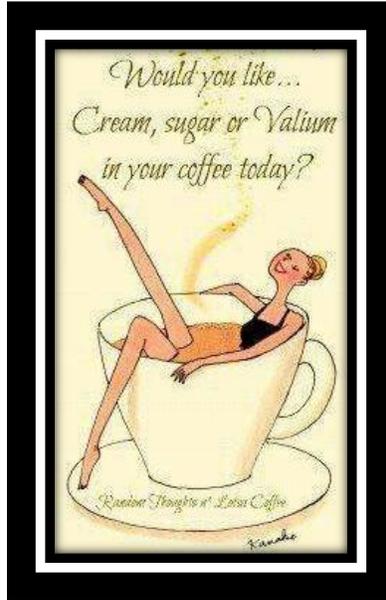


CHAPTER Seventeen

(Part 1)

**“Would you like . . .
Cream, sugar or Valium in your coffee today?”**



Sunday, December 21st, 2014

5:30 A.M.

Cup of Hotness Café – Apartment Bedroom

ONE foot in each hemisphere, Saffire felt like she was standing at the top of the world, looking down on all her transgressions, laid out like a road map of her life. With quietly judging family members all around her, she squeezed her eyes shut against their scrutiny wondering why when she opened them they had disappeared . . . replaced with the shadowy figure of Uncle Ryu, flanked on either side by Junsu and JaeJoong, both content, both smiling.

Shouting, “Go away!” she kicked the covers around the bottom of the bedroll half-asleep, half-awake unconsciously remembering Saffron creeping around her lifeless form at some time, to open the window letting in cold air against the smothering hot room.

“I love you Saffire. I thought you loved me too . . .” Stepping hopelessly toward Junsu, she watched as each of her sins dissipated in a cloud about her. Facing him directly, she could only analyze his wretched, questioning expression, reaching out one tentative finger to wipe a tear from his clear brown eye.

It was so cold! Did being at the top of the world mean she was standing in the polar ice caps? There was no ice underfoot. No blowing snow. Was she dead? Was that why she was freezing? Was that why Uncle was here? Was he taking her to Heaven? Was this her chance to say good-bye to love, and the two men holding her heart captive?

“NO. Don’t wanna die! Too young.” More mumbling aloud in her sleep, was causing sister Saffron to toss and turn beside her as well.

Like slivers through the icy air, flashes of lightening crackled overhead, the distant roll of thunder echoing in the background, followed by the kind yet stern voice of Young Jae Ryu. “Not dying Fire. Just purging your heart. Don’t let go of the wrong love.”

Without warning, Junsu disappeared from view, leaving a grinning JaeJoong, arms outstretched in anticipation of her acceptance. “Saranghae (I LOVE YOU) Saffire.”

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WHERE had everyone gone? Her family, Uncle Ryu? Junsu? And, especially JJ? Dear God he was confessing. And, why was the light on her phone going off at such an ungodly hour? It was still dark. It felt like she’d barely even slept. Oh damn. The work alarm she’d inadvertently forgotten to reset before heading out to JeJu. Beside her Saffron snored quietly, arms flung out to both sides, bits of hair stuck to the corners of her mouth as she slept. Clearly, she was oblivious to the blinking light. Probably dreaming about fucking ‘Baek Seung Jo’.

Squinting into the screen she turned off the phone, curling up in a ball to stave off the chilly air, groaning back into the belly of her pillow, as she reached unsuccessfully for the heavy quilt at the bottom of the bed. *Is there no freaking heat in this entire damn apartment?* It was time to stop sleeping buck naked like she did back home in L.A. with windows open, and the warm ocean breeze on her back. This was just torture.

* * * * *

1:00 P.M.

Uncle's Dining Room

TWO girls, one goal . . . to find out and accept their destiny. How could something that sounded so easy, be so hard? Thrown together by fate, now it seemed fate was about to take over again. The tiny, cold upstairs dining room was scattered with boxes, paperwork, photo albums, and . . . of course . . . the memories of the man who had made it all possible. Uncle, Young Jae Ryu. Undeniably, the feeling of his presence was everywhere. Hidden amongst the hearts of Saffire and Saffron but, most importantly, revealed in the whirlwind of discoveries they had uncovered in their search for answers.

Young Jae had been a private man. His past, his career, even his café screamed secluded, secretive and oft times unattainable to the outside world. He hadn't intended it to be that way, it just 'happened'. One day he woke up to the fact that he had influenced many lives in his own lifetime, and the secrets he harbored would do nothing but bring pain and heartache to those he loved.

