



Sweet on You

A BRADFORD SISTERS ROMANCE

BECKY WADE

Author of Christy Award Book of the Year *True to You*

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To the best writer friends a girl could ask for—
Katie Ganshert, Courtney Walsh, and Dani Pettrey.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

This one's for you.

CHAPTER

One

Five hundred and eleven days had passed since he'd seen her last. Five hundred and eleven days that had been hollower and duller and at times brutally lonely for him because Britt Bradford hadn't been physically present in any of them.

Five hundred and eleven days constituted a streak that, within minutes, would finally come to an end. Because he, Zander Kingston Ford, had returned home.

He sank his hands into the pockets of his sweat shirt and walked beneath the cherry trees arching over the entrance to Merryweather Historical Village. On this morning in early April, pale pink blossoms covered the branches.

He catalogued the details of the village the way a landowner might, with proprietary intensity. He knew this village, this town, and this corner of Washington state very, very well. This place, more than anywhere else on earth, had become his home.

The landscaping around the base of the village's buildings looked fuller than it had before he'd gone, and a fresh load of gravel had been laid on the walking paths. Everything else was exactly as Zander remembered. The deep green of the lawn that all thirteen historical structures faced. The white trunks of the aspens between the buildings. The pale gray of the clouds rolling in from

the Pacific. The wooden sign hanging outside Britt's chocolate shop that spelled *Sweet Art* in black letters.

None of the stores that occupied the buildings would open for another hour. However, he knew that Britt would have arrived in her kitchen at six this morning.

In his lifetime, Zander had acquired knowledge about many things: technology, writing, adventure sports, travel, history. But he was a true expert at only one subject. The subject of Britt.

As soon as he'd awakened this morning, anticipation and apprehension had gone to war inside of him. Anticipation, because he was shamefully desperate to see her again. Apprehension, because he'd left Merryweather for several reasons a year and a half ago. But the greatest of those reasons had been her.

He was halfway across the village on his way to Sweet Art when the shop's door swung open and two women walked out. One of them was Britt. He would have recognized the natural confidence of her posture even if he'd been twice as far away. She was neither tall nor short. Simultaneously slim and strong. Perfectly proportioned.

Zander's progress cut to a halt. His breath stilled in his throat.

Britt and the other woman paused on Sweet Art's porch to talk. Britt wore her white chef's coat with exercise pants. She'd collected her dark brown hair into a knot on the top of her head just like she almost always did when making chocolate.

The women parted, and Britt turned his direction, back toward her shop. Her attention swept past him, then stopped. Lifting a hand to shield her eyes, she zeroed in on him.

His heart froze for an instant, then restarted with hard, drumming beats.

With a whoop of sound, Britt pounded down Sweet Art's steps and sprinted in his direction. The village seemed to be sound asleep, but even if it had been packed with people, she'd have run to him exactly the same way. She wasn't shy.

Joy—deep, simple joy—pulled his mouth into a grin. He opened his arms and caught her with an *oomph*. Then he spun her around in the air twice. Carefully, he set her back on her feet, steadying her

the way he always had emotionally. She hugged him tight, pressing the side of her face against his chest for several long moments.

She was in his arms. Britt was in his arms. Her silky hair whispered against the underside of his jaw. Her crisp perfume—the one she'd adopted during the two years she'd spent in France after graduating from culinary school—filled his senses with the smell of flowers, blackberry, orange, and sunshine. Greedy to catalogue every sensation, he worked to file them all away—

She broke contact and lifted her face to smile at him.

And just like that, standing in the middle of Merryweather Historical Village and looking into her face without continents separating them, the biggest part of his soul—the part that had been missing for a year and a half—locked back into place.

He loved her.

Instantly, the pleasure of that truth was cut in half by pain. Loving her was his greatest blessing. But it was also his greatest curse, because she didn't love him the way that he loved her. Zander was no stranger to loving people who didn't love him back. He ought to have adjusted to it by now, but where Britt was concerned, he never had. They were friends. Britt had always thought of him as her very good friend.

