

PRAISE FOR KANA WU

“Solidly recommended for fans of women’s friendship and single mother stories.” — Midwest Book Review, 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*.

“Short and sweet - but it packs a punch.” — Goodreads Reviewer, 4 stars, on *She Calls Her Mom*.

“Such a sweet and meaningful novella. I smiled, I laughed, I teared up! Quick and easy read.” — Goodreads Reviewer, 4 stars, on *She Calls Her Mom*.

"*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 for-eigner. 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*.

"Verdict: Loved it!" — Goodreads Reviewer, 4 stars, on *No Secrets Allowed*.

"An agreeably warm story that bounces along effortlessly on the genu-ine 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 appreci-ate this book."
— OnlineBookClub.org, 4 stars, on *No Romance Allowed*.

OTHER NOVELS BY KANA WU

No Secrets Allowed

A Warm Rainy Day In Tokyo

She Calls Her Mom

No Romance Allowed

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

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First Edition

NO ROMANCE ALLOWED

SURVIVING ON RAMEN

or

BREAKING HER PROMISE

• book one •

KANA WU

For my mom and my dad.
Thanks for always believing in me.

CHAPTER 1

T

he wind had been picking up since noon. Trees and bushes twirled, bent, and swayed wildly. Fallen leaves and broken twigs marred the beautifully manicured gardens, stone paths, driveways, and resident patios in the Pacific Hills Apartments complex.

Sitting on the bench by my bedroom window, I watched the disarray worsen each time the wind howled and occasionally felt the window glass tremor. The weather had been crazy like this for two days since the red flag, and a high-winds warning was announced in Southern California. Yesterday, a eucalyptus tree fell in Tustin, a next-door city to Irvine, injuring two pedestrians.

Though it was February, California winters were usually mild, somewhere around forty-five degrees Fahrenheit. However, because of thunderstorms the day before, the temperature had dropped by ten degrees, according to the weather report on my laptop screen.

While typing a password to login into my bank's website, something outside my window caught my eye. The wind snatched a baseball cap off a boy walking across the green belt, and each time he tried to grab it, the wind kicked it just out of his reach again.

Chuckling, I shifted my focus back to the screen. The smile on my face faded, and my stomach churned to see the total balance: \$246.75.

Not much left!

Biting my lower lip, I calculated quickly. With the paychecks I would get the next two Fridays, there would be enough to pay only this month's rent and barely buy food. Sighing, I stared at the screen.

Since Lizzy Walter, my ex-roommate, moved to Seattle three months ago, I had been struggling to pay the rent on my own. I'd had to cut back on all my expenses and learned to make do with oatmeal, eggs, instant noodles, and the occasional banana. My salary as an accountant was not enough to support my \$2,500-a-month rent payment for the two-bedroom apartment. If I'd had a roommate, half would have been manageable.

Or I could move to a cheaper apartment?

That was out of the question because I did not have enough money for a deposit.

I wasn't proud of myself. Whenever people learned I was an accountant, they always assumed I was good at managing my money, but I wasn't. I wasn't a shopaholic, but I *loved* shopping. I had brand-name bags, shoes, and clothes sitting in my closet, waiting for me to wear them. In my money-tight situation, I had begun to realize those expensive things didn't bring me any happiness at all.

Move to a different company with a higher salary?

That wasn't the best solution either. I hadn't built much of a resume yet since I'd graduated from college less than a year ago.

I'd already put ads for "renting a room" on Craigslist and received some responses. Too bad no one acceptable had inquired yet. Most of the applicants were job hoppers, college students, jobless, single parents with a kid, or some-one who only needed a temporary place. Some males had responded to the ads, although my criteria were clear: a female with a steady job, not a smoker (because I had asthma), and willing to rent for at least two years.

A disadvantage of putting out the ads was that I got a lot of spam and telemarketer calls.

A few weeks ago, I had taken flyers to work and given them to my three closest coworkers, Sylvia, Lena, and Yoo-Shi. We all worked in the accounting department at Myriad Food and Beverage, a distributor for frozen food and beverages ranging from soft drinks to wine and spirits. Sylvia Santos and Kim Yoo-Shi were part of the alcohol division, while Lena Hunter and I were in the nonalcohol division.

"No male roommate?" Lena had commented as we ate lunch together in the office lunchroom.

"Nope. That wouldn't be appropriate," I'd answered.

