

No Secrets Allowed



A SWEET
AND LIGHT-HEARTED
ROMANTIC SERIES,
BOOK 2

K A N A W U

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A SWEET
AND LIGHT-HEARTED
ROMANTIC SERIES,
BOOK 2

K A N A W U

No Secrets Allowed (A Sweet and Light-Hearted Romantic Series, Book 2)
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First Edition

Chapter 1

A crisp, early winter morning greeted me as I left my aunt's house. Vapor rose in the air from my breath. Gazing up, I noticed the color of the sky matched the gray sidewalk, although the Weather Channel had predicted a bright, sunny day in Boston. Well, so much for expecting a warm day today.

As I turned onto the main street, the hustle and bustle of the city surrounded me. The sound of passing cars and the groaning and hissing of the city bus when it halted at the nearby bus stop overwhelmed the chatter and footsteps of people rushing to and fro. Twenty feet from me, a man yelled and waved his fist as a biker swirled past him on the sidewalk. It was against the law to ride a bike on the sidewalk, especially where it was prohibited by signs, but sometimes, people did it anyway. I chuckled and shook my head.

When I moved to this city four months ago, I hadn't liked its hustle and bustle. Too noisy. However, I was used to it now and felt something inside me come alive every time my ears picked up the familiar sounds.

I sped up a bit, speed-walking toward the O`ahu Café for my favorite winter drink, a mint-flavored mocha latte. Another nearby café had the same drink, but the one from the O`ahu was better and not too sweet. The best part was the location of the café near the bus stop, which allowed me to take shelter from the frigid weather while waiting for the bus.

My idea wasn't as brilliant as I'd thought because, looking through the big window, I saw a long line waiting inside the café. My favorite table near the window and facing the street was already occupied. When the café wasn't too crowded, I enjoyed sitting at that particular table while drinking my coffee, watching pedestrians pass by on the sidewalk.

Seven people were waiting in line, but thankfully, my bus wouldn't be coming for a while.

The bell above the café door made a soft ding as I pushed it open. A couple of customers near the door turned to see who had entered, as well as a young man in a beige apron behind the counter, whose brown skin made many people jealous of his natural tan. His long hair was tied up in a bun and hidden beneath his black beanie. I felt a twinge of envy over his long, shiny, black hair.

Standing next to a girl with a pixie haircut, who was currently taking the customers' orders, he waved to acknowledge me, and I waved back at him.

As I approached the counter, he signaled the cashier to change places with him so he could ring up my order.

“Good morning, Aurorette Arrington,” he sang. “You look great this morning with your red nose like Rudolph.” He tapped at his own nose.

“Good morning, Tyler Sheridan James Kahale,” I teased him back. “You look great too, with your long hair that makes me jealous hidden under your beanie.”

The wide grin on his face faded. Ty, as he wanted people to call him, had never liked his long name. He always said that he wanted to change his name to “Tyler James,” making it short but cool. However, after his dad passed away, he decided to keep it.

“No more free espresso for you, since you called me by *that* name.” He pouted, but his eyes twinkled with good humor. He rang up my usual order, a small mint mocha latte.

“I can deal with that.” I smiled sweetly, tapping my card on the reader.

Ty scoffed and closed the register. He asked the girl with the pixie haircut to ring up the next order. The girl switched places with him, seemingly used to acting on the whim of the owner’s son.

“Where have you been? You haven’t come around lately,” Ty said, pumping two shots of mint syrup into a cup. “My mom has been asking about you.”

His mom, Dot, was my aunt’s closest friend in Boston. After her husband had passed away, Dot had begun managing the café with Ty, her daughter, Brie, and three workers. My aunt came and helped out sometimes when the café was extra busy or if one of the workers couldn’t come in.

“Busy, busy, busy.” I sighed dramatically. “It’s almost Christmas, and my office has been super hectic since October. I haven’t had a chance to stop by because I’ve been exhausted by the time I get home. Please tell Dot that I’ll stop by after work for her delicious chicken pesto panini tonight.”

His mom’s panini was one of the café’s specialties. Made fresh, people loved the crunchy texture and delicious pesto sauce. Usually, I texted Dot to put aside one or two that I’d pick up later after work.

“Yeah, I’ll tell her. By the way,” Ty said as he poured an espresso shot into my cup, “I heard from her that your aunt got a new coffee machine for her birthday last month, but she doesn’t drink coffee, does she? Now, tell me, why would someone give her a coffee machine? I’ll bet the giver isn’t a very thoughtful person. Just saying,” he added, giving me a meaningful smile.

In return, my smile was sour. The giver was Peter Ryder, my long-distance, British-born boyfriend, who lived in California. He’d known that my aunt loved tea more than coffee and bought an English tea set for her birthday. He also bought a coffee machine for me from the same store. Somehow, the store had messed up the orders and sent the coffee machine in beautiful wrapping paper to my aunt instead of the tea set. My aunt was upset and thought Peter wasn’t a thoughtful person. When I told him, Peter

freaked out and complained to the store. My aunt felt better after he apologized and explained it to her. Later on, the store called for clarification and sent her another tea set by way of compensation.

“It wasn’t his fault. The store messed up the order,” I said quickly. “Besides, my aunt now has two beautiful new English tea sets while I got the coffee machine.”

“Ha! I knew you’d defend that useless guy,” Ty said, pointing at my nose. A proud smile plastered his face. “Aurorette, you should date me, not a guy who lives far away in California. Since I live close to you, I wouldn’t make a blunder like that. Three years younger means nothing in this century. Besides, I think I’m more mature than him. And where does he work now?” Leaning toward me, he placed his hand behind his ear.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ve heard that before.” I waved a hand. “And instead of dating *me*, you should find a girl your age. Besides,” I leaned toward him and whispered in his ear, “you’re working for your family business too.” I gave him a wink.

His mouth opened slightly and then closed again. “But this is only temporary until I finish colle—”

His words were cut off when a large, tall woman, her gray hair wrapped in a hairnet, came from the kitchen. “Ty! I’m busy, and the milk company will be here soon. I need you to receive the delivery.” Her dark brown eyes widened as our eyes met. “Oh, hey, Rory. Sorry, I didn’t notice you there. Where have you been, dear?”

“It’s been crazy at work,” I replied. “I’m glad I saw you today, Dot.”

Dot smiled and nodded. “Well, enjoy the coffee. I have to get back to the kitchen again. Do you need some panini today? One or two?”

“Two would be great, and I’ll pick them up after work. Have a good day, Dot.”

“Thank you. I’ll save you two panini.”

Dot retreated to the kitchen, and Ty handed me my order. “Come again tomorrow. I’ll give you a free shot of espresso,” he said, his voice lowered so the other customers wouldn’t hear.

“Okay, but I can’t promise anything,” I said.

He pouted.

I grinned widely before taking my drink to the condiment bar to retrieve additional chocolate powder and a lid.

As I turned, a young boy rushed toward the door and bumped my elbow, spilling the hot drink onto my hand. I shrieked and jumped sideways, losing my grip on the cup.

The next events seemed to happen in slow motion.

Mocha splashed onto the man waiting nearby for his order before the cup hit the ground, sending the rest of the hot liquid everywhere.

The man gave a tiny yelp and tried to shake the coffee from his light blue sweater. The brown stain was already spreading down his chest.

“Oh my God!” Ty screamed, grabbing a roll of paper towels from the counter before rushing toward us.

“I’m sorry,” Ty and I said almost in unison.

“You should be careful next time, young lady,” a voice said from behind me.

I turned and saw a bald guy standing near the condiment bar.

“He could have been scalded by the hot coffee,” he continued.

“That’s not my…” I glanced at the bald man before turning to my mocha victim. “The kid bumped my elbow and—”

“At the very least, you can take him to the doctor to treat his burns, and pay for his dry cleaning,” the bald guy interrupted.

I took a breath. It was clear this guy loved making trouble. “Yes, that’s what I’m going to—”

Before I finished, the mocha victim turned to the bald guy. “Hey, man,” he said, “thanks for your concern. The coffee wasn’t too hot, anyway, and I don’t need a doctor. And this young lady”—he pointed to me—“didn’t do it on purpose. That means she doesn’t need to pay for my dry cleaning.”

The bald guy mumbled and moved toward the door with his nose in the air. A few customers murmured and glanced at him as he left the café.

Sighing, the mocha victim turned to Ty. “Please show me where the restroom is, so I can clean my shirt.” He pointed to me. “Would you mind watching my luggage while I change my clothes?” He indicated the luggage at his feet.

I nodded. “No problem at all.”

“The restroom is this way.” Ty ushered him down the narrow hallway. “I can give you our café sweater for free, too,” I heard him say.

“Is your hand okay?” asked Dot, who must have heard the commotion from the kitchen.

I picked up a beige jacket from the floor, assuming it belonged to the mocha victim. One sleeve of the coat had a coffee stain on it.

“Yes, I’m fine, Dot,” I said, searching for the young boy who had caused the ruckus. When I didn’t see him, I assumed he must have run off.

“I’ve never seen that boy or the bald guy before,” said Dot, following my gaze to the front door. “Let me replace your drink, dear.”