She set her palms on his shoulders. "You came back."

"I promised you I would."

She had the features of a warrior princess. Her eyebrows communicated determination. Her almond-shaped brown eyes revealed fierce creativity. Her chin broadcast independence. Her lips were full. Her nose straight and slender.

"You got taller," she accused.

"Nope. I'm still five eleven."

"Then I must have gotten shorter."

"You're exactly the same."

She appeared gratified by his statement. "You look tired."

"That's because I am. You look well rested."

"That's because I am. Your hair's longer than usual."

"I know. It's bugging me."

Britt tilted her head, peering at him closely. “I’d sort of forgotten about the pinpricks of light blue in your eyes.”

“I’d sort of forgotten that you have a few tiny freckles on your cheekbones.”

“You forgot about my freckles?”

“I admit that I did.”

“I’m scandalized,” she said. “Have you lost weight?”

“Maybe a couple of pounds.”

“Did I gain weight?”

“Definitely not.”

“That’s what you’d say even if I *had* gained weight.”

“Yes,” he acknowledged. “Because I’m no dummy.”

Her pale pink lips ticked upward at one edge. “You’ve been gone a really long time, Zander.”

“I know.”

“And you were very far away.”

He gave a nod.

“I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” The words felt stupidly small. Like calling Mount Rainier a hill. Until he’d left her behind, he’d had no idea he could be as desolate as he’d been without her.

She stepped back and set her hands on her hips. “It’s . . . sort of . . . scrambling my brain to see you again.”

“Yeah.” After such a long time, it was surreal to be here. With her. The last eighteen months had changed him, but he selfishly hoped that they’d changed nothing about her. While he’d been gone, she’d been going about her small-town routine, the same small-town routine she’d been going about for years. Which is why he’d been able to convince himself that he wasn’t missing anything in her life that he couldn’t bear to miss.

“I was expecting you to sleep until noon today,” she told him.

“I should have.” He’d only been able to string together four hours of sleep after reaching the Inn at Bradfordwood, the bed-and-breakfast Britt’s mom owned, in the middle of last night.

“What happened? Couldn’t stay asleep?”

“Nope.” *Because I couldn’t wait to see you.* “Jet lag bites.”

“How long did it end up taking you to get here from Tokyo?”

“The trip from Tokyo to Honolulu and from Honolulu to Vancouver took twenty-eight hours. Then I rented a car and drove the rest of the way.”

“Brutal.” Britt linked her arm through his, and they walked in the direction of Sweet Art. “I’m glad you’re home, but I’m sorry that it’s for such a sad reason.”

“I am, too.” Three days ago, his aunt Carolyn had called him in Japan to tell him that her husband, Frank, had died suddenly. The news had gut punched him. Uncle Frank had been like a father to him for well over a decade.

Even as Zander had hunted for available flights to Washington, the ruling thought in his head had been, *This can’t be right. Frank can’t be dead.* His subconscious was determined to pick a fight with reality.

The reality: Uncle Frank had been hardworking, reliable, humorous, and devoted to his wife, twin daughters, and two nephews. Uncle Frank had also been found dead in the driver’s seat of his truck this past Saturday, apparently killed by a heart attack.

“How’s Carolyn doing?” Britt asked.

“As well as can be expected.”

“And you?”

“Okay.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” he said. “How’ve you been?”

“Fine.”

“You haven’t gotten yourself into trouble lately?”

“Not lately.”

“You’ve been behaving?” A note of disbelief marked his question.

“I didn’t say I’d been behaving.” She shot him a wry glance. “I simply said I hadn’t gotten myself into trouble *lately*.”

“Ah. Dating anyone?” *Please, God, let the answer be no.*

“Not at the moment.”

They'd kept in regular contact with each other through texts and FaceTime calls, but he'd purposely avoided asking about her boyfriends, because he hadn't wanted to know.

