and noted her hands were shaking. His stomach knotted in dread. *Shit!*

Sakura 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.

Oh, God! She could feel herself shaking, and her heart wouldn't 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 she didn't know, staring up at the beautiful pink cloud of cherry blossoms as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Oh, God, she couldn't believe it. She was still crying even at this age. She was turning twenty-four soon and here she was still crying. Crying for what? The stupid crying wouldn't change anything, would it?

Once she'd 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'd 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 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 her? Hadn't she seen it already when Alaina and Tara had tried to kill her by drowning her in the pool when they'd known very well that she didn't know how to swim? And the brothers? They hadn't 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.

She sat up and squared her shoulders. That was it. 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'd longed to be their sister, longed for them to love her and care about her. Now, however, she'd had enough. She didn't care that they didn't want her as their sister anymore. After this wedding, she was going her own way, to find her mother, to begin anew. Yes, and they'd get what 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 her face and body. She chuckled and whispered, "Spring is nearly over."

CHAPTER 30:

Falling For Sakura

“YOU’RE BEAUTIFUL,” BETH SAID, CHUCKLING. “I can’t believe the brothers’ ideas worked.”

Sakura cocked her head to one side as she studied herself in the full-length mirror. Yes, it worked all right; she had to admit that. Her bridesmaid’s dress was 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.

“Ah,” Beth said. “I see you like the looks of yourself.”

“I don’t usually go this far.” Sakura admitted.

“Now then, I must go and see how the bride is doing. Make sure she doesn’t get cold feet and all that jazz,” Beth said, heading out the door.

Sakura grinned. Alone, she turned to look at herself in the mirror one more time. She was Sakura Princeton. But was she really Sakura Princeton or was she Sakura something else?

Tanaka! The last name rang in her head. Her mother's name 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.

"Hi," she greeted them the moment she stepped into the large room.

James smiled at her as she came in. "Are you nervous?" he asked, noting how beautiful she looked. His sons were going to have the shock of their lives.

Sakura shook her head, telling him she wasn't at all nervous. She took a deep, steady breath and said quietly, "I was wondering if both of you have a moment."

James raised his brows at her, noting the odd tone in her soft voice and the slight expression of dread on her flawless face.

"What is it, sweetheart?" Brenda asked, watching her closely.

Sakura licked her lips, her heart pounding hard within her chest. "Mom?" She looked straight at Brenda, her body stiff.

"Yes, sweetheart?" Brenda queried.

"Dad." Sakura turned to James. "I have a question to ask."

"What is it?" James cocked his head to one side.

Sakura took a deep breath and said, "I'm asking your 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, I don't want to hurt you or anything, but—"

She paused and licked her lips with nervousness.

"You're a grown woman now, Sakura. Whether your last name is Princeton or something else, you will always be our Sakura." As James said that, he had a sad look in his eyes. He knew what this

meant. He knew she was leaving them. Of course, he had known all along this day would come sooner or later. After all, he couldn't very well stop her since she had her own life and her own future to think about.

"So you're not upset?" Sakura asked.

James chuckled. "You have your own future to think about, Sakura. No matter where you are, you'll always be our Sakura."

Sakura cocked her head to one side, wondering if her adopted father suspected she was planning to leave. She turned to Brenda. "And you?"

Brenda said, "Of course, sweetheart, you have my blessing."

Sakura wasn't finished yet, and before she got too nervous to tell them, she went straight ahead. "I've planned to leave St. Joseph Island after the wedding. I've already handed in my resignation letter at the lab. My boss said it's okay and that he understands it's such short notice." She looked up at them and saw Brenda's face had paled. "I love you both very much."

Brenda, with tears in her eyes, pulled her adopted daughter into her arms. "I love you, too," she whispered into Sakura's hair. "I just never thought you'd be going so soon. This house is going to be so empty without you."

Sakura chuckled.

"And I'll have to put up with James complaining about Beth's standard coffee," she continued.

James said, "Now, now." Once his wife had finally let go of their adopted daughter, he pulled Sakura into his arms and hugged her tight. "Just make sure you keep in contact."

Sakura nodded.

Half an hour later, she was standing in the garden, listening to the "Wedding March" 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

caused the cherry blossom flowers to detach from the branches and rain down on them. It was so nostalgic.

Then it was time, and Sakura 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.

Sakura couldn't help but smile 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 Sakura was Katherine, dressed in her pale pink maid of honor gown, slowly striding toward the platform. Halfway through, Sakura couldn't help herself turning her head to the left. Instantly, her eyes spotted the brothers, all dressed in Armani suits, very sleek and refined. They caught many women's eyes, causing them to gasp in awe. They stood in a row, watching the procession. But to be sure, it wasn't the procession they had their eyes on. They had their eyes intensely on her, especially Sebastian and Darcy, who weren't smiling like their other brothers. In fact, their expressions were stone cold.

The brothers couldn't take their eyes away from their adopted sister. She was so beautiful that she took their breath away, as James had predicted. That dress they helped 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 they couldn't 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.

Sebastian couldn't take his eyes off 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 couldn't. He wouldn't because—

Because what? *Shit!* It was so hard. So very hard.

Sakura quickly glanced away from them, her heart pounding within her chest. *Stop thinking about them, Sakura*, she told herself. *Just stop!* Yes, only a couple more days to go. Then they'd 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 Sakura 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. "Dear family and friends, on behalf of Mary 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 pledge their love and commitment to each other. We rejoice in the manner God has led them to each other and got them to the place where they now stand."