Before I could decline her offer, she’d already walked behind the counter and apologized to the customers for the commotion.

Shortly after, Ty and the mocha victim came out of the restroom. The man now wore a bright pink sweater with the words “I need my coffee now!” printed above the cartoon picture of a sullen lady in pajamas with rollers in her hair. Ty had drawn the cartoon, and every time I saw it, I smiled.

But not this time.

As our eyes met, I mouthed to Ty, “Pink?”

Ty shrugged.

The mocha victim seemed relieved as I handed him his jacket. He put it on quickly, buttoning it up to conceal the sweater.

“I’m sorry we don’t have any other color, sir,” said Ty apologetically. “Our new order will be here in two days. If you don’t mind waiting, I could go upstairs and lend you one of *my* sweaters.”

The man shook his head. “That’s okay. I have no time to waste as I have a plane to catch.”

“How about me paying for the laundry service?” I offered, using the chance to look at him clearly.

He was a head taller than me, sturdy but slim. Behind his glasses, his eyes were blue with a hint of green. His light brown hair was neatly cut with clean edges, making him look like the classic gentleman. I guessed he couldn’t be over the age of thirty-five.

“Don’t worry about that. I was here for my business trip, hence I can charge my company for a new, expensive sweater,” he said, half joking. “Thanks, but it’s unnecessary. Besides, I got a free pink sweater.” He grinned after saying the last sentence.

“But—”

“It’s okay.” He shook his head again. “Accidents can happen anywhere. And this wasn’t your fault.”

Before I could say more, Dot brought me a new mint mocha latte. After thanking her, I turned to the man, but he was already gone. I exhaled, waving at Ty, who was busy mopping the floor to prevent people from stepping on the spill. I tried to put the event behind me and walked to the bus stop.

All the way to work, I couldn’t shake thoughts of what had happened earlier.

The poor guy.

He was here for a business trip, and on the day he had to fly back home, his sweater and coat were ruined by a mint mocha latte.

I’ll bet he bought a new sweater at the airport rather than wearing that bright pink one.

I pressed the red stop button as the bus rolled closer to my destination and waited until it came to a halt. Once the door opened, the fresh air rushed in, wrapping its cold fingers around me.

Walking slowly along the sidewalk toward my office, I pulled my beanie down to cover my ears and adjusted the scarf around my neck. The tip of my nose was growing numb from the frigid wind. I missed the mild winter

season in Southern California. After living there for more than five years, I'd been spoiled by year-round warm and sunny weather.

Boston was beautiful, but I would have liked it more if the winter wasn't so harsh and the summer wasn't so humid.

No one had forced me to live in Boston. After I graduated from college, my aunt had suggested that I move in with her, but I loved California and was happy when I got a job as an accountant at Myriad Food and Beverage. I'd thought I was ready to settle down there. Many things had happened in August, including the horrible car accident after I resigned from Myriad. My aunt was my only kin, so after the accident, I decided to move and stay with her.

I entered my office building and took the elevator to the tenth floor, where I got off at Veles Capital, a financial holding company possessing a diversified line of community banking and commercial finance. I'd worked there as a senior analyst in the risk department for almost four months. My boss, Sally Kranda, was the nicest boss compared to my bitchy, bully boss at Myriad .

"Good morning, Marsha," I said, passing my coworker's cubicle.

"Hi, Rory. Good morning and happy Friday," Marsha Wilson said cheerfully over her shoulder.

"Happy Friday," I responded.

Sitting on my chair, I fitted my electronic notebook into its docking station and turned the power on.

"Too bad you didn't join our happy hour yesterday," Marsha said, sliding her chair to peek inside my cubicle while I logged into my computer.

"Why? Did something happen?" I glanced at her before turning my attention back to the computer.

Still sitting on her chair, Marsha slid into my cubicle.

I should tell her to stop doing that because she looks silly with her bulging, six-months-pregnant stomach.

"Last night, Kelly was drunk and confessed her love to Ryan," she whispered.

I covered my mouth with my hand. "Really?"

She nodded. "Yup. Crazy, huh? I don't understand her. Did she think it was okay to get drunk during happy hour with her coworkers? If she'd wanted to get drunk, she should've just gone with her regular friends. We don't want to go out with people who can't control themselves. Besides, our happy hour is for relaxing and bonding, not for drinking excessively. That stupid girl doesn't know how to limit herself, and she confessed love to her senior while Leslie joined us for the happy hour." Marsha rolled her eyes when she mentioned Sally's assistant manager. "It's a good thing Leslie doesn't care what people do outside the office. If she did, Kelly would be doomed."

“What did Ryan say?” I asked.

Marsha shrugged, tossing her bronze, shoulder-length hair behind her. “As you know, Ryan loves joking around. It surprised me how maturely he handled Kelly. Obviously, he isn’t interested in her. Kelly knows he prefers you over her that’s why she’s always bitching about you.”

It didn’t take a genius to know that Ryan Harris had been crushing on me since I’d joined the company. He’d also been my classmate in university back in California.

I hadn’t recognized him right away. Ryan had changed a lot, and the only things that had stayed the same were his sweet smile and his dimples. He was no longer a quiet, pale, lanky boy with long, dark brown hair, who wore black every single day. His lean and muscled body, along with his messy, medium-length hair made him look adorable. He’d also become a pleasant person to talk to, easy-going, and a reliable coworker. No wonder people, especially females, loved talking to him.

Meeting him again after years brought back the sweet memories in me. In college, we’d done everything together, starting from orientation, and some people mistook us for a couple. I didn’t know what he’d felt toward me because he never said it. If he’d ever asked, I wouldn’t have minded, because I liked him. Unfortunately, we’d grown apart after choosing our majors.

Since meeting again, Ryan had openly showed his attention toward me and looked unhappy upon learning that I had a boyfriend. I felt a familiar light flutter in my belly every time he looked at me, and I wished he had had the courage when we were in college.

I opened my mouth to respond when the general manager’s office door opened. Sally emerged, her expression one of grave concern. She walked by us as though in a trance.

We exchanged glances, and Marsha slid her chair back to her cubicle while I focused on my monitor. We almost forgot to greet Ryan as he arrived and sat in his cubicle. When his head popped over the partition, he raised an eyebrow. I shrugged and jerked my head toward Sally’s office. Without another word, he sat down and started working.

Twenty minutes passed, and Sally’s urgent voice called out, “Rory, Marsha, Ryan, come to my office.”

Right away, we all stood and hurried to join her.

“Please take a seat,” she said, sitting in her chair.

I sat next to Marsha, and Ryan dragged an empty chair next to me.

Sally let out a heavy sigh before she laced her fingers together and gazed at us.

“Stone Dealership,” she said, “our new automotive client in the California office, is in trouble. From their financial statements, I can tell they used the loan for personal expenses, because the million dollars we approved six

months ago has quickly dwindled. This dealership is a subsidiary of Stone Transportation Services, one of our biggest clients. We can't share assumptions like that with them. Mr. Stone would be upset if we accused his younger brother of being incompetent." Sally stopped, taking another breath before continuing. "So, this project needs to be handled delicately, or Mr. Stone will move his businesses to another loan company."

My first day on the job, I'd been told that Stone Transportation Services had been one of the biggest clients at Veles Capital since its establishment two decades ago. The mutual relationship between the companies had been solid for years.

"And you know that, recently, Martin lost three of his field auditors and an accountant." She closed her eyes briefly before opening them again.

Martin Travers was the risk manager for the California office and Sally's counterpart. His team was smaller than Sally's, but I'd heard that he was losing some of his staff again this year because of his tough personality.

"I don't want to tell you why they quit simultaneously, but Martin needs our help. Also, the office doesn't have many clients in the automobile industry yet, and they don't have a person familiar with the business. So..." She turned to Ryan. "I want you to help the office."

The dimples in Ryan's cheeks became pronounced. I knew the business trip was a wonderful opportunity for him to expand his skill and experience, both of which would help him work toward a promotion. A willingness to go on business trips definitely improved the career outlook as well.

"And you, Rory," Sally turned to me, "your background in accounting would help Martin's team tremendously. You can give the dealership's employees basic accounting training. Martin also informed me that they've recorded everything incorrectly since the dealer joined us. The risk analysts are having a hard time analyzing Stone's financial report."

My heart leaped. California! I'd been thinking of it that whole morning, and suddenly, I'd been assigned there. What a coincidence. I couldn't wait to tell Peter. He would be dancing around like a crazy person.

I couldn't daydream about it for too long, though, because Sally's voice brought me back to the current conversation.

"And Marsha, I can't let you fly with them because of your condition, but I need your expertise to perform a deep analysis based on Rory and Ryan's findings. Leslie will take care of one of your clients, if necessary."

"How about you?" Marsha asked. "Are you going there too?"

She nodded. "I'll be there in two days, but I don't think you two will fly this week. You should be in California in a week's time. Belinda is already arranging our plane tickets and hotel."

Sally's eyes shifted to the picture on her desk of her husband hugging their daughter and son. Her finger trailed over it. Everybody in the office knew how much she loved her family. She didn't like to go on business trips, but

she did what was needed. Her eyes remained on the picture another moment before she turned back to us.