"I was dating this guy named Anthony, but we broke up three months ago."

"You've been single for three whole months?" The average interval between Britt's boyfriends: 2.5 seconds.

"I know! I'm proud of myself."

"What happened with Anthony?"

"He was an interrupter. I could never finish my sentence."

He held Sweet Art's back door open so she could pass first, then entered the kitchen that occupied the rear of her shop's square footage. Here, the rich scents of chocolate and coffee hung in the air. Walls of white subway tile gave way to counters of stainless steel. Open shelves held ingredients as well as turquoise, gray, and white mixing bowls.

Britt waved him toward one of the stools that framed her large central island. "Sit."

"I can help—"

"You're jet-lagged and sleep-deprived. Sit."

Zander did so while she moved around the room, cleaning her work space and updating him on her family. Her older sister Nora was busy planning her wedding, which would take place in six weeks. Her oldest sister, Willow, had married last summer and was living with her husband in nearby Shore Pine. Her parents were finishing a two-year stint in Africa as missionaries.

Kitchen clean, Britt washed her hands, then grabbed a small plate off a shelf. "Hang on a sec." She vanished through the swinging door into her shop and returned carrying four chocolates on the plate. She stood at the kitchen's side counter for a moment, studying the white Easter-egg-shaped chocolates assembled there, no doubt debating whether to add one to his plate.

Even when still and quiet, Britt *radiated* energy. He could feel the life in her, the suppressed movement.

She added an Easter egg to the assortment and set the plate before him.

He studied the chocolates. “What do we have here?”

“You tell me.”

He shouldered out of his sweat shirt like a boxer shrugging out of his robe before a fight.

Britt laughed. “It’s so nice to feed someone who has a sophisticated palate for chocolate. Finally!”

“No one around here cultivated a sophisticated palate while I was away?”

“No. They’re all still novices. You’re the only one who’s ever taken advantage of my excellent coaching.”

He picked up a hand-dipped dark chocolate. He’d taken advantage of her coaching, but not only that. He’d also read numerous books on the subject of chocolate.

“I knew you’d choose that one first,” she said smugly.

Dark chocolate with nuts had long been his favorite combination. He let the chocolate soften in his mouth, then chewed slowly. He’d thought he’d stored the taste of her chocolate successfully in his brain. Now that he was tasting it again, he realized that . . . no. His memory hadn’t done it justice.

Crossing her arms, she leaned her hip against the island and waited for him to make a guess.

For her dark chocolates, he knew that she used either seventy-two percent extra-bittersweet, sixty-four percent bittersweet, or fifty-five percent semisweet. For her lighter, sweeter chocolates she used thirty-eight percent milk chocolate or twenty-nine percent white chocolate. “Sixty-four percent bittersweet chocolate with macadamia nuts and Grand Marnier,” he said.

“It’s rum, not Grand Marnier.”

“You’re not going to give me credit?”

Britt shook her head. “I would have given you credit if you’d stopped after macadamia nuts. You were trying to show off when you said Grand Marnier. Pride was your downfall.” Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

“I can do better.”

“Prove it.” She handed him a napkin and a glass of ice water.

He sipped the water, as she’d taught him to do between chocolates, then ate a truffle. “Seventy-two percent extra-bittersweet chocolate dipped in white chocolate and rolled in pumpkin pie spice.”

“Yes!”

He lifted his eyebrows to gloat. “I nailed that one.”

“You did,” she agreed. “Even though you couldn’t resist showing off again by noting the pumpkin pie spice.”

“Yeah, but this time I was certain. I’ve been gone a long time, but I’m still a chocolate savant.”

“You may still be a chocolate *sous* savant—”

“Not all of us can be master chocolatiers.”

“—*if* you can nail at least two of the remaining three chocolates.”

“I thrive under pressure.”

“And I thrive at humbling those whose taste buds have deteriorated during their international travels.”