Sakura tried to concentrate on what the minister was saying but found she couldn't as she felt two pairs of eyes watching her. Then, of course, she couldn't help herself and glanced in that direction and saw both Darcy and Sebastian watching her, their eyes intense and their faces expressionless. She bit her lower lip. *Stop thinking about them, Sakura*, she told herself yet again. It was nearly over.

The minister turned to Peter and continued. "The woman who stands by your side is going to be your wife. She will look to you for comfort, for support, for love, for understanding, for

encouragement, and for protection. You must never take her for granted and always stand by her, for good or ill.”

Peter cleared his throat and said loudly, “Today in the presence of God, family, and friends, I pledge to join my life with yours...”

Sakura 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, as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” Peter said, smiling brilliantly.

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 in health, as long as you both shall live?”

Mary clearly said, “I do.”

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.” He turned to Peter. “Peter, take this ring and place it on your bride’s finger and state your pledge to her, repeating after me.”

Instantly, Michael stepped forward and gladly offered them the rings. Peter took one and slipped it onto Mary’s finger. While he held Mary’s hand in his, he repeated after the minister. Then it was Mary’s turn.

“Mary and Peter,” the minister said, “you have pledged your 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

they have pledged themselves to meet sorrow and happiness as one family before God and this community of friends, I now pronounce them husband and wife. You may kiss your bride."

Peter pulled back Mary's veil and, grinning cheekily, kissed her on the lips. Everyone cheered then, and Sakura laughed, tears in her eyes.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Johnston," the minister said.

"Hurray!" Michael shouted and ran to hug Sakura around the waist. "Now it's our turn," he said cheekily.

Conrad stood up and yelled, "Hey, who said it's your turn, you little brat?"

Everyone laughed at them. Sakura ruffled Michael's thick hair. "Come on," Michael said. "Photo time."

It wasn't long before Sakura 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.

Sakura 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.

"Time for our photos, little sis," Logan said cheekily.

"No, it's time for our photos, my dear Sakura," Tristan said cheekily, grabbing Sakura by the arm and leading her away.

"Oi!" Logan snapped. "Sakura and I are taking our photos." He grabbed her other arm and proceeded to lead her in the opposite direction.

"You guys." Sakura couldn't help raising her voice just a little. "How about we all take photos together instead?"

Tristan didn't look very happy with that idea.

Logan sighed. "Very well," he said and took her camera from her. He called to Patrick, one of the three photographers they had hired for the occasion, to come over to them.

Tristan took the chance and pulled Sakura to him, causing Sakura to collide against his massive chest. "Say cheese," he said.

"How lame," Logan said, pulling Sakura back to him. The three stood with Sakura in the middle and the brothers on either side of her. Patrick raised the camera to his eyes and then *click, click, click, click*.

"That was great, guys," Patrick said. "More?"

"Yeah, more," Tristan said. Then when the photographer started clicking again, he sneakily kissed Sakura on the cheek.

Sakura gasped. Logan saw. The brother growled and said, "You're not the only one who's kissing her." That said, he kissed her as well on her other cheek.

Oh, God, Sakura 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 clicked and clicked, both Tristan and Logan kissed her cheeks with delight. They would have continued if it wasn't for the loud command that got bombed their way by Sebastian. Darcy wasn't far behind him.

"That's enough!"

Tristan and Logan pulled back and frowned at their younger brothers.

"What? Jealous 'cause you couldn't kiss our sweet sister?" Tristan chuckled. He came over and slapped Sebastian on the shoulder. "Get over it, Seb boy. She's not into you."

Logan chuckled then. "She's not into you either, my boy," he said to Darcy, who only frowned at him. Tristan and Logan walked away, chuckling merrily.

Sakura felt her heart thundering within her chest as the two brothers watched her intently. She took a deep breath and then walked past them toward Patrick. "May I have my camera back, please?"

"Of course," the photographer said.

"Thanks," she said and started walking away.

"Oh wait, photos," Patrick shouted. "You guys are siblings, aren't you? Now then, let's have some very good photos."

"No, that's fine," Sakura said, shaking her head furiously.

Sebastian grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her to him, causing her to tumble in her very high heels. "Take the photos," he said to the photographer.

He placed his arms about her waist, pulling her even closer to him as the camera clicked and clicked and clicked. Sakura 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 this wasn't going to get any worse, 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 Darcy*.

"Take our photos," Darcy said.

The photographer chuckled. "You two look good together."

Sakura blushed. Darcy smiled. Sebastian scowled.

The photographer continued to take picture after picture after picture. Then Sebastian couldn't stand it anymore. He pulled Sakura 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.

The photographer laughed. "All three together, then," he said. "You three look great." Then he went *click, click, click*. "Stand in the middle, miss," he said to Sakura.

When Sakura didn't move, he came over and guided her. When he returned to his position, Sakura was standing in the middle with the two brothers on either side of her. Then he continued to take more photos.

"My, my." Mary, the newly wedded bride, appeared behind the photographer. "You three do look good together." Then she laughed. "Now then, sorry to interrupt, but I must steal my

precious Sakura away for a wee moment.” That said, she grabbed Sakura by the arm and took her away.

The brothers watched her go, their faces stone cold.

Sakura was only too glad to be taken away because, my God, how she could feel the tension between the two brothers.

“What was all that about?” Mary asked a few moments later once they were in her bedroom.

“What?” Sakura asked, confused, watching Mary searching for something in her huge closet.

“You and the two brothers,” Mary said. “Man, I could’ve sworn I felt a lot of tension there for a moment.”

“Oh,” Sakura voiced, totally understanding what her friend meant. Was this conflict really because of her?

“Now where is it?” Mary said. “Ah!”

A moment later, she came back and gave Sakura a pretty little box, neatly wrapped up with happy birthday wrapping paper.