“I know all of you have your own projects to do, but I need you to push them aside and focus on this one,” she said solemnly. “And you two,” her eyes shifted to Ryan and me, “I’m not your mom, but I do take care of my staff. Please act maturely and professionally, especially you, Ryan.”

Ryan chuckled and spread his arms to each side. “Why me? How about her?” He pointed at me. “Her boyfriend is in California.”

Sally rolled her eyes. “I was young once too.”

“You’re still young,” Ryan said smoothly. “How old are you? Thirty-five?”

Sally chuckled. At fifty-three, she looked much younger than her age.

“Stop kissing my butt, Ryan,” she said in her Boston accent, and laughed, waving her hand toward the door. “Get outta here!”

Grinning, Ryan walked out of the office, followed by Marsha and me.

We all loved Sally. She could be serious, but she could also be an easy-going person who loved to joke around.

When we returned to our cubicles, I checked the distance from the California office, which was located in a city called Irvine, to Peter’s apartment and almost yelped. It was only twelve miles. Not far. My heart burst in anticipation of seeing his face in person, and I couldn’t wait to tell him about my business trip to California.

Chapter 2

“I’m coming to California!” I almost shrieked during our video call that evening.

Peter’s face broke into a wide smile. “Wow, that’s awesome,” he said in his British accent. “After that, can you take a week off?”

“I wish,” I said, taking my phone to the kitchen so I could grab a glass of water. “This project will keep me busy starting next week until it’s completed. I can’t take any vacation until next year.”

Aunt Amy, who was cutting fruit on the countertop, raised her eyes to me as I entered the kitchen and mouthed, “Peter? Say hi from me.”

I nodded. “By the way, Aunt Amy says hi to you.” I turned my phone toward her and let them wave before turning it back to me.

Peter rubbed at the back of his neck, and an expression of disappointment showed clearly on his face. “When will you fly here?”

“My boss said we’re scheduled to fly next Sunday morning. I guess I could be there by Sunday midnight and rest before going to the office. Then I should fly back on Friday night,” I said, taking a sip of my water.

“Could you fly out on Friday and stay at my house for the whole weekend?” he asked.

“Stay at what?” I asked, nearly choking on my drink.

“My house.”

Across from me, Aunt Amy raised her eyebrows.

I shrugged. It was news to me, too.

“Don’t you mean your apartment?” I asked.

Peter shook his head. “No, my house. I bought it two weeks ago.”

What?

“You hadn’t said anything.” I glanced at my aunt before walking back to my room.

“Well…” Peter scratched his temple. “I wanted to surprise you, but since you mentioned you were going to fly here, I just blurted it out.”

“Ouch, what a bummer,” I teased, trying to imagine the kind of house he’d bought.

He grinned. “The house is small,” he said as if he could read my mind. “Let me send you the link so you can see what it looks like.”

I opened the link on my notebook and immediately thought the term “small” meant something far different for Peter than it meant for me. The 3,200-square-foot, two-story house on a 7,000-square-foot plot of land was huge compared to my aunt’s 1,500-square-foot townhouse. My eyes nearly

fell from their sockets to see the price of the place, but Peter's family could afford to pay that much.

Located in a beach town, Peter's new house was a combined design of modern and tropical, consisting of two-and-a-half bathrooms, four bedrooms, and a loft space. The backyard led to a sandy, white beach. The master bedroom included an en suite bathroom with a skylight above the bathtub, and its interior featured a palette of white, gray, and beige colors, giving it an elegant and cozy appeal.

"Have you checked the link? Do you like the house?" Peter asked when I'd gone quiet. "The picture doesn't do it justice. You need to come and see it for yourself."

"Yes, I'm looking at it now. It's awesome," I nodded. "I like the kitchen. It looks modern and roomy."

"Yes, I can imagine you sitting in there while I make pancakes for you." His smile broadened. "I *do* hope you can fly earlier on Friday."

I held my breath, imagining the possibility of spending time with him on the weekend. Besides, I was curious to see the house in person.

Chewing my lower lip, I said, "I hope so too. We'll see if my boss approves my flying on Friday morning."

Leaning forward, Peter looked at me. His light brown eyes widened and shone. "It would be fun to have you over for the weekend. I miss you, Rory. It took me a while to get used to living here without you. I miss living with you like we lived in your old apartment."

I smiled, remembering the good times we'd had as roommates.

"Yeah, I miss that time too," I admitted. "By the way, let's say I'm allowed to fly there earlier. I still can't stay at your house for the whole business trip. I may be needed for a late meeting or overtime."

"Yeah, I understand," Peter said. His shoulders drooped as he rubbed his eyebrows.

"At least we could have each other for the weekend. So, keep your hopes high and I'll let you know what happens tomorrow," I said, smiling.

He nodded.

"Hey, tell me about Tom. How's he doing?" I asked, curious about what his half brother had been doing.

Peter met my gaze and nodded, understanding that I didn't want to continue talking about staying in his house. "He's doing fine. But we haven't seen each other in ages because we've both been so busy. Just so you know, I think he still feels guilty about what Phil did to us last time, because he's avoiding me." He sighed. "I know my brother, so I'm giving him some space until he's ready to open up again. I hope he doesn't mind seeing you while you're here."

Phil, Tom's ex-boyfriend, worked as a finance manager for White Water, Incorporated, a prestigious wine distributor for US and Canada, where Peter

was working as president of the company.

Born into the Sandridge family, Peter and Tom were part of Britain's old entrepreneurship families called Sandridge Group that had run many businesses in several countries for decades.

Their last name wasn't Sandridge but Ryder. It was from their grandpa's last name, the current chairman, who was born from the youngest daughter of Sandridge. Although their last name was different, Peter and Tom were in line to take over the businesses when the time was right.

Four months ago, when Peter had been assigned to replace his sister as president of White Water, Inc., Phil didn't like it. He didn't think Peter deserved to take the position, considering his wild youth of partying, drinking, causing trouble, and using drugs. Phil sabotaged the selection and spread rumors, fabricating photos of Peter. He hoped the elders of the Sandridge family would revoke the decision and choose Tom instead. However, Phil didn't know that Tom had zero interest in the family business, which was why he lived in California rather than London. Tom found out about the dirty trick his boyfriend had played and broke up with him after asking Peter to fire him immediately.

"Tom shouldn't feel that way," I said, feeling sad for the man. I liked him, and we'd been friends for a while. "This hasn't been easy for you either, has it?"

"No, it hasn't." Peter shook his head. "I already lost Jane, and I don't want to lose my brother too. I love him. He barely talks to me now, and of course I can't talk to Jane. I feel especially lonely when I want to share a burden that relates to our family."

He let out another sigh and stared into the distance, his face reflective.

I didn't have siblings, but I could understand his loneliness. "Let's hope he shakes those feelings of guilt sooner rather than later," I comforted him. "I miss him too."

A slight smile appeared on his lips. "Yes, let's hope so. Don't forget to let me know if you can fly in earlier, because I want to let him know you're coming."

I nodded. "Okay."

Although tired, Peter smiled. Nothing made him happier than seeing his girlfriend's smiling face, and she would be there next week. If he hadn't remembered he was in his office, he would have hollered with joy.

Since that morning, he'd been in back-to-back meetings. He wanted to rest on the couch in his office for at least an hour before teleconferencing with London, but he didn't want to miss a video call with Rory. Since he had another meeting soon, their call had been cut short, but it had been enough to make him happy.

“Rory,” Peter whispered, caressing the picture sitting on his desk. She looked lovely in her pale-yellow dress. The light freckles on the bridge of her nose, that she always complained about, made her look adorable. He chuckled as he looked at her photograph, remembering how chaotic their first meeting had been.

He’d never wanted to work in his family’s businesses. When Jane had asked him to help her with her project in California, he couldn’t refuse. However, a week before Jane flew to the States with him, she’d had emergency surgery that forced her to stay in the hospital. Later, Jane instructed Peter to fly alone and stop at a rental place to cancel her stay, where she’d already signed a six-month lease.

Knowing her eccentric personality, Peter hadn’t bothered to ask further. He’d assumed Rory was Jane’s ex-boyfriend or male friend. Everyone in the Sandridge family, including his grandpa, let Jane do whatever she wanted because she was a brilliant businesswoman. If Jane didn’t want to stay in a hotel, they would rent her a house. If she decided to rent a room in someone’s home, they wouldn’t argue with her.

When he’d stopped by to tell Jane’s roommate about the cancelation, it had surprised him that Rory was a female name. In Britain, it was a male’s name.

Jane’s new roommate had seemed shocked about the cancelation, and Peter detected that Rory had some financial troubles. Seeing her distress, he’d offered to continue his sister’s rental agreement.

To his surprise, she’d accepted.

It had never crossed his mind that living with Rory would change his life forever.

She taught him everything, including valuing money, something he’d never concerned himself with. He also learned to appreciate the money he earned.