“You’re about to eat those words.” He’d sought out chocolate in every country he’d visited. He’d sampled it, sent Britt pictures of it, and mailed the best of it back to Washington for her to try. If he screwed this up, it wouldn’t be because he didn’t know chocolate. It would be because he was too distracted by Britt, who was wearing purple tennis shoes, who’d painted her short fingernails gray, whose name was stitched onto her chef’s coat in cursive.

He ate a dome-shaped molded chocolate.

For years, he’d been praying that Britt would fall in love with him or that he’d fall out of love with her. God hadn’t answered either prayer. So when he’d left on his trip, he’d hoped the passage of time might change his heart. However, Zander’s love for her had proven stronger than his own willpower.

Than distance.

Than time.

He wanted to be far more to Britt than her friend. But if he told

her that, she'd react with pity and probably misery on his behalf. The admission would crack the rare dynamic they shared, and then they'd be forced to pretend the crack didn't exist.

He wasn't willing to do or say anything that might put their friendship at risk. Because even though their friendship was torture for him at times, it was also the best thing in his life.

Britt couldn't get over her tugging, tingling sense of awe.

Zander was in her kitchen. Zander!

Her Zander.

To have him here felt both strange and familiar. Very familiar. Very strange.

"Thirty-eight percent milk chocolate with hazelnuts and cinnamon," he said.

"Right again."

She'd met him just days after they'd both started their freshman year at Merryweather High School. Back then, Zander had been as thin and defiant and mistrusting as a wounded animal.

His early life with his parents in a rough St. Louis neighborhood had never been a cakewalk. But things had begun to unravel beyond repair the year Zander was twelve, when his dad had gone to prison. Zander and his older brother, Daniel, had spent the next two years with their drug-addicted mom until the day their home and their "normal" had literally gone up in flames. It had taken Britt ages to pry the story of that day out of Zander.

Before the smoke had cleared, CPS had removed the boys from their mom's care. Their custody had gone to their mom's sister, Carolyn Pierce, and her husband, Frank. Zander had been carted to Washington, world-weary and withdrawn.

He'd made Britt work hard to earn his friendship, but almost nothing else she'd done had proven as worthwhile.

She watched him eat the puffed rice chocolate.

The fourteen-year-old boy she'd once known was long gone. He'd been replaced with this worldly, adult Zander, who was a roaring success and had nothing left to prove.

Earlier, when she'd been standing on Sweet Art's porch, a clang had gone through her when she'd recognized the lean lines of his body, his dark hair, his introspective loner aura.

To her relief, Zander looked very much the same. His pale skin struck a distinct contrast with his hair, which verged on black. His jaw, cheekbones, and nose were all sharply defined. Straight eyebrows. Thick eyelashes. Zander had a romantic, slightly heart-breaking, usually serious face. He could pass as either a nineteenth-century poet or one of those harshly handsome vampires from *Twilight*.

He was wearing clothes she remembered him wearing before he'd left—a gray T-shirt that said *Atari* across the front and his favorite pair of jeans. He hadn't added to the sleeves of tattoos running down his arms.

Her intuition told her that something within him *had* altered, though. He'd traveled the globe alone for a year and a half. Anyone who'd experienced something like that would return home changed. Matured. More self-reliant. She shouldn't be surprised and she shouldn't mourn because he wasn't precisely as he had been when he'd left.

Nor should she worry about the caution she could see in his ocean blue eyes. Given time, she'd be able to coax him to lower his shields.

For today, it was enough that *he* believed *her* to be exactly the same. That's what he'd said when they'd been standing on the green. "*You're exactly the same,*" he'd told her, even though she wasn't. Since he'd seen her last, she'd been scarred in ways he knew nothing about. Thank the Lord he hadn't been able to tell.

"Thirty-eight percent milk chocolate," he said, "with puffed rice, pecans, pistachios, and candied orange peel."

"Nope. Puffed rice, *almonds*, pistachios, and candied orange peel."