Sylvia nodded. "It's not good for a single young woman to live with a man," she'd said in her Philippine accent. "I think living with a male roommate would lead you to have a 'romance relationship,' and that would be messy!"

Yoo-Shi put the flyer on the table. "I had a male roommate for two years in Seoul. We were both single and didn't fall for each other. In fact, we helped each other. One day, my roommate fell in love with a girl and asked for my opinion. It was fun, like having a brother or a cousin." With a pout, she continued, "I wish I had a male roommate now because it is fun and less drama. Not like living with the bitchy roommate I have now."

We'd all looked at her in sympathy. Her current roommate was a single, large-frame woman in her early forties with a long nose and long, ash-blond hair. Her voice was deep and throaty. I'd met her once when picking up Yoo-Shi, and when she talked, she looked down her long nose at me as if I were her humble subject. Initially, Yoo-Shi had said the lady was nice, then her opinion changed as her roommate showed her true colors. But for some odd reason, Yoo-Shi couldn't kick her out.

"I agree with her," Lena had said, tossing her golden-blond hair over her shoulder. "When I lived in Chicago for my first job, I had a male roommate two different times. I already had a boyfriend, but he lived in New Jersey. My roommates also had girlfriends, but they lived in a different state too. We were fine—barely had an argument. They kept the apartment clean and helped me with computer issues. We've kept in touch."

"Really?" I widened my eyes. "Wasn't your boyfriend jealous? I don't think I could do that to my boyfriend."

"Well, I'd told him about my intention upfront and asked his permission. He appreciated my openness and was fine," Lena had said. "If they disagree, well, better you don't do it. I'm lucky my boyfriend was so open-minded, which is why I married him. It's up to you, Rory, and don't do it if you aren't comfortable."

Yoo-Shi had nudged me. "I don't understand why you can't live with a guy. You're single, and it's socially acceptable for opposite genders to live together."

"I know, but...it's complicated because I already made a promise....Sorry, I can't give details." I'd lowered my gaze.

Yoo-Shi had seemed unsatisfied but didn't say more.

"Don't worry, Rory. We'll try to help you," Sylvia had said, pulling her long black hair up into a bun.

Later on, I'd gotten a few referrals from my coworkers, but those fell through because the prospects either found a cheaper room, moved in with family, or stayed where they were.

I felt queasy thinking about my current condition. Maybe I should work weekends. There was a dance academy near my apartment that constantly put out an ad for a receptionist. Or I could cashier in a little grocery store a few blocks away. Its employees always looked happy. But the thought of a part-time job made me cringe because I'd lose so much of my free time.

On the other hand, it might be better than living on instant noodles.

My phone rang, its melodic tone interrupting my miserable thoughts. I glanced at Lizzy's name flashing on the screen.

"Hi, Rory! How are you?" greeted Lizzy, talking above her noisy background.

"Marvelous! But hey, I can't hear you. Where are you?" I asked.

"Terry and I are in a cinema for the new Marvel movie. So crowded today. Hold on. Let me find a quiet spot." From her breathing, I could tell she was walking fast. "Have you seen the movie yet?"

"Not yet. I—" I didn't want to admit to her that I didn't have money for such leisure. "Maybe sometime next week."

"Okay. Make sure you watch it. You are a Marvel movie girl." Lizzy chuck-led. "Oh, yeah, the reason I called you: I need a favor."

"Sure, what's up?"

She drew in a breath. "An hour ago, my boss texted me about an IT emergency in a client's office, close to your apartment in Irvine. I should be there next Monday, but I don't want to stay in a hotel. Can I crash on your couch for a night?"

"Sure. I'd love to see you again," I said. "Besides, I don't have a roommate yet, so please come."

"I'm sorry about that. Don't get discouraged. You'll find someone great," she said.

I let out a sigh because I already felt hopeless. "Thanks. I'm working on it," I said.

"Terry said he gave your ad to any female coworkers he knows who might be looking for a place. Hope one of them will contact you soon," Lizzy assured me.

"Aw, he's so sweet," I said. "Please thank him for me."

Terry, her boyfriend, had just moved to Seattle a week ago. I believed wedding bells would ring for those two soon.

"Will do. Hey, don't be shy when you need help, okay? I always think of you as my sister."

"Okay."

"By the way, does Mrs. Ishida know you're looking for a new roommate?" Lizzy asked.