Rory also taught him about honesty and acceptance. She wasn’t shy to admit that she’d been born out of wedlock and raised by her old-fashioned aunt after her mom passed away. She told him the truth about not knowing her father. He also knew her aunt didn’t approve of Rory having a male roommate, afraid Rory would make the same ill-timed decisions her mom had made.

Something had slowly changed inside him. Peter learned to be a good man, different from the spoiled and selfish person he’d been in his youth. He wanted to be better for Rory.

If Jane were alive, she would have been happy to see his transformation.

Thinking of Jane made his heart thud dully in his chest. She’d been gone for more than three months, but he couldn’t seem to shake his sadness. Jane had been more than his sister, especially after his mom abandoned him as a child. Peter had attached himself to Jane. She’d been his confidant, his

protector, and his “little mom.” Whenever he had an issue, he’d always asked for his sister’s advice.

Now, she was gone forever, and his brother wasn’t talking to him. No one had been around for him through his anxiety over the new position as president of White Water.

Their father, Archibald “Archie” Ryder, had flown from London to California to give him some management training. Peter didn’t have a close relationship with him. His presence didn’t help because Archie was known for having an iron fist, and he never let Peter slack off. Nights, mornings, weekends, and weekdays, his father forced Peter to work better, harder, and faster. As a result, his body and mind were tired, and he wanted to take a break.

When people in the States were celebrating Thanksgiving, Peter had to fight to take some time off and spend his first American Thanksgiving with Rory and her aunt.

For the first time in a while, Peter felt brighter and happier, knowing Rory would be there soon.

Chapter 3

I couldn't contain my smile when Sally allowed me to fly on Friday instead of Sunday morning. She knew my boyfriend lived in California and that I wanted to spend time with him.

Sally was an amazing boss who knew how to deal with the staff. Although harsh at times, she also knew when to loosen up. When someone made a mistake, she would call them in privately and speak calmly with them, making her one of Veles Capital's favorite managers.

Guess who else was excited about my upcoming visit with Peter?

Aunt Amy.

Once she knew I was flying to California in a few days, she bought ingredients to bake marble cakes, chocolate chip cookies, and brownies, because Peter loved them so much. When I first met Peter, he didn't like those things. Then, when he visited for Thanksgiving, he found he really liked my aunt's cookies and cakes.

That made her happy, but it made me nervous. I knew my aunt, and I was afraid she would go overboard.

When I came home from work, the countertop was covered with two marble cakes, two nine-inch square pans of brownies, and three dozen chocolate chip cookies sitting on cooling racks. A few plastic containers sat nearby, ready to be filled with all the goodies.

"Wow!" My jaw dropped. "That...those cookies and cakes are enough for twenty people."

"I don't think so," said my aunt, glancing at the sweets.

"Now, how am I going to bring them with me?"

"I already found extra luggage," she said, slapping my hand when I reached out to steal one of the cookies. "That's for Peter," she scolded me.

I snatched one anyway. "I'm your niece. Shouldn't I get priority? You haven't baked me anything, and now, you're feeding him like he's starving. Well, if you want to make him fat, keep feeding him with your sugar and carb-filled snacks."

She chuckled. "Rory, sweetheart, these are healthier than the store-bought ones because I use organic ingredients and not too much sugar." Aunt Amy glanced at me as she cut into a tray of brownies. "And I smell some jealousy from you."

"Nope, not jealous."

"Yes, you are," sang my aunt.

“No, I am not,” I sang back, taking a seat on a stool as I watched her. “All right, fine, maybe I am.”

My aunt gave a cheery smile.

I didn’t like it. “That’s because you never bake me anything. Not even for my birthday,” I added.

My aunt stopped and stared at me. “I always baked birthday cakes for you.”

“Nope.” I shook my head. “You always bought those cakes from France Bakery.”

She laughed, her shoulders shaking. “My dear Rory, that’s because you always complained that you wanted to be the same as your classmates, whose parents always bought a birthday cake from some famous bakery. I...we didn’t have money at the time. I had to trick you. On the day before your birthday, I asked my friend who worked at the bakery to give me a box and a ribbon with the store name printed on it. I put my cake in the box and gave it to you, so you’d think I bought the cake from the bakery.”

I almost choked on the cookie in my mouth as her eyes twinkled.

“So...” I cleared my throat, and guilt rose into my chest. “You always baked it for me?”

“Yes, sweetheart. I always did on your birthday. Once you were twelve, I stopped baking because you said you wanted to control your weight. I baked a few times for different events at the church or for my friends. Now, I have Peter to spoil with my baking.”

“Sorry for being selfish,” I said.

She chuckled as she finished packing and looked down with pride at the containers. “That’s okay. It was my fault too. I should admit that I wasn’t patient enough with you, anyway, and caused you to misunderstand me. If I’d been kinder and more open, we wouldn’t have had so many arguments, and maybe you would’ve been more open with me. I could’ve given you different advice about many things.”

Her words touched my heart. I stood and walked around the counter and threw my arms around her.

“Oh!” she exclaimed.

I heard the smile in her voice as her arms tightened around my shoulders.

“Well, enough of this sentimental stuff.” My aunt gently pushed me away, a smile still lingering on her lips. “Now, bring me the blue luggage so I can pack this.”

I retrieved the luggage, and she loaded the containers inside.

“So, are you going to stay at Peter’s house?” she asked, fastening the zipper on the luggage.

Her question didn’t really surprise me, and I’d expected it, anyway. It might have sounded odd for most people that my aunt asked a twenty-four-year-old woman whether she was going to stay at her boyfriend’s house.

I'd never known my father. My mom had always been upset whenever I asked about him, so I stopped. I understood, because her pregnancy had brought too much stress to her family and strained her relationship with her parents. My Japanese grandpa, Grandpa Kenji Ishida, couldn't accept the fact that his daughter would have a baby without a husband. His extended family shunned us, but my Grandma Audrey Arrington Ishida, who was German-Australian, was more open-minded about her daughter's pregnancy. As she couldn't hold her upset feeling any longer, my grandma brought my mom to America, a country where she immigrated with her family when she was ten years old.

After my mom passed away, my aunt took me under her wing and vowed to try and prevent me from making the same mistake her sister had made. She watched me like a hawk, only becoming more lenient after I graduated from college. I eventually understood her strictness, especially after seeing a few of my friends and coworkers around the same age who had a tough life because they were raising babies without husbands.

Some regretted their decisions and wished they could turn back the clock. Witnessing their struggles, I felt sorry for them and didn't wish to be part of the group. I didn't want to burden my aunt with my fatherless child, as she'd had enough problems raising me.

I cleared my throat and said, "Well, I'm planning to stay at his house over the weekend, and then move to the hotel on Monday because I want to show Sally that I'm professional and don't take this business trip lightly." I looked at her solemnly. "And I won't break the promise I made to you on the day you allowed me to live alone a few years ago."

Aunt Amy looked at me and tapped me on the shoulder. "You're an adult now, and honestly, I'm more concerned about your professionalism. This is your first business trip for this company, and if you've been chosen for this job, it means your boss trusts your skills. However, I'm relieved that you understand the importance of this project for your career."

I smiled at her.

"Now," she added, glancing at my suitcases, "let's weigh your luggage. I hope it isn't too heavy."

"If I ate some, they wouldn't be overweight," I offered.

My aunt glared at me and shook her head when I gave her an innocent grin.

That night, I tossed and turned in bed. My eyes refused to shut, and my mind was racing. The thought of seeing Peter again thrilled me to bits. The last time we'd been together was on Thanksgiving Day. I wished we could meet more often, maybe once or twice a month. However, our working situation didn't allow us to have such a privilege. Peter was busy with his

management training, and I was busy in my new office. We'd acknowledged the issues at the beginning of our relationship and promised to endure the challenges.

However, I dreaded to think about being alone with Peter.

It was nothing to do with the promise I'd made to my aunt. It was my traumatic experience that no one knew about because my lips were sealed tight.

I was sixteen when it happened. Behind my aunt's back, I'd had a boyfriend. My aunt watched me like a hawk, but she couldn't be with me twenty-four hours a day. I'd learned to wiggle free from her watch.

My first boyfriend was a classmate and one of the cutest boys at school. I'd never imagined that he would ask me to go out because I wasn't an attractive girl, and I was too skinny for my age. After that, we went out a few times.

One day, when we kissed, his hand slipped into my shirt and touched my bosom. I cringed and told him to stop. He looked at me as if I were from another planet. "It's normal to show your boyfriend how you care about him," he argued. I knew it wasn't right, but I didn't want to be seen as immature. It wasn't a secret that a few of my female classmates, including my best friend, had had the experience. Everybody was doing it, as they said. Besides, we didn't do anything more than touching above the waist underneath our clothes. After debating with myself, I let him have his way.

The next day at school, he avoided me, and a few of his close friends giggled when they saw me. Feeling confused, I asked him what was going on. His answer surprised me. He said he wasn't interested in me anymore because I was too flat and too rigid. A cold sweat dripped down my back as I felt an invisible hand slap hard across my face, again and again. It wasn't my fault if my body hadn't developed in time.