* * * * *

I*t was way past noon, uncle Ryu paced the back wall of the dining room, arms behind his back nervously. What had ever possessed the girls to seek out his 'hidden' papers? A man didn't hide important information without a reason. These were not for everyone's eyes. Even a spirit had rights. If he'd had prior warning to his imminent death he would've secured them better, but . . . aishhh, death came in its own time.*

Why could he have not been given the 'Heaven' card and moved past all this? Was it possible he was actually quivering nervously? This wasn't the first time he'd wondered if emotions were a part of the spiritual world.

Peeking over the shoulder of first one young, pre-occupied café owner, and then the other, he itched to attempt a little spiritual 'magic' of sorts. Throw a box to the floor, swoosh some papers around. Scare the crap out of them like he had in the street their first night in Gangnam. Maybe if he thought about it hard enough, he could summon the cat to assist.

Nooo, they hated his orphaned, wayward friend. The poor darling would be cut and quartered before she knew what hit her. Best leave her out of it. Possibly a little verbal warning? Now, that never hurt.

“This isn’t going to help. The answers aren’t here. Do you REALLY need to know? Can’t you just leave it alone?” A feathery stomp to the floor only brought up a cloud of spiritual dust that neither of them bothered to notice.

“SHOO! Damn fly. There it is again.” Feeling the light tickle of wings, Saffire flapped one hand across her ear. “How in the hell did a fly get in here in the middle of winter?”

Glancing up from her bent over position at the table, Saffron chuckled. Did the sister from ‘flyless’ California not realize where she was? “Come onnn, this is Korea dummy. Open windows everywhere. Doesn’t matter what time of year it is. Now, concentrate, I asked you a question. You’re so distracted.”

“Sorry.” The familiar buzzing of Saffire’s cell, shoved deep into the recesses of her pocket reminded her that JJ wasn’t giving up. He was relentless, and she . . . ill-equipped to talk. Right now, this was more important. “What was it again?”

Saffron sniffed, swinging her red hair from side-to-side in conjunction with her unbelieving head. *Whatever was consuming Saffire, it had to be about JJ or Junsu. She’d been all over the place since getting up.*

“I SAID . . . Can you believe Uncle Ryu hid all this away? And, to find it in, of all places, the back of the wardrobe. There could be something really important in here.” Her hands smoothing out a wrinkled newspaper article, yellow with age, she studied it carefully. Even though the café ended up being a quiet, out of the way sanctuary for Idols, it had gotten some major press the day it opened. Her heart skipping a beat, she pointed at the two tiny girls in the photo. “Look, its opening day at the café. Unless I’m blind, that’s us there. Both of us.”

Scratching her shoulder blade it was hard to imagine the tall, buxom, blonde beside her had literally ‘held’ her hand twenty some years ago, standing absurdly still for a local photographer. Muttering quietly, “Damn. I guess we didn’t know him like we thought, huh?” she shivered in the chilly room, wishing there were more answers and less questions.

“I dunno. We knew as much as he wanted us to, I guess.” Still grumbling about the random fly, Saffire hated she’d opened this can of worms just by stuffing JaeBear to the very back of the wardrobe, unable to figure out what was keeping the spacious closet from being able to hold his entire body.

“Maybe so but, obviously he knew we were sisters . . . and never told us.” Her voice small, Saffron fingered the article unable to believe that the Uncle she loved so deeply would harbor such a massive family secret from the two of them.

“Everyone has them. Secrets I mean. No matter what we think, I’m sure he had his reasons.” Staring into the faded newspaper Saffire’s memory of Mother’s musical talent unwillingly surged to the surface. “Talk about secrets. You saw the violin this morning right?” she asked.

“Yeah, I did. I wondered where it came from. Did Father finally bring it with him like he promised?”

Saffron ‘had’ noticed the rugged case lying propped up against the end of the tattered sofa cushion before heading to the bathroom earlier that morning. She was glad Saffire had gotten it. Maybe now she’d calm down a little bit.

Shaking her head in disgust at her Father’s inconsistent, and uncaring attitude, Saffire barked, “HELL NO. Believe it or not, it was Mother’s. Bet you didn’t even know she played huh?”

Astonished at the news, her sister’s head shot up. “What? Mother’s?” *Of all things, ‘Cruella’ had a soft side?* “No, I honestly didn’t,” was her quiet response, “that’s sort of disturbing don’t you think?”

“Yeah. Highly.” Trying to wrap her head around and understand herself, what else might be disclosed today, the phone in Saffire’s pocket vibrated insistently, again. *Did she dare? Maybe just a short conversation to keep him at bay another couple of hours.*

Giving in (against her better judgement), she pulled it out, turning away from a suddenly, attentive Saffron. “Hold on. I need to get this . . . JJ, anneyong.”