I grunted at the heavy weight that landed on my chest when Lizzy brought up my aunt's name. I loved Aunt Amy but was scared of her at the same time, mostly because I didn't want to burden her anymore. I owed her for taking care of me after my mom, her younger sister, passed away, and I wasn't a docile kid back then. At fifteen, I'd successfully turned her beautiful black hair gray. So, for once, I wanted her to enjoy her single life in Boston without having to worry about me.

"Hey girl, are you there?"

Lizzy's voice brought me back to reality. "Um...yes, I'm here. No, I haven't told her yet," I mumbled. I pictured her rolling her hazel eyes.

"It's been three months since I moved out, so you'd better tell her soon," she said after a long pause. "I can't imagine how mad she will be if she finds out you kept her in the dark."

I winced at the reminder.

"Well, I can't force you to tell Auntie Amy, anyway. But if you need help, Terry and I are here for you," said Lizzy.

I nodded as if she could see me.

"Hey, I've got to go. Terry will get worried if I'm not back. See you Monday."

"Okay. See you, and a big hug to Terry," I said.

"Sure thing."

We hung up. I sighed and dropped my phone on the bed, then headed toward the kitchen. A bowl of colorful M&M's sitting on the counter looked tempting, so I sat in one of the high chairs, lifted its glass lid, took a few, and plopped them into my mouth.

Since Lizzy had brought up my aunt, my thoughts flew back to a moment a year and half ago. It was during the last six months of my bachelor's degree studies when she'd told me about her job offer in Boston. I remembered vividly the joy I felt for her as she would return to the city she loved.

I'd wanted to stay in our apartment, but Aunt Amy thought it was a bad idea for me.

"Move to a studio or one-bedroom, Rory," my aunt had said. "I know you have a part-time job now, but your wage won't cover the rent."

"But this location is close to campus and my job," I'd said stubbornly. "Doesn't this apartment complex have a one-bedroom, too?"

My aunt had pursed her lips. "There are many other apartments near your campus. Besides, I've already asked the office manager, and she said there are no studio or one-bedroom units available at the moment."

I had avoided my aunt's eyes while going over all my reasons for not wanting to move. It was challenging to juggle my time between my job, classes, and schoolwork. My weekends were already dull and boring, mostly full of writing papers. I didn't think I had enough time to sell or donate stuff in preparation for moving. My head had pounded each time I thought about it, and living in a student apartment was a no-no. Most of those students loved partying more than studying. If I wanted to graduate on time, I had to avoid living there.

Besides, I loved Pacific Hills. It was situated uphill with gorgeous surroundings, and the neighbors were great too. I had built good relationships with the staff and already knew who was reliable and who was not. The monthly program was superb, with free classes like yoga or tennis twice a month. I doubted I would find all that anywhere else.

My aunt had narrowed her eyes while listening to me.

"Please let me stay until I graduate and get a permanent job, then I'll move to a one-bedroom," I had begged my aunt. "I'll find a roommate too."

"Well," she'd said, looking straight at me, "after listening to your *reasons*, I assume you've also thought about the *consequences* of staying here, because I don't want to hear you complain about the cost later. Just so you know, I won't help you pay the rent, but I'll help you choose a good roommate to share your expenses with her. Think of it as my last duty as your guardian."

I'd wished she could help pay the rent until I graduated, but I wouldn't take back my words. Overly confident, I'd agreed.

Before she left for Boston, Aunt Amy had found Lizzy, the daughter of a church friend, to be my roommate. Everything went smoothly until Lizzy got promoted and had to move to Seattle.

I laid my head on the countertop, thinking. My aunt had sacrificed a lot for me, including moving to California when I was accepted as a student at the University of California, Irvine. It was unfair to ask for her help if I was the one who insisted on living in this apartment. I decided to keep trying to find a roommate on my own and, if I didn't find one in one more month, I would call her.

CHAPTER 2

On Sunday morning, the wind died down. The apartment complex grounds were a mess of leaves and broken twigs strewn over wet ground. On my way back from jogging, I saw a huge tree had fallen and blocked the sidewalk around the manmade lake near my apartment. No

victims, but one car that was parked on the curb had been smashed.

I was about to go around the fallen tree when I heard my phone buzz. I took it out from my running belt. On the screen, I saw a new email notification from Rowena White, my accounting manager.

I groaned. *Not again!*

Last month, she had requested that Lena and I reroute our office emails to our personal emails so we could help in our off-hours with a project for Samuel Hamilton III, the owner of Myriad. Desiree Lang, the general manager, had told us about the possibility that Mr. Hamilton would establish a partnership with a company somewhere in Europe.

