

[PLACEHOLDER COVER — final artwork to come]

LOVE, SECRETS, AND A PLATE OF SUSHI

a novel

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FREE PREVIEW · CHAPTER ONE

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— Chapter One —

CHAPTER ONE

Switzerland — mid-January

‘Watch out!’ I yell to Dan over the roar of the airplane engines. Our van performs a graceful pirouette on the snow-covered tarmac, directly towards the wheels of an approaching jumbo jet. Working at the airport was meant to be a thrill – though of a different kind.

Dan is my supervisor, determined to be everyone’s buddy rather than anyone’s boss.

He is also, reliably, a terrible driver.

I’ve learnt to anticipate the sudden braking, and the way he takes corners with the confidence of a Formula One racer. I no longer clutch the seat.

‘I’ve got this under control. Trust me,’ he shouts back.

‘Dumb idea to take the van in these conditions,’ Marcus, my co-worker and self-declared resident genius, says.

Marcus is dating Dan’s sister. That may or may not explain how he landed the job. With a usually relaxed attitude towards work, and always quick with a joke, he’s now gripping the dashboard with both hands.

‘Dan, stop the car!’ he shouts.

Zurich Airport prefers its planes right-side up – so, sensibly, they keep the runways clear of snow.

The moment our tyres hit bare tarmac, they grip and we stop abruptly.

The jumbo jet does not.

‘Get us out of here!’ Marcus yells, his voice climbing two octaves.

‘Why? You just told me to stop.’

‘Look behind you!’

And still it edges closer with the absolute indifference of something that doesn’t know we exist. If we don’t move, we’re about to receive an involuntary convertible upgrade.

Dan floors the accelerator, and we’re back on the snow, but this time, mercifully, sliding away from the plane.

‘You did pass your driving test, right?’ Marcus asks, now a fraction less pale.

I recall the airport driving test and its two golden rules: planes always have priority; stay within the lines. Both assume the lines are visible.

‘That was a thrill, huh?’ Dan says, laughing. ‘I could murder a pretzel.’

Typical Dan – we almost become a footnote in an aviation incident report, and he’s already moved on to breakfast.

* * *

‘Next time, I’m driving,’ I declare, munching on a croissant.

We’re in the passenger terminal cafeteria – our preferred refuge from the cargo zone, where Cosmo Ltd. keeps us safely out of sight. From here, our office is only five minutes away. Less in the van – assuming we avoid the vehicle ice dancing.

When not being chased by aircraft, I spend too much time watching planes lift off – usually in the brief lulls between jobs – imagining my name on a crew list instead of a customs form.

Working for an airline was the plan. This job is the compromise.

At least here, in the terminal, I can pretend I’m part of the movement, surrounded by travellers going somewhere. My airport badge gets me through doors most people walk past without ever noticing.

Two years ago, I walked away from a secure career at the postal service because I was convinced there was something better – something that actually moved. I applied to several airlines and eventually landed an interview with one of them. It went well, I thought, right up to the moment they asked me to make a mock passenger announcement in French.

My French, it turned out, had gone AWOL since my school days. The interviewer’s expression told me everything before the rejection letter even arrived.

Cargo gets me closer to the runway than the postal service ever did.

I tell myself Cosmo is a springboard. I try not to think it might be the landing.

‘The pilot would have braked anyway,’ Dan says. ‘There wasn’t any real danger.’

Right – because stopping a jumbo jet is just like tapping the brakes on a scooter. I consider voicing my thoughts, but Marcus beats me to it.

‘The pilot probably didn’t even see us from up there.’

‘Sure he did,’ Dan insists.

Then, too casually, he adds, ‘Anyway, Tom, did I mention that Rita from Head Office is coming to see you this morning?’

I run a quick audit of recent decisions. It takes longer than it should. But no, nothing Personnel should be interested in.

Head Office is barely a mile away. Yet they rarely visit unless something has gone wrong.

‘Rita? Don’t think so,’ I say. She’s been here only a few months and has already reorganised half the company.

‘Oh, it must have slipped my mind.’

‘Did she say what she wants?’

‘Something about your working hours,’ he says lightly. ‘Don’t worry. If there’s a problem, I’ll back you up.’

The fact he thinks there might be a problem is what worries me.

* * *

No sooner have we returned from our extended break than Rita storms into our office, heels striking the floor like punctuation marks.

‘Hi all,’ she says briskly, already whispering something into Marcus’ ear.

Marcus is out of his chair before she’s even finished speaking and slips from the room without question.

She leans against my desk, hands clasped in front of her – casual in posture, not in intent. ‘Listen, Tom, a few things have been brought to my attention recently.’

A few. Plural.

‘Such as?’

‘Concerns about the amount of overtime you’ve been logging.’

‘From?’

‘I’d rather not get into specifics.’

‘What kind of concerns?’

‘Well... some people feel the workload could be managed within normal hours.’

I glance at Dan. He doesn’t look back.

‘It’s for the customers. They want their shipments the moment the plane lands.’

‘I’ve spoken at length to management, and we think your team should be able to keep things under control.’

Dan studies his pen as though it contains the secrets of the universe.

‘I’m putting in those hours for the company,’ I say, trying to keep my voice level.

‘Or it might be worth looking at whether things could be done more efficiently.’

I blink at her. Pinch myself – hard. Still here. Still in this office, with this woman who has just called me *inefficient*.

‘For the moment,’ Rita continues, ‘you’ll need to reduce your overtime by fifty percent, and going forward we’ll have to be stricter about approvals.’

Fifty percent.

Just like that. As if the hours never happened.

‘And there’s also the customs incident. Next time, it would be better to consult Dan first.’

I stare at her. Consult him? The whole thing was *his* instruction. My stomach flips as I glance at Dan again – he’s still fascinated by the pen between his fingers, no eye contact with the likes of me.

‘Let’s consider this a formal warning,’ Rita says. ‘It’ll go on your record, of course. No more improvising on procedures. Is that clear?’ She sighs. ‘You know this isn’t personal, Tom. I’m just trying to make sure things run smoothly – for *everyone*.’

That last word lands with particular care.

Thank you for reading.

That's the beginning of Tom's story – but not the end of the chapter he's about to have.

Love, Secrets, and a Plate of Sushi launches soon. Stay subscribed and you'll be the first to know the moment it's available – plus a few extras along the way as publication gets closer.

— R. K. Arnold

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