Feeling dirty and sick to my stomach, I left school that day and sat under the cold, running shower at home for hours, hoping I could forget my foolishness for letting him touch me. When my aunt came back from work, she didn't understand why a girl who was healthy in the morning had come down with a fever in the afternoon in summer.

Then, six months later, we moved to a different state because of my aunt's work. By then, my body had filled out in all the right directions, and I always looked good and sexy in any dress. Still, I became self-conscious and careful about choosing close male friends. My relationships consisted of no more than kissing and hugging.

My final year in college, I met Ben, my ex-roommate, Lizzy's, coworker. We met when Lizzy and I were in a mini-golf amusement park. Somehow, we felt a connection and saw each other often after that.

Everything went smoothly for a while. Ben was six years older than me, mature, and independent. He wasn't a man who would drag his girlfriend

into bed after just ten dates. I'd thought Ben was "the one." Even my aunt had the same thought.

When our relationship became serious, Ben said that I was too chubby. Stupidly, I accepted it and forced myself to diet hard until I collapsed and was rushed to the ER, while Ben was cheating on me with some pretty, skinny woman. For almost two years, I avoided having a romantic relationship with a man until I met Peter.

Peter was interesting. He wasn't as sexy and handsome as Chris Hemsworth or Chris Evans, but he was the type of man who could make girls whirl their heads and gawk at him in awe. He stood out with his six-foot height, chiseled face, fine bone structure, and trim body. His nonchalant gaze and aloof smile drove girls crazy. Still, every time we were together in public, Peter kept his eyes on me as if I were the only girl on the planet, and that flattered me. He seemed to enjoy spending time with me, without sending any signal to go further than kisses and hugs. Even when he kissed me, he always did it gently and lightly, as if making sure I was comfortable before his kiss became firmer and more certain.

I wasn't naïve or afraid of going to the next step in a relationship. I dreaded it because it had taken me years to glue the shards of my self-esteem back together, and I couldn't imagine someone breaking it again. If things went the way I thought they were going at Peter's house, this trip would change me forever.

Chapter 4

Lights from buildings and moving vehicles sparkled from above, like scattered sparkling pieces of jewelry, as my plane descended toward John Wayne Airport.

When the plane landed, joy at being back in California consumed me. The last time I'd seen this state was at the end of summer, and now, only a few months later, I'd returned. I'd thought I wouldn't be here again for at least a year or two.

While waiting for the seat belt sign to go to "off," I turned on my phone and saw a few text messages from Peter. I grinned as I read his texts.

Miss you, and it is 2 p.m. here.

Miss you at 2:15 p.m. Oh, why does it feel like it's been two hours already?

Are you here yet? Maybe not.

On my way to the airport.

I'm waiting in the arrival area.

Are you here yet?

Please tell me you're here.

Rory...

Rory...

His last message said, *Now I'm turning into your possessive boyfriend.* He followed it with a grinning emoji.

I smiled but refrained from responding because people were getting their luggage out of the overhead compartments. Once I got mine, I waited patiently to get off the plane.

The baggage claim area wasn't very crowded. After waiting ten minutes, I found my luggage, piled them on the airport cart, and pushed it toward the arrival gate. I paused to fish out my phone and send a text to Peter.

My flight got rerouted back to Boston.

My phone rang.

"Hi, Pet—"

"Really? Seriously, your flight got rerouted back to Boston? Are you at the Boston airport now?" Peter asked without saying hello. "But why does the flight status say your plane is on time?"

"Maybe they haven't changed it yet because we turned around halfway into the flight," I said, biting my lip to keep from laughing.

"Are you already at the Boston airport now?" he asked again after some silence. His tone sounded disheartened. "When will you be coming, then?"

“Um, I’m not sure when,” I said, pushing my cart toward the waiting area. “Too bad. You can’t eat Auntie’s cookies and marble cake—”

“I’d prefer you to be here,” Peter interrupted me sharply. “Now I’m upset.”

“Sorry,” I said, scanning the crowd until I spotted a familiar figure in a light orange sweater over his untucked gray shirt. He stood with his back to me, holding a phone against his ear.

“What happened? I don’t understand.” Sounding upset, Peter scratched his head with his other hand.

He didn’t hear me behind him and shrieked when I poked his back. As he spun on his heel, his eyes bulged, and his mouth dropped open.

“Ta-da! Miracles can happen if you believe,” I said, grinning widely.

“Oh my God, you...” His voice trailed off.

In one movement, I was in his arms.

“Hi, Peter,” I said, my voice muffled against his sweater.

“You...” He didn’t finish voicing his thoughts, but he tightened his arms around my shoulders. “That’s not funny, you know. That’s...not...funny. Don’t joke like that. Promise me you won’t do it again.”

“Sorry, I just wanted to tease you,” I said, hugging him. A warm feeling spread through my chest, and I inhaled his familiar scent. I made a note to tell him not to change his cologne because it smelled good. Tightening my arms around his waist, I pressed my forehead against his chest. “If my flight was canceled, of course I would’ve told you earlier.”

“Still not funny,” he grumbled. “I’m almost crying.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said, looking up at him and grinning.

Peter rolled his eyes but smiled back at me. “So.” He tilted his head. “As much as I love holding you, if we don’t leave soon, people will eventually start to suggest that we get a room.”

“Ha ha ha. Funny,” I said, releasing him.

“Come on.” He took my cart, offering his arm. “I parked nearby.” He smiled when I looped my hand around his arm.

My heart squeezed in my chest as I noticed his gentle gaze. I’d missed that.

Once we’d loaded everything into the trunk of his Tesla, I slid into the passenger seat.

“Rory,” Peter called as I reached for my seat belt.

“Hmm?” I turned toward him, attempting to click the seat belt into place.

Leaning over the center console, Peter cupped my face with his hands and kissed me. His lips were soft against mine. The seat belt recoiled as I shifted closer to kiss him back.

“I’m happy to see you again,” he said, brushing my cheek with his thumb.

“Me too,” I said.

“Are you hungry?” he asked after pulling back. He put the car in gear and headed toward the exit. “I already bought some food for you, unless you want to stop somewhere else.”

I glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It showed 7:30 p.m., which was 10:30 Boston time. I was alert enough to eat, but I wouldn’t mind going straight to his house and hitting the sack right away.

“Nah, let’s eat at your place,” I suggested.

“Okay.”

The I-405 North traffic was crowded as we hit the freeway. Cars moved slowly, and one or two vehicles tried to cut off the cars merging onto the interstate. I didn’t really care because I was excited to be back with Peter again.

“Auntie baked and forced me to bring your favorite cakes and cookies,” I said. “Believe me, those cakes and cookies are more than enough to feed an army. Next time, don’t tell her what you like.”

Peter chuckled. “I love her food and cakes. Why can’t I tell her the snacks I like?”

“Because she’d find a way to feed you until you became fat and couldn’t move, lying on the floor like a starfish.” I stretched out my arms and feet, pretending to be a starfish.

“Do I detect some jealousy?” Peter looked upward as though searching for something in the sky. He laughed when I reached out and poked his cheek.

“I’m not jealous.”

“Yes, you are,” he sang in the same tone of voice my aunt had used. He grinned widely as his hand stroked the back of my head.

It was good to be with him. I’d missed even the simple things like his big smile and riding around town with him. Long-distance definitely sucked.

Chapter 5

Peter's car slowed at the curb and stopped in front of a house with a white picket fence. "Welcome to my house," he said, his eyes gleaming with pride.

I got out of the car and stood there, gazing wide-eyed at his new home.

The two-story house looked even better than it had in the pictures Peter sent me the week before. Although we arrived at night, the sky was clear, and the moon was visible. Illumination from the garden lights and the streetlight gave me a clear view of the house. I caught the subtle fragrance of roses and jasmine as I stepped onto the stone path leading to the front porch.

"Come in. I'll show you around," Peter said, my luggage in hand. He opened the door and waited.

I nodded and followed him inside. As I stood in the hallway, I instantly fell in love with the house.

The interior was mostly white, and the flooring was a sandy color. The gray furniture gave the spacious room a cozy, contemporary feeling.

Peter took me through the first floor, giving me a tour of the sunroom, living room, and dining room, which had a tall glass window with a beautiful view of the beach. French doors topped by trapezoid-shaped windows led from the sunroom outside to the backyard.

The kitchen, spacious and modern with a beautiful marble countertop and backsplash, was also on the first floor. If Aunt Amy were here, she would have been thrilled to cook and bake in that kitchen.

Like in my aunt's townhome, all the bedrooms and bathrooms were upstairs, and the powder room was on the first floor. As we stepped onto the landing, Peter sat my luggage near the first door.

"My room," he said, as though he could read my mind. "I'll show you the other rooms later. This is the loft." He gestured at the open space above the living room and then took my hand. "I'm going to convert it into a library. I've already ordered books and bookshelves. Also, I'll add a coffee table, chairs, and big pillows to make this room comfortable for reading."

"That's gonna be nice."

"I think so too. Now, let me show you the guest room." He pushed open the door of the first room. It had two nightstands, a dresser, a queen-size bed, and a long closet on the other end, with tall windows opposite the bed. The room had far more space than my bedroom in Boston.