It was a “hush-hush” project, and only people in the accounting department knew because we were the group that worked on and processed the financial data. The rest of the departments would be informed later to prevent any negative issues. The project hadn’t even begun, but Rowena was already taking advantage of our personal time. Since then, almost every Sunday, she emailed us to finish our reconciliation reports so she could review them at nine o’clock Monday morning. It was crazy, but what Rowena wanted, Rowena got.

I scoffed at her email, inserted my phone back into my running belt, and continued jogging. Luckily, I had already done most of my tasks and had only three more left. Still, they would take half of my precious Sunday to complete. *Ugh!*

Around noon, I finally finished the reconciliation reports and submitted them to Rowena’s folder before sending a text to Lena.

Are you done with your report?

My phone vibrated two seconds later. Tapping on the screen to open the text, I chuckled at the lightning emoji she sent. I wasn't in the mood for teasing her and responded by sending a thumbs-up emoji.

I inserted the office notebook into the computer bag with a sigh. In the last two months, I hadn't felt any excitement about working at Myriad. I still liked my coworkers and enjoyed wine tastings or free lunch events, but my manager was unbelievable.

I remembered the day I had interviewed with Rowena ten months ago. I'd been impressed by her easygoing manner and was excited to work for her. The first few days in the office were perfect, but the new-job bubble deflated on the fourth day. The honeymoon period had ended, and Rowena showed her real personality. She wasn't easygoing anymore; the promise of "we'll train you until you've become an expert" had been forgotten.

"I'll only explain this once, so you'd better remember and not make me repeat it," she'd said in a bossy tone, pointing her forefinger in my face.

Since then, I'd felt uncomfortable around her as if she were releasing an unpleasant aura. Rowena was very moody and impatient. My stomach clenched each time she passed my cubicle. I hadn't understood, and still didn't, why she always furrowed her eyebrows at me whenever I asked her for advice. She'd quickly stopped answering my questions and told me to check the history of each report. She'd even suggested that I wait until Lena came back from Chicago and ask her.

Lena had gone to the Windy City for a family emergency before my first day and wouldn't be back for a couple weeks. I was pretty much at the mercy of Rowena because there was no one to help me. I'd quickly become friends with Sylvia and Yoo-Shi, but they couldn't help because they were from a different division.

To make matters worse, I'd been making tons of mistakes. Cold beads of sweat ran down my spine each time Rowena emailed me back with `wrong account` written in capital letters in the subject line.

When Lena had returned to work, I liked her right away. She was super-pa-tient. Her golden-blond hair bounced as she nodded in sympathy while reading all the notes from Rowena on my reports. Slowly, she'd taught me to understand Myriad's accounting process, and after only a couple of hours training with her, I'd been able to do my job better.

Lena was well-liked around the office. Upon her return, coworkers would stop by her desk and ask about her family. Rowena had said nothing. However, from my peripheral

vision, I'd been able to see her staring at Lena while she was having a conversation with a lady from the tax department.

Later that day, Rowena had called Lena to her office. Through the window, I had been able to see that Rowena's face was twisted, and her lips were puckered as if she were eating something sour. I'd been surprised how Lena had come out of her office calmly, with a smile. I'd been intrigued to learn from her about how to deal with Rowena.

I was too naïve to read the situation because, one day, as I went to the ladies' room on the third floor, I found Lena wiping her tears as I entered. She startled, and her teary eyes had widened, then she glared at me.

"Why are you here?" she'd asked, pushing a lock of her long hair out of her face. "Are you spying on me?"

"Of course not," I'd said, shaking my head. "I like coming up here when-ever I need to be alone. Besides, this is the cleanest restroom because nobody uses it."

She'd stomped her foot. "Don't you dare tell anyone about this."

I'd moved aside as she left the room abruptly, her footsteps echoing in the empty hall.

When I'd returned to my cubicle, which was next to Lena's, her face was as calm as the ocean's surface with a small smile on her lips as usual, but she avoided me. Two days later, she'd approached me and asked if I'd like to go out to dinner with her. I'd been curious about her behavior and agreed right away. We'd gone to an open-air mall about twenty minutes from our office and ordered dinner from one of restaurants nearby. While we'd waited for our food, Lena poured her heart out about how Rowena treated her staff and how Desiree knew but didn't do anything.

"That's awful. Why does Desiree let this happen?"

"You don't get it, do you?" she'd asked with a bitter smile. "Desiree is Rowena's friend. They used to work together."