“Shit!” Sakura swore under her breath.

Mary pulled Sakura into her arms and said softly, “I’m sorry. I won’t be here when you turn twenty-four, so happy early birthday.”

Sakura felt tears brewing in her eyes. “You didn’t have to do that, Mary.”

Mary chuckled. “Twenty-four is a big number. Almost a quarter of a century, if you think about it.”

That was true, but Sakura never thought about that.

Mary took a step back. “I know your real birthday was probably sometime earlier than this, but since you were found at the orphanage two days from now, twenty-four years ago, then technically speaking, it’s your birthday.”

Sakura chuckled. “Thanks, Mary. You remember.” Then she thought none of the brothers would have remembered. Why would they? She wasn’t important to them.

“You’re not allowed to open it until the day, all right?” Mary warned.

“Of course,” Sakura chuckled.

“Now then, let us return to our photos,” Mary said, heading out the door.

Sakura 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 into the microphone and said, "Sorry, ladies and gentlemen. That was my bad." Everyone laughed, including the bride and groom, who were standing in the center of the hall, waiting to start their first dance.

After some tweaking, the music started. It was "Unchained Melody" by the Righteous Brothers.

The moment Sakura 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 lovingly in each other's arms, 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 his mother dance in Jack's arms.

Richard pulled her into his arms and started moving her around, little by little. Sakura wasn't any 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 Sakura felt as though someone was watching her. She lifted her head and saw Sebastian, his blue eyes intense on her face.

Sakura felt her heart thundering within her chest as she continued moving around in Richard's arms. She tried to move 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 Sakura—his beautiful Sakura—dancing in Richard's arms as the man swayed her around. How he wished it

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 with love—love just for him. Then very slowly he moved his head down and took her lips, kissing her passionately and wildly as they moved about the dance floor. *Sakura. His Sakura.* 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. She 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.

Finally Sakura was able to break away from Sebastian's gaze when Richard moved her around to another part of the dance floor. Sakura's heart was still thundering within her chest when she met Darcy, who was also watching her intently.

Oh, God, his eyes... She could see the pain within his eyes as he gazed at her, and her heart ached with him, for him. Why was it so painful? She gripped her hands on Richard's shoulders 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 in Richard's place, taking 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?*

Sakura wanted to take Darcy into her arms and hug him, give her all to him. She wouldn't because he was already with someone else. He didn't want her. He'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. "There, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Sakura slowly looked up, her face pale. "No, I suppose not," 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? *How?* How was that 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, swaying 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 longed for her but knew he couldn't have her. In front 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.

Sakura closed her eyes, torn. What should she do?

Conrad surprised her by pulling her into his arms and started laughing. "Come on, Sakura. Dance with me."

Before she knew anything, Tristan got her by the other arm and chuckled. "You're dancing with me, sweetheart."

“Oi!” Conrad snapped. “I got the first dance. Isn’t that right, Sakura?”

She managed to give him a small smile, though her head was spinning. “How about we all dance together?” she suggested weakly.

“Yeah, why not?” Logan said, appearing out of the blue and 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 dizzy. “Dance, Sakura, dance.” He chuckled. Then Conrad appeared before them again and took her into his arms. “Now you’re dancing with me.”

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. It wasn’t long when she noticed a couple on the other side. They were obviously making out, and she decided she didn’t want to disturb them.

She turned and took two steps when she heard, “Darcy, darling.”

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 the woman’s face. Then she 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.

Sakura’s whole body shuddered. Her 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 on, she had made her decision and she wasn’t going to change it.

CHAPTER 31:

A Secret Kiss

DARCY REMOVED KATE'S ARMS FROM around his neck and pushed her back, his face a mask of anger. "What are you doing?" he asked coldly. "I thought I told you it's over."

Kate watched Sakura walking away and smiled with satisfaction. Oh yes, Sakura 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*—and he hadn't batted an eyelid. In fact, he was so pissed off with her that he nearly slapped her face just mere moments ago.

Kate folded her arms across her chest and smiled at him. "I'm coming back to you. Is that wrong?" She moved closer to him and touched his arm. "I love you, Darcy. Please come back to me."

Darcy gritted his teeth. "How many times, Kate? How many times do I have to tell you? It's over."

Kate cocked her head to one side. "Tell me one thing, Darcy. Are Tara and Alaina right? Are you in love with that bitch?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Sakura!" She barked out the name in disgust. "That bitch Sakura."

Darcy had had enough. "Listen here, Kate," he began in a low, heated voice. "Yes, I love her. I have always loved her, even before I met you. She's the woman who makes me feel pain and pleasure at the same time. She's the woman who makes my heart beat fast and slow at the same time. She's the woman who I think about every second. I love her, Kate, and I've *never* loved you. Is that clear enough for you to understand?"

Kate gritted her teeth and then bashed her fist on his chest. "You bastard! What about our relationship?"

"We've never had a relationship, Kate. Ever!" Darcy closed his eyes and his heart ached. He had to tell Sakura 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 Sakura, and Darcy could never do such a horrible thing to Sebastian. Darcy could never steal the woman Sebastian loved.

"Good-bye, Kate," he said coldly and then walked away. He didn't return to the hotel to 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 the moon was high, he couldn't help himself and ran and ran and ran until he was exhausted, breathless, and puffing, sweat soaking his body.

When he finally couldn't go any farther, 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 him to such an extent that he couldn't help himself and screamed. He howled long and loud. His voice, hollow with agony, echoed across the air like a lone wolf in the woods, grieving for the loss of his mate.

When he finally couldn't scream anymore, he cried, his head in 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?