The other two rooms were the same size. Peter used one of them as his home office.

“Now, let’s go to my room.” He gently pulled my wrist, leading me as he walked back to the room next to the loft.

I held in a gasp when he opened the door. His bedroom was even more spacious than the other three rooms and had the same tall window, but it covered half of the room. A blackout privacy curtain hung to the side. His king-size bed faced the window that overlooked a beautiful view of the beach.

“Wow, look at that!” I moved closer to the window. “This breathtaking view sprawls in front of you every time you wake up or go to bed.”

“Yup.” He nodded.

“You know what?” I looked at him over my shoulder. “If you moved your bed closer here, Peter, you could stargaze before going to sleep.”

“Good idea,” he agreed, placing his hand on my shoulder. “And it would be nice if I could enjoy the view with you by my side. Besides,” he turned me to face him, “this room and the bed are spacious enough for two.”

I felt my breath catch in my throat and noticed his light brown eyes narrowing on me.

Our first night together in his beautiful house would have been an unforgettable, steamy, heart-pounding night, if only I could respond to him by wrapping my arms around his neck, kissing him hard, and pushing him onto the bed.

But I couldn’t. I didn’t.

My throat tightened as I reached up to brush his brown hair and touch his cheek. With his eyes still on me, he leaned against my palm after giving it a quick kiss.

Then I felt a nervous, squirming sensation in my stomach. Unaware, I chuckled.

Peter looked at me with a question in his eyes.

Taking a deep breath, I looked at him and said quietly, “I love you, Peter, and I’m so excited to finally be alone with you again, but”—I searched into his eyes—“I don’t think I’m ready, because it’s gonna be a huge leap for me to sleep—”

My word stopped midway because Peter leaned in and gave me a quick kiss. The corners of his eyes wrinkled as he straightened his back.

I was stunned. Frowning, I continued. “As I said, it’s gonna be—”

Peter stopped me again with a quick kiss.

“You keep stopping me,” I said.

His smile widened as he tilted his head. “What was your assumption when I said this room and the bed are spacious enough for two?”

“Uh…” I blinked. “Do you want me to…?” My voice trailed off.

His eyes widened, prompting me to go on, but I clamped my mouth shut.

Peter tsked and put his finger on my chin. “Stop overthinking. Didn’t I only say, ‘This room and the bed are spacious enough for two’?”

I detected no joke in his eyes. He was sincere.

My lips parted, and then I frowned. Now, I wondered if I wasn’t attractive enough for him.

“So?” Peter made his way out of his bedroom. “Which room would you choose?”

“Um, the second one,” I answered, following him.

His eyes sparkled as he turned to me. “Are you sure you want to sleep in the room next to mine?” he teased me.

I chuckled and whacked him on the arm.

Peter touched my cheek and said solemnly, “You must be hungry and tired. Go unpack your clothes, and I’ll heat up our dinner.”

“Let’s prepare it together,” I offered.

The corners of his lips drooped. “Are you afraid I’ll burn the food?”

I snickered. “Okay, but don’t forget to take the suitcase with your cakes.” I pointed at the other suitcase in front of his bedroom.

“Got it.”

After I was done unpacking, I went down to the kitchen as Peter was putting the cakes and cookies in the fridge.

“Aunt Amy really worked hard on these,” he said. “I’ll call her tomorrow morning to thank her.”

“She’ll be happy to get your phone call. You’re her favorite person, you know.”

“Am I your favorite person, too?” he asked, closing the refrigerator door.

I moved toward him and rose on my tiptoes to kiss him on the nose. “You’re my special one, how about that?”

“That sounds better.”

I smiled.

“Hey, why don’t you go check the backyard while I’m preparing dinner? The sky is clear, and you’ll get a good view of the oil platforms,” he suggested as he reached out to turn on the stove dial to light it.

I looked at him for a few beats before nodding. “Okay.” I walked toward the sunroom and opened the French doors leading to the backyard.

A gentle breeze swept my hair to the side as I stepped onto the crushed gravel path. I stopped in the middle of the path and looked up at the sky, where thousands of stars were twinkling against the black background. I had a clear view of the moon too, shining like a spotlight in the air.

Peter was right. I could see the light from the oil platforms on the horizon under the starry sky. They’d been strung with LED lights and turned into a sort of offshore decoration.

“One...two...three...four...five...,” I counted. I could see five platforms clearly from where I stood.

Curious, I walked closer to the chest-high fence and turned to watch Peter cooking through the window. It was hard to imagine that he used to be so clumsy in the kitchen. But now, he appeared confident and...so handsome too. I chuckled and took a few minutes just to stare at him.

Continuing to explore, I realized that his house was in a secluded area with only two other houses farther down the beach, one on the right and one on the left. There was a hill near the left house.

It was peaceful and quiet here, which gave me a brilliant idea.

Maybe I would ask Peter to sleep outside tomorrow with sleeping bags. It might be nice to sleep under the stars without neighbors snooping around. I felt giddy at the thought and hoped Peter would agree.

“Rory, the food is ready,” Peter called from inside.

“Okay.”

On the countertop, he’d set out a few plates with all the foods I liked: a variety of onigiri—Japanese rice balls wrapped with seaweed—a spicy salt pork chop, and a big bowl of Taiwanese beef soup.

My stomach growled instantly at the delicious smell coming from the pork chop.

“Someone is complaining,” Peter teased me, pulling out a high barstool for me.

I sat, and Peter sat next to me.

“Thanks for buying the food for me,” I said, pouring the soup into a small bowl for myself. I didn’t pour any for Peter because I knew he didn’t like it.

“Don’t mention it. I know you miss the food here.” He reached for the onigiri.

“You like it now,” I commented, watching as he ate it.

“Yup. Initially, I didn’t like it because of the seaweed. It tastes like paper, don’t you think? I’m used to it now, though.”

“I’m happy you like it,” I said.

Peter’s eyes sparkled as he gazed at me.

After dinner, he cleared the table and washed the dishes, and I went to the guest room and took a shower. It was wonderful to have a warm shower after my long flight. It helped my tense muscles relax and alleviated the cramps in my right thigh from sitting too long.

Part of me wanted to sleep right away, but I also wanted to see Peter before going to bed. I went to the living room, where he sat watching TV. He’d already taken a shower, and he’d changed into a long-sleeved shirt and sweatpants. Smiling, he patted the empty spot next to him.

“What are you watching?” I asked, sitting next to him and looking at the TV.

“Just a series that I recorded because I don’t have much time to watch. Oh, I have something for you. Give me your hand.”

As I held my hand out to him, Peter slid something onto my wrist. I took a closer look at it and smiled. A bracelet of gold-filled glass beads on an adjustable black nylon cord was tied around my wrist.

“Aww...so cute! Thank you.”

“Could you tie this one for me?” He slid a similar bracelet, but with black beads, onto his wrist.

“Oh, is it a couple’s bracelet?” I asked, tying it for him.

“Yup.” He nodded and then admired the bracelet he’d bought. His eyes caught mine as I gazed at him.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked.

“Do you know the meaning of these bracelets?”

He nodded.

“It means a commitment, and people would see us as a couple,” I said, as if I didn’t see him nodding.

He nodded again.

“Are you sure?” I looked directly into his eyes.

Peter’s hand brushed against my bangs. “Why not? I want people to know we’re a couple. How about you? Are you sure?” he asked back.

I smiled and gave him a peck on the lips.

“That’s it? Man, I expected long, hot, sexy kisses,” he teased me.

I laughed and punched his arm playfully. Little wrinkles showed on the bridge of his nose when Peter laughed and pulled me closer. I looped my hand under his arm and leaned my head on his shoulder.

“Oh, you should feel the beads’ surface,” he suggested.

I rubbed my fingers on the beads and felt the dots there. “What is this? Braille?”

He nodded. “On yours, it says ‘love,’ and mine says ‘forever,’ with number four before ‘ever.’ And this part”—he pointed at the charms dangling on our bracelets—“is a magnet. If we hold our hands like this...” He positioned his hand next to mine, and the charms clung together. “The charms attach automatically.”

For a moment, we admired the bracelets. His looked good on him too. Then Peter turned his eyes to the TV again, and we sat quietly together. My eyelids grew heavier, and my vision became blurry. I smiled sleepily when I felt Peter drop a soft kiss on the top of my head.

Chapter 6

“Rory, if you feel sleepy, let’s go upstairs,” whispered Peter, reaching for the remote to turn off the TV. His eyebrows rose when he didn’t hear a response.

Tilting his head down, he chuckled because Rory was already sleeping on his shoulder. Her breathing was deep and even.

Peter was mesmerized by her face and couldn’t take his eyes off her. He’d seen her sleeping once on the patio in her old apartment when they were roommates, but not this close up. She looked beautiful in her sleep.

Almost without realizing it, he lowered his head to study her more closely. Her hair cascaded around her face. He brushed back the long locks, revealing her flawless face that bore no makeup. Her soft, angled eyebrows looked as though someone had painted them on. Her eyelashes were long and thick, but they looked as soft as a feather. He wanted to run his fingers over them, but he didn’t dare.