I'd blinked, speechless. No wonder they seemed to get along well.

"I'll tell you another story." Lena had shifted in her seat. "Have you been in our documents storage at the next-door building?"

I'd shaken my head.

"Well, that storage is dirty and messy, which is why we call it 'the dun-geon.'" Lena made air quotes with her fingers. "A month ago, Desiree decided we would use one of our Fridays to clean the storage as a team. On the day, everybody helped but Rowena."

“Why?”

“I overheard her telling Desiree that she had a ton of reports to get done and asked permission to stay in the office.” Lena had curled her lips. “Don’t get me wrong—I don’t care if she comes with us or not, but I didn’t like her remark. She said, ‘So long, suckers.’ I was the only one who heard it because I was the last one left and happened to pass her office when she said it. She’s a jerk, I tell you.”

“Maybe she was joking?” I’d tried to give Rowena the benefit of the doubt.

Lena scoffed. “Rowena? Joking? You haven’t known her too long, have you?” Her eyebrows had lowered and pinched tighter. “Soon you’ll see how cunning she is.”

“Did anyone else, like Christina or Sylvia, notice that Rowena got out of cleaning day?” I’d asked.

Lena had shrugged. “Christina looked annoyed when Desiree said Rowena wasn’t joining us. If I’m not wrong, Christina had asked permission to leave early for her son’s award ceremony that day, and Desiree had told her no. Sylvia and Yoo-Shi...well, they are neutral with Rowena. I know Sylvia has a beef with Desiree because she was promised to be our division accounting manager, but it didn’t come true once Rowena joined the company.”

Lena had taken a deep breath and looked at me. “I’m sorry to tell you all these things. You must think I’m a bad person—talking ill behind someone’s back. Well, you’re an adult and can tell the difference. As your senior, I want you to be careful in the office. No matter how badly Rowena treats you, don’t go to Desiree, not even to HR. No one wants to work with a crybaby. Just bite your tongue and do your job. Once you feel you can’t stand it here anymore, find another job.”

My stomach had steadily tightened as I wondered how long I could survive in this such a toxic environment. Obviously, there was no such thing as a perfect place to work.

“After all you’ve been through, why are you still working here?” I’d asked carefully.

Lena had been taken aback and didn’t respond right away. “Well, this office is near my house,” she’d said, lifting her gaze to me, “and I’m working toward getting my CPA license, so I think it’s wise to stay until I get it.” She’d studied my face. “Please keep what I’ve said just between us, okay?”

“Yes, of course,” I’d nodded.

After that, we’d become close friends who provided comfort and support to each other whenever Rowena was harsh to one of us.

CHAPTER 3

Another week passed without a potential roommate. Lizzy's short stay had been like a breath of fresh air. We'd chatted and laughed like the old days. But once she'd left, reality pulled me back, especially at the sight of my bank account balance dwindling after a credit card payment.

Suddenly, instant noodles, oatmeal, and eggs were dancing in front of my eyes and chanting at me, *"We love you, Rory! We love you, Rory!"*

The chanting stopped as my phone chirped for an incoming message. I flicked the screen open and read an email from Amazon Marketplace.

Congratulations, someone is interested in buying your Tory Burch Fleming tote and the Coach cross-body bag. Please follow Amazon Marketplace's rules on sending your merchandise...

I liked the tote and the bag, but I needed to buy some real food. Maybe it was time to forget my pride and ask for my aunt's help.

The next morning, before going to work, I was putting the shipping boxes in my car when I heard Rick Perkins, my seventy-two-year-old neighbor, call my name.

"Rory, my good neighbor! Good morning, young lady!" He grinned, creating deep wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. His cheeks were pinkish, and the sweat pooling around the front of his shirt indicated he must be coming back from his morning jog.

"Good morning, Rick," I answered, closing the car door. "Five miles as usual?"

Nodding, Rick took off his baseball cap and used his fingers to smooth down the white hair underneath. "I'm not young anymore, so five miles is good for me."

"You aren't old," I replied. I wasn't lying. For his age, his body was slim and sturdy.

He chuckled, pushing up the long-sleeved T-shirt that had been hiding tattoos he'd gotten while in the Marine Corps. "Thank you, but my body can't lie. So, young lady, are you ready to conquer the world?"

"Absolutely!" I grinned, pumping my fists in the air.

Rick smiled his approval. "So, how's Amy doing? Is it still cold up there?"