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, Sakura 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 Alaina—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 this she wasn't sure. She just did. Then she put on some night cream and blow-dried her hair. Once done, she went straight to bed, only she couldn't sleep. She felt so restless, and she wasn't sure why.

She flicked on the light, grabbed her camera, and went through the photos she had taken during the wedding. As she gazed down at the people's faces in the photos, her heart ached within her chest. *Her family.* They were her family, weren't they? Then the photo of 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.

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 Daddy James and Mom Brenda, Nicolas, Logan, Hayden, and of course the two men who 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 hadn't been 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'd 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.

"You have no worries, do you?" she said softly. "I wish I were more like you." Then she got up and left the room.

The air was warm and breezy as Sakura headed down toward the garden near the pond where Mary and Peter had their wedding ceremony only that afternoon.

"It was a beautiful wedding," she whispered to herself.

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.

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.

Sakura gasped, her heart pounding hard and fast as she instinctively tried to free herself from the tight imprisonment.

"Let go!" she said, 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. Sakura 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.

"Who are you?" she whispered softly, 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.

"What do you want?" she whispered again, her voice shaking.

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 to her ear. "Hush," he whispered, sending electrifying sensations through her being.

Sakura 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 lower toward her breasts.

Sakura 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. Sakura widened her eyes, wondering why he'd stopped. It felt so good.

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.

“What are you doing to me?” she asked stupidly.

He didn’t respond to her query, and before she could understand what was going on, his firm lips were on hers.

Sakura 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 higher 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.

Sakura’s whole body 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 thought she’d die. Yes, she was lost in the wonderful heaven.

Suddenly, he pulled back, as if he suddenly realized he’d made a mistake. Sakura gazed up at his dark form, her heart pounding. She didn’t want him to stop. She was hooked.

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. “I love you.” Then he was gone. *Just like that.*

Sakura 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. She couldn’t sleep. She was restless. Her heart was still pounding. Her mind was still on the man who had kissed her.

CHAPTER 32:

Tragedy

SAKURA WOKE UP LATE THE next day since she didn't get to sleep until about five in the morning. She came down for brunch feeling a bit out of sorts and also noticed that the house was still as quiet as ever. Perhaps everyone was also still in bed because they hadn't returned home until very early this morning from their night out.

"My, my," Beth commented. "You do look horrible."

Sakura chuckled. "I couldn't sleep last night."

"Yeah, I can understand that. You've seen your best friend getting married and settling down, and now you want that for yourself, too."

Sakura wanted to tell her that wasn't it. The reason she couldn't sleep was because of that secret kiss last night in the garden by—

No, don't think about it, Sakura.

She stood up and said, "I'm going out for a walk along St. Helena Beach. Won't be back till much later."

"I see you're planning to skip lunch yet again?" Beth asked, her brows nearly up to her gray hairline.

Sakura just laughed and walked to the door, ignoring Beth's disapproving stare. "Don't worry, Beth dear. I'll be back for dinner."

Beth grumbled under her breath and said, "There's supposed to be a storm sometime this afternoon. Make sure you're home before that, won't you?"

"I will," Sakura replied, waving her hand in the air to tell the housekeeper not to worry.

"Oh," Beth said before Sakura could disappear around the corner. "The brothers are at St. Helena Beach too, surfing."

Sakura, however, didn't hear her as she was already out of earshot.

Some ten minutes later, Sakura 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.

Yes, all too soon she wouldn't be able to enjoy this any longer. 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 of the beach. She couldn't help herself and watched with interest, marveling at how expertly they stayed on the boards as they surfed the waves. From where she stood, which was a very long distance away, she could just make out the men's athletic bodies. They 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

waves resided, were Sebastian and Darcy. It looked as though they were competing to see who the better surfer was.

Sakura found she couldn't take her eyes away from them as they expertly rode the waves. Suddenly, her heart ached within her chest.

No, she mustn't think about them now—especially not about them and not now when she had already made up her mind that she'd leave St. Joseph Island. She'd 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, Sakura didn't notice that Conrad had seen her and was shouting at her to come to them. When she didn't respond, he got out of the water and raced after her. The brothers didn't notice him go as they continued to surf.

As she was walking, neither did Sakura 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 observe them uninterrupted, and she made herself comfortable, 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 they'd be all right and that nothing bad would happen to them. A few seconds later, she saw them emerge unharmed. She sighed in relief.

It wasn't long when dark clouds started gathering in the distance and heading their way. Lightning flashed, and Sakura jumped at the sound and automatically hugged herself. Then it started pouring—*hard*. She was totally soaked instantly. "Already?" She'd thought that the storm wasn't due until much later.

She narrowed her eyes at the brothers. She couldn't believe it. They were still surfing. *In this rain?*

Obviously, she couldn't stay there watching them any longer. 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

storm would pass quickly because she didn't want to return home late. Beth would be pissed that she didn't listen to her, and of 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 Sakura 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.

Sakura gasped and her eyes widened. *Sebastian!* He had been here with her that night, hadn't he? He had looked after her during 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.

"I love you," he had said to her that night. Suddenly, tears brewed in her eyes. *Oh, Sebastian!* Tears rolled down her cheeks, and her heart tore even more as she fell to her knees.

"Aw, does the lightning scare you so?" a voice said behind her.

Sakura 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 interested. "I've never been here before, but it's a pretty good place, don't you think?"

Sakura didn't reply. "What are you doing here?"

Kate cocked her head to one side. "Exploring. I like the island. After all, if I were to marry Darcy, then—"

Sakura gritted her teeth at the mention of Darcy. Then she noted that something wasn't right. How come Kate was here? How 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.