Lowering his eyes, he gazed at her nose before glancing down to her slightly parted, pinkish lips. Peter’s heart drummed in his chest, and his eyes fixed on those soft lips. He’d kissed them many times, but his heart beat at an erratic pace every time he looked at them.

His heart wrenched, then leaped as he leaned in closer to steal a kiss from her lips, but he stopped a couple inches away, close enough to feel her breath on his face.

“No.” He shook his head. “If I do, she’ll wake, and I don’t want that. I want her to feel secure around me. Maybe one day, when she’s my wife, I’ll wake her up with a feverish kiss that will make her beg for more.” Grinning sheepishly at the thought, he pulled away.

In his early twenties, he would never have given that thought any consideration. If he’d wanted to give his girlfriend a kiss, he would have done it no matter how sleepy she was.

But with Rory, everything was different. His heart had softened, and what he wanted most was to protect and cherish her. He was worried about her being hurt. Maybe he’d finally become the mature man Jane and his mom had always wanted him to be.

Whatever it was, Peter wanted Rory to feel secure around him no matter what. In silence, he continued looking at her innocent, sleeping face.

“Why do people look vulnerable when they’re sleeping?” he couldn’t help wondering. Soon after, his eyelids grew heavy, and he let out a big yawn.

Glancing at his watch, his eyes widened at the time. It was almost twelve. With Rory leaning on his shoulder, he didn't know what to do.

"Maybe I should carry her up? She isn't that heavy, right?" Peter wondered under his breath.

That's a good idea. But wait...maybe not.

She might wake up and get scared, then they'd fall on the floor.

Nah, it wouldn't be a good weekend if that happened.

Peter sighed. "Let her sleep on the sofa, then."

Carefully, he rose from his seat while holding Rory's head. He lowered it after sliding a sofa pillow under it.

"Wow, she didn't even budge." He gave a soft chuckle. Lifting her feet up, he took her slippers off. "Uh...yeah...blanket."

Peter tiptoed to the stairs and climbed each step carefully. A few minutes later, he came back down with two blankets and two pillows. Rory didn't move when he covered her with a blanket and changed her pillow for the one he'd brought from upstairs.

"Good night, Rory," he whispered, kissing her hair.

Sighing, he lay down on the carpet, placed the pillow under his head, and pulled the other blanket over his shoulders. What a night he'd had! No one would believe that he was sleeping on the floor in his own house while his girlfriend slept on the sofa. Since he'd been born, he'd always received the attention he wanted and had gotten used to people striving to please him. People who knew how he'd acted in the past would wonder, "What happened to Wild Fred, and why doesn't he live up to his nickname anymore?"

Yup, he used to act however he wanted, which was why he'd chosen "Wild Fred" as his nickname. It was derived from his confirmation name, Frederick, because it sounded better than "Wild Peter."

Rory had changed him, and he would do anything to make her happy. No girls in his past had deserved to get this attention because most of them approached him with an ulterior motive, his money and his family's status in society. If he were a nobody, they wouldn't have given him the time of day.

Peter looked up at Rory and touched her hand, which was sticking out from under her blanket.

"Sleep well," he said, yawning again.

Although he wished they were in his bed, what he wanted more than that was to see her face when he woke in the morning.

Chapter 7

“Hmm...smells good,” I mumbled.

My aunt must have cooked breakfast.

“One more minute.” I turned, and my shoulder bumped into something soft but firm. Through sleepy eyes, I saw a pale gray wall in front of me.

What is this?

My groggy mind became confused at hearing the relaxing and comforting sound of waves crashing on the shore. I turned onto my back and noticed a white ceiling with a modern, flush-mount light. Slowly, the night before came back to me.

I sat bolt upright.

I'm in Peter's house, in the living room, and I slept on the sofa!

“Ahh!” I jumped off it, causing the blanket to fall on the floor. Shoving my feet into my slippers, I glanced at the bed pillow that I'd used. Peter must have brought them down for me. Then I heard a soft *clunk* coming from the kitchen.

After hurriedly folding the blanket and fluffing the pillow, I noticed another bed pillow and blanket on the armchair.

“Wait, did he sleep here too?” I wondered aloud.

But I pushed away that thought. It couldn't be.

My heart pounded. I couldn't believe that my first night in his house, I'd fallen asleep on the sofa. How embarrassing!

Straightening my clothes, I brushed my hair with my fingers and walked toward the kitchen.

Peter, concentrating on the food he was preparing in a small frying pan, looked up as I came into the room. “Good morning. Did you sleep well?”

“Morning. Yes, I did.” I nodded. “Let me go upstairs to wash my face and brush my teeth.”

“I already put a clean towel in your bathroom,” he said, breaking an egg into a bowl.

“Thanks,” I said, climbing the stairs.

In the bathroom, I splashed water on my face and wondered what Peter would think about me sleeping on the sofa. He must have been surprised.

“You really *are* something, Rory,” I mumbled, scolding myself while brushing my teeth. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

After changing my clothes with a light blouse and khaki pants, I went down to the kitchen again. The clock on the wall showed 7:50.

“Do you need help?” I asked Peter, who was taking a butter plate out of the fridge.

“Nope, I’m done. Just take a seat,” he said, jerking his head toward the barstools.

I took a seat and smiled at the light brown apron tied around his neck and waist. It featured the words, “A man who can cook.” I’d bought it last month when he stayed with us in Boston. It had an adjustable neck strap, so it fitted his tall body perfectly.

“I’m sorry about sleeping on the sofa.” My cheeks warmed, and I was sure they were crimson. “You should’ve awakened me so I could go upstairs.”

“You were sound asleep, and I didn’t have the heart to wake you up and tell you to go upstairs, so I let you sleep downstairs,” he answered, putting a fork next to a plate in front of me.

“And...did you sleep in the living room too?” I asked carefully. “I saw an extra pillow and blanket on the chair.”

“Yup. I couldn’t let my girlfriend sleep alone in the living room, so I slept there too.”

“But...there’s only one sofa there,” I said. “Did you sleep on the floor?”

“On the carpet,” he corrected, taking off the apron and hanging it on the tiny wall hook.

“Oh...”

“Why?” Peter shrugged. “Haven’t you seen someone sleep on the floor before?”

“B—but you could have slept in your r—room, right?” I stuttered. It surprised me that he’d decided to sleep on the floor, on the carpet, and in his own home, while I was asleep on the sofa.

His eyes twinkled gently as he turned my chair to face him. “Would you have preferred I bring you upstairs? Did you know which room I would’ve entered if that had happened?” He leaned his face close to mine, grinning widely.

“That’s not what I meant.” I pushed him away. “Just...why did you sleep on the floor when you could’ve gone upstairs and slept in your own room?”

Still looking at me, Peter placed his fingers under my chin. “You don’t know me well enough, then, Aurorette Arrington,” he said, touching his nose to mine before lowering his mouth to kiss me. His lips were light but warm, increasing the adrenaline in my body and making sparks fly.

Closing my eyes, I wrapped my arms around his neck and parted my lips to kiss him back.

“If every morning were like this, I’d be the happiest man on earth,” Peter said, his lips brushing mine.

“Hmm.”

“And,” he said, his lips still on mine, “if we keep kissing like this, we’ll never eat our breakfast, and my cooking effort to impress you would be in

vain.”

Peter smiled widely as I opened my eyes, pulling myself away. I grinned back at him.

“Let’s eat,” he said, turning my chair back and taking a seat next to me.

Peter had become a good cook. The scrambled eggs with mushrooms were soft and tasty. The bacon was perfectly crisp, and he hadn’t burned the toast. The best part was that he’d brewed my favorite coffee, Big Bang, from Peet’s Coffee. Although he didn’t like coffee, Peter had bought a coffee machine to use whenever I stayed at his house.

A sudden wave of nostalgia hit me as I glanced at Peter, who was chewing his breakfast. *Here we are, just you and me, sitting side by side, eating our breakfast together like in the past.*

“Are you hiring someone to clean your house?” I asked, shaking off my sentimental feelings.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “I’m not good at cleaning,” he said. “Besides—”

“They can clean the house better than you,” I intercepted his words. “Yup, I remember those words.” I raised my mug to him.

“You got it.” He chuckled. Laughing, we clinked our mugs.

“Hey, after we finish our breakfast, I’m going to show you something,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a secret.” He winked.

I snickered and continued eating my breakfast.

After we ate, as promised, Peter took me to the house next door, the one on the left. Standing in front of the door, he gave me a mischievous smile.

In less than a minute, a silver-haired man of medium height, wearing glasses, answered the door. He smiled at me. The last time I’d seen him was in my old apartment a couple of days before Peter returned to London for his sister’s funeral.

“Marcus!” I exclaimed.

“Miss Rory! Long time, no see.” Marcus reached out to hug me.

“Just call me Rory, Marcus.” I hugged him back.

He chuckled, and his hand gently tapped my back before releasing me. Marcus had worked with Peter’s family for a long time. He’d taught Peter to ride a bike, swim, and play soccer because his parents were barely at home, busy with work and social gatherings. They weren’t around for birthdays, school performances, or Christmas holidays. Peter grew up with Marcus and a bunch of domestic helpers. Marcus was Peter’s special person.