"She is doing fine. Just busy with her volunteer work. Last week, she sent me a few pictures of the blizzard. It was unusual even for February. Um, let me show you..." I dug in my purse for the cell phone, then scrolled through the picture gallery folder and showed them to him.

Aunt Amy and I had met Rick and his wife, Maggie, about three years ago when their cat, Tubby, ran away during the Fourth of July fireworks. That chubby cat had snuck into my half-open window and hidden under my bed. I hadn't been aware of his presence. My aunt, who was allergic to cats, had found him the next day unintentionally. Poor Aunt Amy! With teary eyes and a red face from sneezing nonstop, she'd found me in the kitchen and asked between sneezes if I'd hidden a cat in my bedroom.

"Of course not!" I'd cried, running to my room. "I like dogs, not cats!"

Under my bed, I'd seen Tubby's eyes glowing back at me. He'd hissed fiercely when I tried luring him out. How Tubby had jumped down from Maggie and Rick's apartment on the third floor was a mystery. Maybe some-one had forgotten to close a door, and the cat had taken a leisurely walk in the neighborhood and run to the closest place to hide when the fireworks started.

Once my aunt moved to Boston, my relationship with Rick and Maggie became closer. Maggie loved cooking and used me as an excuse to bake and cook because she had no one to spoil, considering all her grown-up kids lived outside California.

"Have you found a new roommate yet?" Rick asked after looking at the pictures.

"Not yet," I answered, putting my phone back into my purse. "It's not as easy as I thought."

Rick gave a nod of understanding. "But you've sent out the ads and flyers, right?"

I nodded.

Rick squinted down at me. "Let me guess—Amy doesn't know about this, does she?"

I lowered my gaze. "If Maggie happens to talk to my aunt, please don't tell her," I begged, looking up at him.

"Don't worry about that," he assured me. "Listen, let me help you. When you have time, stop by my place and bring the flyer. With my luck and connections, maybe I could find someone for you quickly," Rick said without hiding the pride in his tone.

I gave a little smile. That was what I liked about Rick: always helpful.

"Okay. Tomorrow after work, I'll stop by," I said.

"Good." Rick smiled, watching something behind me. "Now, here comes Leo, my partner in crime." He pointed his finger at Leo, my next-door neighbor on the same floor, walking toward us with a basketball in his hands. Leo was about the same age as Rick but still liked to play basketball.

I grinned, waved to Leo, and got in my car.

Rowena's office light was off when I put my bag in my cubicle. Usually, our arrival times in the office were almost the same, which bothered me somehow.

"It's hard to believe you arrived before her," commented Sylvia, popping her head over our cubicle's divider as I turned on my notebook.

"Maybe she overslept after brewing up an evil potion last night," Lena scorned.

My lips twisted at the comment while Sylvia snorted, holding her laughter.

"Trust me," Lena added, "if you searched her office, you might find a witch's hat and a broomstick."

"I dare you!" Sylvia said, laughing.

"Psst...she is coming!" warned Yoo-Shi from her cubicle near the entrance.

Immediately, we all looked down at our computers as the door swung widely. Rowena's heavy footsteps filled the quiet room. Without greeting us, she went straight to her office, and a split second later, I heard the heavy thud as she slammed her Longchamp bag onto her desk.

What a bitch!

Lena said to me in a Skype message.

I smirked and replied.

She woke up on the wrong side of the bed, I bet.

Lena replied.

Almost every day? Rory, please. She always does when she feels like we were talking behind her back. She's simply a bitch.

Rowena tended to be passive-aggressive whenever she felt unhappy toward someone. Unlike Desiree, she would give that person the cold shoulder all day and accumulated his or her mistakes before badmouthing them in front of Desiree, who didn't seem interested in finding out why Rowena always came to her and bitched about her subordinates. She was too busy polishing her department's public image as a fun place to work, full of smart, young people and good teamwork.

My respect toward my manager had steadily been decreasing along the way, but I had to give her credit for always hitting deadlines and not wasting time with senseless chatting. It was unfortunate that her hardworking attitude wasn't accompanied by compassionate, open-minded, and appreciative behavior towards her staff. Her condescending personality was a terrible fit for a manager. If Desiree had cared about healthy relationships between management and the team, she would have been the best person to control Rowena's negative tendencies.

At two o'clock, there was a quick meeting for the finance and accounting departments. The conference room was already packed when Yoo-Shi and I arrived, so we squeezed into the back corner behind a few other employees. In the meantime, Valerie Tanaka, our executive vice president, stood at the head of the conference room with her hands clasped in front of her, her angular eyes scanning the room as she waited for the chatter to die down.