Sakura was suspicious and knew something didn't sit right with her. At that moment, she didn't care to find out what it was and

thought she better get out of here fast. But the rain! How would she get back home safely in this weather? Furthermore, she didn't 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 Sakura. Kate smiled darkly, and then with all her might, she shoved her back, slamming her against the wall of the cave.

"Where do you think you're going?" she gritted out, her voice ice cold.

Sakura 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.

Sakura felt tears burning in her eyes. "Home," she gritted out coldly. "Now leave me alone."

Kate smiled pleasantly as she cocked her head to one side. "Home? Sakura, do you even have a home to go to?" Then she laughed maniacally. "If you mean Princeton Mansion, I don't think that's your home." She pulled Sakura by the collar, which took Sakura by surprise. Then she shoved Sakura forward. "You don't have a home, you slut. You don't belong at Princeton Mansion. In fact, you don't belong with the Princetons at all. You're just a freeloader, sucking their life and money."

Sakura gritted her teeth and pulled back. "What are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? What am I talking about?" Kate asked sarcastically. "Why don't you just get it straight in that dumb head of yours? That you don't belong with the Princeton family. That all you've ever done is cause the family to break apart. Let's just face it, why don't we? You've destroyed both Tara's and Alaina's life."

Sakura shook her head as Kate started moving toward her in a threatening way, like she'd always done in high school.

"First, you burned down the orphanage and killed Tara's mom because you bloody well hated Tara's and her mom's guts 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 about James? He's so 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 inheritance away and gave it to you."

"What? That's not true," Sakura said, shaking her head. "Kate, I don't have to listen to your stupid accusations. Now get out of my way. I'm going home."

"Shut up! Just shut up, bitch," Kate said. "You know, these people are good people, and I, for one, will not allow a wicked bitch like you to hurt them." She grabbed Sakura by the hair and roughly slammed her head and body against the rocky wall of the cave.

The impact was so great that it nearly broke Sakura's bones, 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 couldn't allow this woman to bully her anymore, to hurt her anymore.

When Sakura managed to gain control of her body again, she looked up to see Kate taking a Swiss Army knife out of her belt.

Sakura 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.

Sakura watched in horror as Kate brought the Swiss Army knife down toward her. She screamed, and instantly, before the knife could cut her flesh, Sakura's hand shot out and held Kate's wrist, stopping her in time.

"Why are you doing this?" she panted out lowly, her face pale.

"To get rid of you. You've destroyed too many lives. You've destroyed Tara's life. You've destroyed Alaina's life. They're my best friends. Now you've also destroyed my life. You took my Darcy away from me. You've ruined my life, you bitch."

Kate applied more force, her face red as she brought the knife closer to Sakura's throat, ready to slice her life away.

Sakura 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?

Sakura couldn't think further and managed to jostle the knife out of Kate's hand. Kate scrambled for her precious weapon. Sakura took the opportunity to shove Kate back, causing the other woman to fall on her backside. Sakura 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 anger. She couldn't see a thing as she raced down the narrow pathway she hoped would lead her to somewhere safe.

"Come back here, bitch," Kate shouted after her. "I'm going to kill you for what you did."

Sakura wasn't listening. She raced around the sharp corner, nearly slipping on the muddy pathway. She blinked away rainwater from her eyes as she searched in panic which way to go.

"Sakura! Where the fuck are you?" Kate screamed in the rain. "Come back here and let me kill you properly!" Then she laughed.

Sakura 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 wouldn't fall.

"You know," Kate said, not too far away, rain beating down on her. "This is a pretty good place for you to die. Instead of me slicing your throat to make it look like suicide, maybe I'll throw you off the cliff and make it look like an accident. What do you think, Sakura?"

Sakura felt her heart thumping loud and furious within her chest, her head spinning and her whole body shaking. How did it

come to this? Why was Kate trying to kill her? She hadn't done anything to deserve this.

She bit her lip and peeked down. She shouldn't have done that, for straight down below her was the sea—very angry, with those big waves crashing against the cliff's 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 wasn't here and would leave.

She breathed in heavily and clung to the side of the cliff as the rain beat down on her, her whole body cold and wet and her head 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.

"Where are you?" Kate sang merrily.

Suddenly Kate appeared, and Sakura jumped in fear.

"There you are." Kate chuckled. "Just like old times, eh? Now then. Time to die." She grabbed Sakura by her arm and shoved her toward the edge of the cliff.

Sakura held on to Kate for dear life. "Don't!" she begged. "You don't want to do this. You shouldn't be doing this! Kate, please listen to me."

"Why? Why shouldn't I be doing this?" Kate asked. "You've ruined my life. I have to get rid of you so we all can live happily ever after." She shoved Sakura harder, but Sakura held on to the groove of the rock with one hand and Kate with the other.

Then when Sakura thought she couldn't hold on any longer, Conrad suddenly appeared on the other side, shocked to see her hanging on to the cliff within a thread of her life.

"Shit! Sakura!" he screamed. "Kate, what the hell are you doing? Get away from Sakura!"

Kate, after hearing Conrad's voice, went into shocked stillness. Then she panicked, and as if she couldn't help herself because she'd come too far, she shoved Sakura harder, which caused Sakura to lose her grip on the rock.

“Conrad!” Sakura screamed as her body fell back, her hands reaching out to him. *Oh, God!* She was going to die.

Conrad raced to Sakura, screaming her name. “Sakura!” His hand reached out for her, but he was too late. She was already falling from the cliff and into the ocean below.

“Sakura!” he screamed again, his voice echoing across the sea.

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 Sakura’s body flying down like a little doll and hitting the water.

