

NO *Secrets* ALLOWED

DISTANCE CHALLENGED, HIDDEN TRUTHS.



• book two •

KANA WU

This novel earned a 1st Place Blue Ribbon for the Chatelaine Book Awards for Romantic Fiction,
a division of the 2021 Chanticleer International Book Awards.

PRAISE FOR KANA WU

“Solidly recommended for fans of women’s friendship and single mother stories.” – Midwest Book Review, on *She Calls Her Mom*.

“I highly recommend this incredible book to readers in women’s fiction and contemporary romances. If you love Jill Shalvis, Lori Foster, Samantha Chase, Susan Wiggs, or even Brenda Novak-then, this is a must-read!” – Urban Lit Magazine, on *She Calls Her Mom*.

“Highly recommended for readers who are tired of the typical chick lit romance, and are ready for something light as air and just as refreshing.” – K.C. Finn for Readers’ Favorite, on *No Romance Allowed*.

“The main characters are loveable and endearing, and Wu’s handling of past regrets and secrets withheld endow the couple with a blithe honesty and vulnerability that is sure to warm the hearts of readers of this engaging series.” – Self-Publishing Review, 4 stars, on *No Secrets Allowed*.

“I finished it at 4am, I couldn’t put it down, it’s really good.” – Goodreads Reviewer, 5 stars, on *No Romance Allowed*.

“Beautiful short story! I fell in love with everything about the story. Wonderful characters, great plot and storyline, and very eloquent writing.” – Goodreads Reviewer, 5 stars, on *She Calls Her Mom*.

“The plot of this book surprised me and kept me interested.” – Goodreads Reviewer, 5 stars, on *A Warm Rainy Day In Tokyo*.

“This is a gripping women’s fiction suspense novella. ... I enjoyed reading this book and will definitely recommend it.” – Goodreads Reviewer, 5 stars, on *She Calls Her Mom*.

“Nothing is better than sitting with a book that pulls you out of the real world.” – Goodreads Reviewer, 5 stars, on *No Secrets Allowed*.

“This book has a very positive vibe to it.” – Goodreads Reviewer, 4 stars, on *A Warm Rainy Day In Tokyo*.

“There wasn’t any toxic character trying to take the other down. It was pure love and we all need that nowadays.” – Goodreads Reviewer, 4 stars, on *A Warm Rainy Day In Tokyo*.

“*A Warm Rainy Day In Tokyo* not only offers a Hallmark style love story, but also an intriguing peek into life in Japan through the eyes of a foreigner. Kana Wu’s characters are lovable and easy to root for, and she builds a masterful and immersive setting for them as well.” – Goodreads Reviewer, 4 stars, on *A Warm Rainy Day In Tokyo*.

“An agreeably warm story that bounces along effortlessly on the genuine chemistry of its lead characters ... Wu takes the much-loved tropes of the genre and makes them her own.” – The BookViral Review, on *No Romance Allowed*.

“Readers who enjoy romance novels with a touch of suspense will appreciate this book.” – OnlineBookClub.org, 4 stars, on *No Romance Allowed*.

OTHER NOVELS BY KANA WU

No Romance Allowed

A Warm Rainy Day In Tokyo

She Calls Her Mom

No Secrets Allowed

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For more about this author please visit <https://www.kanawuauthor.com/>

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First Edition

NO *Secrets* **ALLOWED**

DISTANCE CHALLENGED, HIDDEN TRUTHS.

•book two•

KANA WU

*For my mom and my dad -
I love you from the bottom of my bottomless heart.*

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 stood in line, but thankfully, my bus wasn't scheduled to arrive anytime soon.

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. Two 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 it's only temporary until I finish colleg—"

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 had already come out from the kitchen. She must’ve heard the commotion.

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. That poor man was here for a business trip, and on the day he had to fly back home, his sweater and coat were ruined by my drink. I bet he would buy a new sweater at the airport instead of 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 probably should advise her to stop doing that, as her bulging, six-months-pregnant stomach made it seem rather amusing.

"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.

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