“Aishhh, Princess. I’ve been trying to get you since last night. You’re avoiding me, huh? Doesn’t matter, at least you answered. You know we REALLY need to talk. Are you free right now?” The voice on the other end quiet but urgent, was indication

enough that Kim JaeJoong had probably learned his lesson, and was ready to make things right between them.

If there was a gauge for sigh levels, Saffire's would've been off the charts. Knowing this had been a possibility when she answered, now Uncle's personal business (no matter how distracting or disturbing) would have to take precedence over her impending love life.

"Sorry Jae, I'm really not. But, I agree. We DO have a lot to talk about." Uncertainty over the early morning dream evident in her voice, she bit down on one nail, continuing in a whisper so Saffron couldn't hear. "And, about last night . . . please understand . . . I ummm, I really needed some time to calm down and process."

Stepping out of hearing range, she studied the dusty corner of the doorway, spying a bright pink M&M wedged under the baseboard. Her emotions careening wildly around in her head, she smiled, holding back a snicker at the memory of the 'cotton candy date'. If all 'signs' read true . . . she did indeed love this man.

Suddenly, wanting to throw caution to the wind and just tell him, she glanced back over her shoulder at Saffron's confused expression, her voice softening instead. "I'm in the middle of some serious family business right now. But, I promise . . . I'll call you tonight after we get this situation here all sorted out."

Taking her by surprise, his immediate response was enthusiastic and full of hope. "Arasseo love. And I do . . . understand. But, don't forget. 'Cause if you do, I'm coming over. You can count on it."

"I won't. I promise." Excited to hear him take the lead and boldly declare his intentions to get to her (no matter what), she smiled broader.

"Tell me you're okay at least. You got home without any trouble?"

"I did, and you know what? I think I am . . . okay." Nodding to Saffron she knew it was time to say goodbye. *He would be fine. She would see to it.* "We'll talk later. Bye-bye."

Bending to pick up the M&M, she rolled it in her hand slowly, finally tossing it into the trash can announcing to Saffron loudly, "Time to get back to this shit. How about you take that box over there and I'll go through the photo album."

“Whoah, whoah, whoah. Hold the phone.” One hand in the air Saffron dropped the newspaper article she’d been reading, her brows furrowed. “What the hell was that? I tried not to bring it up but, you’ve been really HAPPY so far today, considering how you left Hyun Joong’s room and JeJu yesterday. You didn’t even get pissed when I told you about your stupid white dress getting ruined in my suitcase.” Determination in her clear, strong voice she dropped cross-legged to the floor, waiting patiently for Saffire to give her something to go on. “I’m not doing another thing until you tell me what’s up.”

“Oh geez Saffron. Too many questions. What’s wrong with being happy? And, do you have to know every little detail? Don’t just quit. Get the fuck up.” Claiming her sister’s thin arm she dragged her back up to the table. “Can’t we talk and work at the same time? There’s like a shit ton of stuff here to still go through.”

Did she really want to get into the particulars of her little lovesick breakdown last night? Her proof being the poor tattered and destroyed JaeBear who had ultimately landed in the bottom of the wardrobe cabinet. Or even the random dream that had claimed her sleep so early this morning? It was all still so fresh, even to her.

What was sister really fishing for? Verbal confirmation of her decision to give JJ another chance? Or, to give in and let Junsu off the hook? Surely, she had her own issues with Hyun Joong. She hadn’t stopped humming merrily, smiling or texting either, since they’d met for breakfast at 10:00 A.M. That could only mean one thing . . . in the ‘Baek Seung Jo’ camp, they were still screwing, still happy and still headed into a relationship. In her case (until she got out of her head and into the present), everything was hanging in the balance.

“Listen, all you need to know is that I’ve made a decision between Junsu and JJ, and I’m sticking to it.”

Grabbing her by the shoulders, Saffron’s eyes bulged with delight. *It was about freaking time.* Anxious to hear, she was fairly certain she already knew the outcome. “Sooo? Who’s the lucky one?”

Gulping noticeably, Saffire toyed with the hem of her T-shirt. *This was where the rubber met the road. Once she released the words into the air, she couldn’t take them back. Maybe after this, the sister who’d consistently called her a ‘slut’ (among other things) would ease up a bit.*

“It’s JJ. I’m ummm, I’m in love with JJ. I suppose I just didn’t want to admit it after what happened yesterday in JeJu.”