Sebastian went cold the moment he saw her body. Darcy screamed his head off. “Sakura!” he howled, 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 Darcy in Logan and Hayden’s care, dove back down and went in search for Sakura. Nicolas and Tristan weren’t far behind him.

Please, God, let her be all right, Sebastian prayed. *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 help. They put her on Nicolas’s surfboard and started heading

back. Once they got back to the beach, Sebastian took Sakura in his arms, testing to see if she was breathing. She wasn't. *Oh, shit!*

He laid her back down, his heart thundering in his chest and his stomach knotted in dread. *Don't die on me, sweetheart. Don't 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.

"Come on," he said, anguish in his voice and tears in his eyes. He moved to blow air into her lungs again and then pressed her chest. "Sweetheart, Sakura, wake up!" he growled.

Hayden and Logan were fixing Darcy up as best as they could so he wouldn't bleed to death.

"So much blood," Hayden said. "Shit!"

"Sakura! Sakura!" Conrad shouted from the distance as he raced down toward them. "Sakura!" He came to kneel beside her, his face pale. "Shit! Sakura!" he cried.

Sebastian continued to do CPR, and then finally, she coughed, spurring out loads of saltwater, and opened her eyes. Sebastian sighed with relief and hugged her tight within his arms, tears rolling down his face. "Sakura," he whispered against her wet hair.

Sakura gazed at the man who had saved her life once again. "Sebastian," she whispered weakly. Then she 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. "Darcy," she whispered dryly, her head spinning. Then, as if as she couldn't take it any longer, she closed her eyes again and fell unconscious.

CHAPTER 33:

Confession

SAKURA 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 lines of IV tubes connected to her arm.

Where am I?

She tried to sit up but found she couldn't.

"Don't move," she heard someone say to her softly.

Sakura turned to see Sebastian moving toward her from where he sat. He touched his warm hand to her cheek, cupping her face. "Lie back," he said.

She obeyed him. Sebastian pulled the blanket up to her chin as he watched her.

"Where am I?" she asked weakly.

"In the hospital," he said.

"Oh," she voiced, staring up at the ceiling. Then she closed 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 cliff.

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.

She flashed open her eyes. "Darcy!"

"Hush," Sebastian said. "He's fine. He's fine."

"Tell me what happened to him, please," she begged, tears in 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 slowly, he moved and kissed her forehead. "He's fine. He's just across the hall." He didn't dare tell her that Darcy had lost a lot of blood and his left arm was broken when he was trying to save her.

Sebastian rested his chin on top of her head and said, "I was so worried. When I saw you fall, I thought I'd die."

Sakura clutched onto him, her body trembling. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry? I couldn't believe Kate would do that to you." He nudged her face up so she could look at him. "Sakura," he began slowly.

Sebastian knew he couldn't 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. He knew for certain he never wanted that to happen again, ever. Yes, he needed to tell her now.

"I love you," he said, staring into her dark eyes—eyes that had always mesmerized him. "I have always loved you, Sakura. I'm not going to ever let you leave me, ever again."

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. "Sebastian," she whispered softly. She desperately wanted to tell 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, she'd be leaving him. All too soon, she'd be leaving them all, and it pained her to think about it.

Then before she could say anything, his lips were on hers, kissing her gently and passionately. With tears in her eyes, Sakura submitted to him, letting him kiss her, letting him explore her mouth, letting him have all of her because she knew it would be the last time she'd share a kiss with him. Then when he finally lifted his head and wiped her tears away, she couldn't help herself and said softly, "I love you, too."

Sebastian's heart burst 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, Sakura laid her head on his chest and closed her eyes, clinging onto him, never wanting to let him go, knowing very well that this would be the last time she'd 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 Sakura 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 Logan at the end of her bed, Sebastian and Hayden on her left, and Conrad on her right.

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.

"Don't move. You're not well yet," he said. Then he hugged her really tight, a worried expression on his face. "I was so worried last night, but stupid Sebastian wouldn't let me stay with you. You scared the shit out of me, falling off that cliff."

"Oi, lie down, puppy boy," Tristan said teasingly. "You're suffocating poor Sakura."

Conrad frowned at his brother but did move back to give Sakura some breathing space.

Nicolas said, "How are you feeling, Sakura?"

Sakura managed to give him a weak smile, nodding her head to tell him she was fine.

Logan cleared his throat and then said, "You really put up a good fight against that sea there, Sakura. I'm impressed."

A frown formed on Sakura's pale face.

Tristan elbowed his brother, telling him it wasn't appropriate to mention the incident.

"Kate?" Sakura asked softly.

The brothers looked at one another. "Kate has been taken into custody for questioning."

"What's going to happen to her?" Sakura couldn't help asking.

"She's being investigated for attempted murder," James said, his eyes dark.

Sakura could feel the pain radiating from his voice, and her heart ached in response. "You're tired. You should rest," Brenda said, stroking back her hair.

Sakura nodded in agreement. Then Brenda shooed all her sons out, who finally left after putting up a big fight. Brenda kissed her on her forehead gently. "Get well soon."

Sakura nodded, and then before Brenda went, she said, "Mom?"

"Yes, sweetheart?" Brenda raised her brows.

Sakura said slowly, her eyes on the older woman's face, "I love you and thank you so much for everything."

Brenda cocked her head to one side, confused as to why Sakura would say those words to her all of a sudden. She replied, "My pleasure."

Sakura watched her adopted mother go, tears brewing in her eyes, her heart aching, knowing very well this would be the last time she'd see the woman for 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 forehead. "I'm sorry," he said in anguish.

Sakura's tears flowed down her cheeks. "Daddy James, please, you've done nothing wrong."

James brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. "I'm so sorry, Sakura. I've failed as a father. I couldn't protect you."

Sakura shook her head. "No, you didn't fail. You're a marvelous father, and I'm your daughter." She raised up and touched her hand to his face. Slowly, she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "I love you, Daddy James, and thank you for everything. You will always be my Daddy James."

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, Daddy James," she said, a sad smile on her face.

James watched as she slowly rested 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. "I love you, my daughter Sakura. You will always be our Sakura no matter who you are or where you are." Then he was gone.

Sakura quietly sobbed until she fell asleep. The next time she woke up, she saw Ned sitting beside her bed, waiting for her to wake.

"I was mighty worried, you know," was his greeting.

Sakura smiled weakly. "I'm still alive, Ned dear."

He suddenly hugged her tightly. "Don't you ever do that to me again," he muttered, tears in his eyes. "I'm too old for that sort of bullshit now."

She chuckled. Then when he moved back and looked at her, she said, "Ned dear, I need your help."

"You know I will do anything to help you," he replied, noting the determined look in her dark eyes.

"Thank you," she said, smiling.

CHAPTER 34:

A Final Kiss

SAKURA 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'd returned from Mary and Peter's wedding. 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 she'd 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

Sakura had entered their lives. Sakura would not break either Sebastian's or Darcy's hearts. Well, probably at first, but she knew that eventually they would forget about her. Eventually this Sakura 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 they'd live happily ever after, just like in fairy tale books, and the name Sakura would no longer have any meaning to them.

Sakura 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 Sakura 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 Darcy's room. She'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 caressed him, pleading for him to wake up, for him to open his eyes.

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!

Suddenly, Darcy moved. "Snow," he groaned softly. "Snow, don't leave me. Don't die on me. Please, I love you."

Sakura cried, her whole body shaking with emotion as she hid her face against his neck.

Darcy slowly opened his eyes and dazedly looked at her. "Snow," he whispered.

Sakura 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. Sakura cried as they kissed, her heart bursting with pleasure and pain, with happiness and sadness. This 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.

"I love you, Darce. I will always be your Snow," she said softly and then kissed him gently again. At that moment, however, she knew she'd never see him again.

Then slowly she got up and walked to the door.

CHAPTER 35:

Sayonara, My Beautiful Family

THE OLD TOYOTA COROLLA CAME to a halt a good distance from Princeton Mansion. Sakura, 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.

Sakura 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 were sitting by the lit fireplace while Tristan, Logan, and Hayden were working on a get-well poster for Sakura 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 Sakura. He was rather pleased with the outcome and hoped Sakura would love it.

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.

Sakura 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 she couldn't stay much longer. She had to go in 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, Sakura 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.

CHAPTER 36:

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 Sakura, 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'd finished replying to the various messages that needed his attention pronto, he put down the tablet and finally noticed the pretty card that sat in the middle of his bed.

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.
Sakura*

Hand shaking, Nicolas whispered, "Sakura."

* * * * *

TRISTAN PICKED UP THE SMALL, pretty card and read it. As he opened it, a photo slipped out and landed on the bed. He picked it up and saw it was a picture of him with Sakura and Logan. He and Logan were kissing her at Mary and Peter's wedding ceremony. He turned his attention to the card and read:

*Sorry I slapped you that day in the library years ago.
I'm sorry I never got to know you better.
Sakura*

"Sakura? What is the meaning of this?" Tristan said and read the card again.

* * * * *

LOGAN STARED AT THE PHOTO of him and Tristan kissing Sakura on her cheeks. "Sakura?" he said. Then he read the card again:

*I will miss your laughter and your teasing.
I'm sorry I never get to know you better.
Sakura*

“What?” Logan said. “This is no time for jokes, Sakura. When I see you tomorrow, I’ll tell you how to do a proper joke.”

* * * * *

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.
Sakura*

Hayden picked up the box and found an earring. He gritted his teeth, his eyes dark. It was the earring she’d bought for him when they were children.

“Sakura,” he said, clutching the earring in his hand.

* * * * *

CONRAD COCKED HIS HEAD TO ONE side as he looked at the pretty card sitting on his bed, wondering whom it was from. Grinning, thinking it must be one of the maids 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 dearly.
Sakura*

Conrad blinked and read through the contents again. Then he realized what it meant. *No*, he thought. It couldn’t be right. Someone must be playing tricks on him. It must be Tristan. He rushed out of his room and ran to Sakura’s bedroom. He didn’t 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, the camera, and Sakura’s bag were all gone. That was when he

realized she was really gone. He collapsed onto his knees and whispered, "Sakura."

Nicolas, Tristan, Logan, and Hayden came into her room then. They found Conrad beside Sakura's bed. That was when they, too, realized she was gone—really gone.

Conrad lifted his head to his brothers and said sadly, "She left us."

* * * * *

SEBASTIAN STARED AT THE LITTLE card on his bed, his heart thumping loudly within his chest. He knew the instant he'd 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 contents. That was when he heard someone rushing into Sakura's room and a moment later more footsteps.

"She left us," he heard Conrad say.

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 if he couldn't stand the torment of not knowing what that card said, he reached for it. Slowly he took a deep breath and opened the card.

Mono no aware.

I love you.

Sakura

Sebastian closed his eyes, his face contorted with anguish. "Sakura," he cried softly under his breath. "Sakura." His body was 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?

"Why?" he whispered. "Why?" Then he shook his head, refusing to submit to this stupid fate she'd made out for him. He

wouldn't accept this. Not Sebastian. He wasn't just going to sit here and let her run off just like that. Oh no. He'd track her down and bring her back.