“Why don’t you come in?” Marcus invited us. “Too bad my wife, Rosa, won’t be here until next week. She would’ve been happy to see you, Peter, and Miss Rory.”

“Maybe not today, Marcus,” Peter said. “I’m going to drive Rory around. She misses California.”

“I understand.” He smiled, turning to me. “Yes, you should enjoy everything you don’t normally see in Boston.”

“That’s the plan.” I smiled back.

After visiting Marcus, Peter and I walked barefoot along the sandy shoreline. The morning sun kissed my skin as I inhaled the fresh, salty ocean air. My body relaxed and my mind quieted as I picked up the sound of ocean waves washing up against the beach and the seagulls squawking as they soared in the air above us. The waves crawled to the shore, wetting the sand beneath my feet. When the waves became stronger, I moved to the dry sand because I didn’t like the water washing over my feet. Peter chuckled to see me, and, in a sudden movement, he lifted me by my waist and marched farther down into the ocean. He stood behind me and then let the waves crash against his back. I shrieked with laughter as I felt the cold waves hitting my thighs. Breaking away, Peter laughed and danced a jig around me every time I wanted to smack him.

Around noon, we met Tom for lunch. Peter’s half brother hadn’t changed much, still skinny and laid-back. His red hair had changed a bit, and his tousled hairstyle made him look younger than his twenty-six years.

“Hi!” I waved to him.

“Good to see you again, Rory. It’s been so long since we’ve seen each other.” He hugged me tightly.

“I missed you too, Tom, and...your squeezing hug,” I teased, trying to breathe.

Chuckling, he eased away, gazing at me for a moment before shifting his eyes to Peter, who watched us.

“I don’t miss *you*,” he said, stepping forward and jabbing Peter playfully in the stomach before giving him a quick hug.

“Me neither,” Peter responded. “Theo isn’t here yet?” he asked, glancing at his watch.

“He’ll be here soon,” Tom said. “He needed to pick up Emma on the way here.”

Peter raised one of his eyebrows. “Oh? I thought Emma couldn’t join us.”

“I’m not sure, but that’s good. Rory can meet her. Let’s wait inside. I already reserved a table for five,” Tom urged us.

“Okay,” Peter and I agreed.

As we entered the restaurant, Peter explained to me that Theo Adams and Emma Hathaway were his and Tom’s childhood friends, who happened to live in the same neighborhood in Richmond, London. Theo’s father used to

be a US consular general in London, and Emma's dad was a scientist. Ten years ago, they moved back to the States.

"I'm sure you'll like them," Peter assured me before excusing himself to go to the restroom.

While waiting for him to return, Tom and I caught up with each other, mostly talking about work.

Peter had been right when he said that Tom felt guilty for what his ex-boyfriend had done to us. I didn't want to say anything, as I wanted to let him heal and forgive himself. There was no need to rush things.

Theo and Emma arrived, meeting Peter as he returned from the restroom. Theo was a head shorter than Peter. He wore glasses and had wavy, light brown hair, which was cut short and swept behind his ears. Emma was as tall as Theo and also wore glasses. Her copper hair was tied loosely to the side.

I liked them instantly.

Despite seeming quiet and reserved, Theo bantered with Tom and Peter. Emma and I talked as well, and, once in a while, we listened to the guys' conversation and joined in their laughter.

Nothing felt better than having a good conversation with good people. Theo and Emma were down-to-earth people, regardless of their family backgrounds. They could have followed in their parents' footsteps, but they chose different career paths in education as professors for an undergraduate school.

After a fantastic afternoon with his half brother and their childhood friends, followed by light shopping in Fashion Island, Peter and I drove back to his house. It was almost four when we arrived and decided to relax at home before going out again for our Cruise of Light dinner in Newport Beach.

As we entered the house, Peter asked, "How do you like my friends?"

"I like them. They're very down-to-earth."

He nodded. "Yup. That's why I like them. I've been friends with Theo since we were young. I learned a lot about being humble from him."

I chuckled. "Did he beat you up when you acted snobbishly?"

"Not really, but he would definitely give me a piece of his mind."

"I can see that."

While Peter dug into his freezer for some ice cream, I asked casually, "Do you think they like me?"

"Of course. I thought that was obvious. Why do you ask?" he answered as he continued to rummage through the freezer. "Ah, there you are." He put the pint of rocky road ice cream on the kitchen counter and looked for an ice cream scooper.

I shrugged, tapping my fingers on the counter. "Um...just curious."

"You don't seem to be convinced."

“No, I believe it.”

“Really?” He stopped searching for the scooper and turned to me.

I nodded, but Peter cocked his head, raising one of his eyebrows. Solemnly, he walked around the counter with his eyes fixed on me. I bit my lower lip and looked away.

“Something’s bothering you. What is it?” He stood in front of me.

I studied his face and nodded. “Okay.” Stepping closer, I placed my hands on his waist and looked at him, and Peter clasped my hands in his. “Why do you like me?”

Peter blinked. “What kind of question is that?”

My stomach tightened, and I felt stupid. I clenched my jaw. “You’re a good-looking guy with a good education and a good family. It wouldn’t be difficult for you to find a girl with a good background, like Emma. Why have you continued dating me after knowing who I am?”

His eyelashes fluttered. A crease appeared between his eyebrows. “Does it matter?”

I nodded slowly, and I saw his jaw clench.

“Why does that suddenly matter to you?” he asked, his voice rising.

My throat became dry. I drew in a shaky breath and forced myself to look in his eyes. “Because I’d never thought about it until I met your friends today,” I said. “Since meeting them, I’ve been wondering what your family would think of me.”

I noticed a flicker of surprise in his eyes as his jaw tightened further, and he only gave me a hard stare.

I frowned. “Just...forget what I said.” I tried to pull my hands away, but Peter held them tightly.

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Acknowledgement

Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues but the parents of all the others.
– Marcus Tullius Cicero

I have to start by thanking my parents for everything they've done for me. Without them, I might not be the person I am today. When I felt hopeless and failed, they encouraged me to stay focused and keep fighting. Now I know where my fighting spirit comes from. I love you both!

To my better half and forever boyfriend, Steve, for your patience and love. Since March 2020, you've been working from home because of COVID-19, but we barely met during the day because I locked myself in writing this book. I love you, babe! If I had two hearts, you would have both.

To my sisters and brother for keeping my spirits up. Thanks for always putting me in your prayers.

To Rick K, my neighbor in MV. Rest in peace. You are no longer in the world, but I won't forget your kind advice. You understood the struggles and the pain of writing a book, but each time we met, you always said, "Listen, writing a book isn't easy, and you'll feel down. But don't give up. I have faith in you, and I know you can do it." Thanks for your positive affirmation. It made me feel good about myself. I won't give up. Thanks, Rick! Till we meet again.

To Mr. and Mrs. B for sparing your busy time to have dinner with me and my better half. You answered my questions patiently, especially after knowing that I needed that information for my book. Thank you. We should have dinner again soon.

To my in-laws, Ana and Fernando, Mr. and Mrs. Patterson, Leslie, Asun, Irma, Olin, Joy, Odi, Cayung, Dina, and Tepi. Your mental support is essential to me.

To my readers who asked for the sequel. Without you, this book can't go anywhere.

And last but not least, I thank God for giving me the strength to finish this book, for your blessings and graces every day. I love You!

Author's Note

Dear readers,

Whew! Finally, the sequel is done.

I have to admit that writing this sequel was more challenging than the first book. After spending countless hours writing up to sixty chapters, I had to delete half of them and start over because I didn't feel satisfied with the storyline. Sentence after sentence was deleted and rewritten. I never felt confident because I always felt something missing in the story. One morning, I had a burst blood vessel in my left eye from staying up the whole night. I almost gave up and stopped writing.

As many people have experienced, the COVID-19 pandemic made my mind unsettled, and it wasn't easy to stay optimistic. On top of that, I lost two good people I'd admired. One was my lecturer, and the other was Rick K, my neighbor in MV, who inspired me to create a father figure in Rick Perkin for Rory in the first book. Their passing affected me emotionally as though I lost a brother and a dad. May they rest in peace.

Despite the conditions, I kept writing, especially after receiving a few notes from readers who asked for the sequel.

Slowly but surely, the storyline was established. It was getting better once I got pointers from my editor. It meant more long hours spent in front of the computer, but I knew I wouldn't regret it because I always wanted to give my best.

Now, while writing this "author's note," my heart is filled with joy because it meant all the struggles and tiredness have paid off, and my book is ready to publish.

Dear readers, I hope you enjoy this heartwarming story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

About the Author

Kana Wu, an autodidact author, has loved writing since her childhood. Her debut novel, *No Romance Allowed*, was published in October 2019, and it received two awards as Finalist in the 2020 International Book Awards and Reader's Favorite Awards. It was also a winner in the Romance category for the 2020 TCK Publishing Readers' Choice Awards Contest.

She lives in Southern California with her husband and her two rescued Jindo dogs.

Be the first to know when Kana has a special offer or a new book by checking her website or following her on social media.

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