"Thank you for coming," she said in a clear voice as the room became quiet. "I'm going to give you an update on our partnership project. Mr. Hamilton has announced the name of our future partner: White Water, Inc." Val paused for effect. "White Water is a British wine company. Their finance team will fly to the States in three weeks, but they will be in New York first before coming here. Please keep in mind that this partnership is vital to us because White Water is highly reputable in the wine industry. They distribute branded wines to high society, royalty, and the wealthiest families in the world. So, please welcome them while they are here."

“How long will the process take?” someone asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe two or three months; maybe longer. I bet White Water teams will have tons of questions once they look at our profit-and-loss statements and financial audit reports. Next week, all general managers will give me names of people who are their subject-matter experts, and they will work with White Water teams. So...” Val scanned the room, “any questions or concerns?”

“Are we going to get free lunches when the Brits are here?” someone cried.

Chuckles filled the room, and all heads whipped around to find who was daring enough to throw a joke at the always-serious Val.

“Maybe only for those who are working with their team,” she answered. “Okay, if there are no more questions, thank you for coming today, and we’ll see you again when the White Water teams are in town.”

At once, the noise of chairs being pushed across the floor was heard as people rose from their seats. The meeting room doors were opened wide as employees poured out. Before going back to work, Sylvia and I went down to grab some fresh coffee in the lunchroom.

“I overheard that the founder of White Water is a great-grandnephew of one of the dukes in England,” she said, filling a coffee cup, “and the current president is his son.”

I whistled my surprise. “A company with royal blood.”

“Yup.” Sylvia nodded and moved over so I could get some coffee too. “I’m happy with the partnership, but to be honest, I worry too.”

“Why?” I asked.

Sylvia looked down at her cup for a moment before replying. “Myriad is the third company I’ve worked for. Usually, talks of a partnership project, or whatever term management used, ended with the company being acquired by the other. But maybe I’m wrong. Maybe Myriad is different and won’t sell. So...just ignore me.”

“Our gross profit is strong this year, up twelve percent compared to last year,” I said, referencing a financial report I’d read. “I don’t think Mr. Hamilton would sell.”

Sylvia shrugged. “Remember the big fire we had last year in Northern California? It burned up most of our wine suppliers’ warehouses, and millions of dollars were lost.

Without their wine and other products, there isn't anything for us to distribute. If that's still the case, there is no more alcohol division. Wine is Myriad's most profitable product line."

"Last night, I googled about White Water and found that"—Sylvia lowered her voice—"it also owns forty-eight percent of Red Wine, Inc. Red Wine is our main competitor in the US. So, if our partnership is successful, it means White Water will have two companies in the same business line. Do you think they wouldn't merge us into one company?"

Her words made sense. All of sudden, I felt my stomach churn.

Sylvia nudged me. "Hey, don't be scared. Maybe I'm wrong," she said in a cheerful tone.

Looking at her, I bit the inside of my cheek. "Myriad is my first job. If we were let go, unlike you who has more years of experience, I'll have a hard time finding a new job. Besides, I don't think it will be easy for me to get a reference from you-know-who."

Sylvia gave me a sympathetic nod. "Stop overthinking. Christine would be happy to vouch for you. So would I."

"Thanks, I appreciate it," I said.

"My pleasure. Let's get back to work before you-know-who turns you into a frog." She made a frog sound.

I laughed until my sides ached.

Late in the afternoon, after work, I stopped at a grocery store for a rotisserie chicken, salad, and fruit. On the way back home, my phone buzzed, and Rick's name showed on the screen. Hoping for something good, I answered the call.

"Hi, Rick!" I greeted him through the speakerphone. "How are you?"

"Hey, Rory. Listen, I have good news. Are you home now?"

My heart pumped hard. *Good news!* "Not yet, but I will be in ten minutes."

"Okay, I'll wait for you," said Rick.

"See you soon." I hung up.

Rick was talking to Jose, one of the security guards, as I parked my car in front of my apartment. I'd always been amused by Rick's friendly manner because he could talk to anyone about anything, from the weather to sports to culture to food.

Still chatting away with Jose, Rick waved to me as I got out of my car. The two men parted, and Rick headed in my direction.

“For you.” He thrust a plastic bag out to me.

“What’s that?” I asked, accepting the bag from his hand. It was heavy.