"Mono no aware bullshit!" he swore. "I'm going to find you, Sakura, and I will never allow you out of my sight again, ever!" He 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 body was in pain. What happened? Why couldn't he remember anything? Slowly, he brought his fingers to his lips and stroked the pale flesh. He closed his eyes again, trying to remember what had happened. All that he remembered was him trying to save Sakura 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, God, he couldn't remember.

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 Sakura 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.

Sakura

A sound escaped his lips and Darcy felt dizzy. His heart began to beat fast.

"Snow," he whispered, closing his eyes, trying to calm his beating heart. Then when he fully comprehended the meaning of

those few words, he flashed his eyes open, jolted up, and screamed, "Sakura!"

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 around him. "Sakura, don't leave me!" he cried, his eyes dark, his voice shaking. "Don't. I love you. You can't leave me. Please, Sakura."

He scrambled off the bed, mindlessly tearing away IV lines from his arms. "I have to find you. Where are you, Sakura? Please, come back."

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.

Darcy wouldn't listen to them, however, and shook his head as 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.

"She's gone," Darcy whispered, tears in his eyes. "She left."

Sebastian nodded.

"We can't just leave it and do nothing," Darcy said. "We have to find her." He looked up 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.

"We'll look for her, Darcy," Sebastian said, his hand tight on Darcy's shoulder. "We'll find her."

"Together," Darcy said. "We'll find her together."

Sebastian nodded and said, "Yes, together."

The brothers nodded again, and Darcy smiled, tears in his eyes.

EPILOGUE:

A New Beginning

IT WAS MORNING AND THE bright orange sun was just beginning to rise over the horizon. Sakura 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 Sakura's arms, licked her chin. She turned her attention to him then and smiled. "Look, Toby, our new home," she said, pointing 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.

Sakura felt at peace as her serene face gazed off into the distance. Now, she was no longer Sakura Princeton. From this day forward and beyond, she was Sakura Tanaka, and she so looked forward to her new future.

"Sebastian," she whispered softly under her breath. "Darcy, please forget Sakura Princeton because she no longer exists."

Sakura knew that eventually the two men would forget about her, forget about Sakura Princeton like they'd forgotten about her before. Soon their memories of her would fade and then completely disappear from their minds. Then one day, they would meet the wonderful women who surely deserved them. Sakura Princeton, however, was not that person. Sakura Princeton never was and never would be.

"I love you both," she whispered softly.

Sakura Tanaka smiled as she stroked her long hair back, her eyes gazing off to the horizon. "I'm looking forward to next spring. It will be so interesting," she said to herself.

* * * * *

NEW YORK CITY

ONE YEAR LATER, SPRING

LUKE HAMILTON WAITED NERVOUSLY AS he stared at the painting of some cherry trees that was placed proudly in the middle of the large gallery. He couldn't understand why his boss wanted this type of painting so badly. It was just a picture of cherry trees with some green land in the distance and beyond that, the pristine blue ocean and the azure sky above. It wasn't that interesting, yet 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 herself. And now he stood waiting for her to materialize. And materialize she did.

"Mr. Hamilton," she called out softly, which caused Luke's 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

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 couldn't afford to touch.

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 shinny 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.

"Would you like to have a seat?" she asked, cocking her beautiful head to one side as she looked at him.

"Um," Luke began, lost because she was smiling at him. Why was she so beautiful when she smiled? *Shit!* What was he here for again? Oh yes, the art exhibition. Yes, that's right, and the paintings.

"Yes, please, Ms. Tanaka," Luke said, nodding furiously.

She chuckled softly, and Luke wanted to melt with joy. "Please, you can call me Sakura. After all, you've been my client for six months now, and calling me Ms. Tanaka just doesn't seem right."

Luke swallowed. "Well, I'm working for my boss. But then again, it's the same thing, isn't it?"

"Luke?" Sakura asked. "About that Japanese fashion show that is due to take place in a few months?"

"Yes?" Luke asked.

"Your sister is working for the Japanese designer Mr. Tachibana, yes?"

Luke nodded his head.

"I was wondering if I might ask for a favor."

Luke was only too happy to help. "Of course," he said, trying very hard to hide his eagerness.

"I was wondering about the fashion industry. Will your sister be able to help me with that?" she asked, her eyes on him, the two different colors fascinating him even more.

"Of course," he said. "The one that's taking place at Princeton Hotel here in Manhattan?"

Sakura paused for a moment, for the name Princeton caused her heart to jolt within her chest. "Yes," she confirmed. "That one."

Luke chuckled. "Of course. Mind you, many people are going to show up since the famous Princeton brothers are going to be there, or so I've heard." Luke moved forward, curiosity eating at him. "You're not asking just because you're interested in them, are you?"

Sakura felt her hands shake. She couldn't believe it. After almost a year, the brothers were still affecting her, both mentally and emotionally. Slowly she shook her head. "I have my own reasons, Luke."

It was her mother, Haruka Tanaka, who she wanted to meet. She knew for a fact Haruka would be there, and she couldn't 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, *they wouldn't know I'd be there*. Besides, they'd probably all forgotten about her by now, so she had nothing to fear.

Finally Sakura smiled brilliantly. "Thank you," she said to Luke. "Thank you so much. You don't know how much this means to me."

* * * * *

NEXT IN THE FALLING FOR SAKURA TRILOGY

Thank you for reading *Falling for Sakura: A Secret Kiss*. The story of Sakura and the seven Princeton brothers continues in **A Secret Proposal** and **A Secret Affair**.

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ABOUT ALEXIA

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, paranormal, 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 www.alexiapraks.com for updates about my upcoming books.

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