"Shoot. Now I have to get this Easter egg right, because I'm determined to retain the level of chocolate sous savant." He popped it into his mouth. His eyes narrowed on her as he swallowed.

“Twenty-nine percent white chocolate shell with a salted caramel ganache center.”

“The Easter egg was too easy.”

“It was nice of you to tee that one up for me.”

“It truly was. I’m surprised by my own generosity.”

“Every one of those chocolates was delicious, Britt.”

“Thank you.” She set his plate in the sink. “Coffee?”

“Please.”

“Still drinking café au lait?”

“Yep.” He followed her into Sweet Art’s retail space. “Still drinking cappuccino?”

“Yep.” She went to the espresso machine. “This is the first time you’ve been back in the States since your book released. Did you see it in the airport in Vancouver?”

“I did, actually.”

“It’s everywhere. Wal-Mart, Target, the grocery store. Every time I spot it, I want to grab it off the shelf and shove it at all the strangers in the store. I’m ridiculously proud of it, even though I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“You did have something to do with it.” He hooked his thumbs around his belt loops, a habit he’d long had. “When I told you I was thinking about writing a book, you’re the one who convinced me I could. When I was working on the rough draft, you talked me out of quitting at least five times.”

“Because you’re my friend, but also because I knew the book was going to be a success. I was right.”

A lone dimple sunk into his cheek. “Do you know of any stocks destined for success?”

“You’re not going to need to invest in stocks. You’re going to earn plenty of money and then some through your writing career.”

Three years earlier, Zander had begun writing a thriller aptly titled *Geniuses*, about a genius enlisted by the FBI to outsmart and catch an evil genius. It was dark, smart, and filled with twists. A handful of publishers had entered a bidding war over the manuscript,

which had then been heavily backed by the winning publisher. The advance Zander received had enabled him to quit the tech job he'd had here in Merryweather, pack his laptop into his carry-on, and write while traveling abroad.

Geniuses had released nine months ago and raced to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, where it still sat.

Britt plucked two mugs from the cupboard. When he leaned over and closed the cupboard for her, she swallowed a rush of affection because his compulsion to close doors and drawers was another of his old habits.

They sat at the bar that ran the length of one wall, contentment warming her like a sunrise. She liked feeding chocolate and coffee to strangers. But she *loved* feeding chocolate and coffee to Zander. Especially now, when he needed comfort in the wake of his uncle's death.

She blew on her cappuccino. She had a large family and a wide network of friends. Zander had only his brother, Frank, Carolyn, and herself. When Frank had died, Zander had lost one of his inner four, and she'd do just about anything she could to help him. "Nikki heard that Frank left work Friday afternoon and wasn't seen again until he was discovered in his truck the next morning."

"Right. Carolyn thinks he must have had the heart attack on his way home from work on Friday."

"Why wasn't he found until the next day?"

Zander hefted one shoulder. "He parked his truck perfectly on the side of the road. It wasn't until the next day that someone got suspicious and called it in."

"He was found on Shadow Mountain Road?"

"He was."

"Which isn't on his way home."

"No, it isn't. Carolyn's best guess is that he was running an errand when he had the heart attack."

"Poor Frank," Britt said. "Poor Carolyn."

"The suddenness of Frank's death is bad enough, but the fact that Carolyn wasn't with him at the end makes it even worse."

“Friday night must have been terrible for her.”

“It was. She was up all night panicking, trying to reach him on his cell phone.”

“That’s awful.”

“I’m going to the police station with her in the morning. They’ll give us the preliminary autopsy report then.”



Zander’s journal entry, four years ago:

Britt’s the closest person to me, yet we’re not close enough. “Not close enough” is starting to feel like a chain. It’s keeping me inside a room when I know there are mountains and oceans outside the room. I can’t get to them, though.

I’m chained up.

I know Britt, but I don’t know what it’s like to kiss her. I don’t know what it’s like to honestly tell her how I feel.

I’m chained up.