“From my beautiful wife,” he winked. “She made a blueberry cheesecake this morning and gave you a quarter of it. Some oranges from her sister’s garden. And your favorite food, a tray of meatloaf.”

“Aw. She is so sweet.” My heart filled with warmth. “Now I feel rich!” I held up my bags from the grocery store.

Rick chuckled, giving me a thumb-up. Together, we walked toward my apartment.

“So, you said you have good news for me?” I asked as we arrived in my kitchen.

Rick nodded and sat on a tall chair at the kitchen bar while I took the food out of the bags and laid it out on the countertop. The smells of meatloaf and rotisserie chicken made me hungry.

“A woman named Jane Ryder called and said that she’s interested in the room. But...,” Rick stopped and gazed at me, “only for nine months or less.”

“Oh.” I lowered my head to hide my disappointment.

“Yeah. She’s here for a short-term project and will go home when it’s done,” Rick said. “But I think you should consider, because she’s willing to pay for six months’ rent upfront.”

My eyes widened as my brain made a quick calculation: *\$1,250 multiplied by six is...* “What? \$7,500 in advance? That’s a lot of money! No, nobody is willing to pay that much. It sounds too good to be true.”

“Yup, that’s what I thought.” He gave me a piece of paper.

I nibbled my lower lip while reading the phone number written on it. “Do you think she is a liar?”

Rick half shrugged. “If she hasn’t called me in two days, you’ll know the answer,” he said as he rose from his seat and walked to the front door.

"Thanks for your help, Rick. I appreciate it," I said as he turned the knob and walked through the doorway. "And thank Maggie for the food."

"Our pleasure. Good night, kiddo," he said, and closed the door behind him.

I sighed and looked at the phone number. No one was willing to pay that much. Shaking my head, I crumpled the paper and tossed it into the trash can, then headed to my room for a quick shower before dinner.

My dinner was lavish with a piece of meatloaf, rotisserie chicken, and steamed rice. Then, I had the cheesecake for dessert. A blissful sigh escaped my lips as I tapped my stomach gently. If only if I *were* rich, I would have a skillful chef like Maggie.

Later, at eight, Lizzy video-called me.

"We *adopted* a puppy!" she shrieked, turning her camera to Terry holding a mixed golden cocker spaniel in his arms. "Her name is Kiki."

"Oh my God, what a cute puppy! Hi, Kiki!" I squealed, waving my hand in front of the camera. "Aww, she is so adorable. And the eyes...My heart is melting!"

The puppy's coat was long and curly and the same color as Terry's hair. When he planted a kiss on the puppy's head, for a second, it looked like he had hair extensions.

"How could her owner have had the heart to put her in the shelter? She's so sweet!" My eyes fixed on the puppy.

"We don't know, but she has a new home now," said Terry, lifting the pup-py's paw and waving it to me. "Hi, Auntie Rory."

I chuckled and waved back to the camera.

The puppy seemed content in Terry's arms, pressing her head to his chest when Lizzy put the phone closer to her face.

"I'm so jealous because I think Kiki prefers Terry to me," said Lizzy, turning the phone back to herself.

"Don't be silly," I laughed. "Soon, she will know that you are a good mom for her."

Lizzy grinned widely, her eyes sparkling with pride. "So, any news about a roommate?" she asked.

"Rick got a call today, but I don't think it's a serious offer," I said, and told her about Jane Ryder and her promise to pay six months' rent in advance.

“Sounds too good to be true,” said Lizzy. “No one is willing to pay upfront like that.”

“That’s exactly what Rick and I thought. Oh well. Not my luck yet.” I rubbed my temple.

“Don’t give up, okay?” Lizzy comforted me. “You’ll find someone great. I believe God will help you.”

“Thanks, Lizzy.”

“Hey, why did you guys suddenly decide to get a dog?” I asked, diverting the topic. I knew she would ask me if I was fine financially, but at that moment, I wanted to forget about it.

Beaming, slightly pinkish, Lizzy explained that they wanted to have a baby soon after the wedding but were scared, so Kiki could be the best way to “practice” their parenting skills before having a real child. Terry’s eyes sparkled when he chimed in, with Kiki sleeping peacefully in his arms.

Terry and Lizzy were meant for each other. I was happy for them but also jealous of Lizzy, who had gotten a good man in Terry. I shouldn’t have been worried about that, given that my monetary issues needed to be resolved before I could even think about a serious relationship.

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