“I knew it! I FUCKING KNEW IT. I knew you’d come to your senses.” Throwing both arms around her shoulders Saffron jumped up and down, (wishing the girl could act at least a little more enthusiastic). “So, what’s wrong then? You don’t seem like . . . overly thrilled. No matter what was said before, you know, about Junsu and stuff. JJ is AMAZING. The two of you really are perfect together. Junsu’s a little stuffy for my taste.”

Stepping back, she studied her sister’s somber face, knowing on the heels of choosing JJ would come the disappointment of breaking Junsu’s heart. “Heyyy, never mind. I get it. But, you DO know, Junsu’s a grown man. He came into this triangle thing, eyes wide open (among other things . . .). He’ll get over it. Anyway, it’s better for everybody that you made up your mind.”

Another hug, found them finally on common relational ground. Smiling, Saffron cupped Saffire’s cool cheeks. “SO, YES! Let’s BOTH be happy for a change. I have news too. My news is . . . Hyun Joong wants to date. How ‘bout that?”

Wriggling out of her grasp, Saffire groaned teasingly, “Aghhh, I’m not surprised. You’ve been grinning an awful lot too. You even drank f’ng tea this morning instead of coffee. What the hell does that say?” Pushing at her playfully she returned to the table, pouring over the piles laid out neatly before them, adding nonchalantly, “So, what was in the package you got earlier? Was it from him?”

Not waiting for a response she kept rattling on, staring into the picture of a woman who was the spitting image of her red-headed, freckle-faced sister. “Of course it was. Who else would be sending you presents first thing this morning? Surely not Ian. He’s probably back in the arms of ‘what’s-her-name’. So, what was it? More cookbooks? Hah!”

Flipping her head, she raised the photo to Saffron’s face, examining the similarities closely. “Damnnn. Lookee here, you got another twin.”

Shoving her hand away, Saffron snatched the photo, meeting the eyes of a young woman with long, curly, red hair snickering, “Lemme see that and geez, slow down, one thing at a time. It was a box of DVD’s. And yes, Joong sent them to me. You know, for being sort of laid back, you’re so scattered sometimes, and you talk really fast. How do you ever focus to play an instrument?”

“I dunno. Raw talent I guess. Does it matter?” Flipping through another stack of photos, Saffire chuckled inwardly at the thought of Hyun Joong’s gift choices. First, a cook book and now DVD’s? He was a strange one. It seemed absurd of a man growing up in an age of ‘YouTube’, and ‘Netflix’, (among others). Clearly, he wasn’t thinking straight.

“He sent you DVD’s? Of what? That’s sort of a dumb present don’tcha think? Nobody watches them anymore. We don’t even own a DVD player. Does this mean he’s sending one of those later?” Her curiosity peaked, Saffire returned to the table, dropping the photos to turn the pages of a large picture album instead.

“Nooo, and NOT that it’s any of your business, but, they’re of his variety shows and movies.” Saffron winced. *Why did she have to be sassy and condescending all of a sudden? After all, it wasn’t the fact they were DVD’s, it was the time and consideration he’d taken to even ‘think’ she would enjoy watching them. It had been an unexpected, sweet gesture.*

“Whaaattt? Seriously? You can see all that online. Whatever.” Picking up another photo Saffire turned, her grin genuine. “At least he’s thoughtful. Way to go ‘Seung Jo’. Fighting! By this time next year maybe you’ll have found a way to watch them. Hope you’re still dating.”

“Oh, I will. You can BET on that. And we WILL still be dating. You can BET on that too.” Giving up on the conversation going nowhere, Saffron concentrated on the red-headed woman in the photo, squinting to see her better. “Who is this anyway? Does she have a name?” Turning it over, the back read, ‘Saffron Kroes -1910’. “Shit, you’re right. Not only do I look exactly like her, I’m obviously named after her too. ”

Re-focused to the job at hand, her fingers quivered nervously (feeling like someone had just walked over her grave), laying the picture back on the table with the rest she asked, “Have you heard from Mother yet today?”

“Nooo. I’ve been with you all day. Should I have?” Flipping page after page, Saffire ruffled through the book quickly, “Didn’t she go home?”

“I don’t think so. She made it seem like she and Father were going to stay on until after Christmas.”

“JESUS! What the hell for?” Saffire cracked both palms on the table loudly, uncertain why she thought after her little ‘one-on-one’ with the reformed Sandra that this would come as a surprise.

“How the hell should I know? Damn. Relax. Nobody said they were going to spend it here.”

“Nice try Saffron. How stupid are you? Didn’t you learn anything at dinner the other night?” Saffire’s face crinkled in frustration.

Reaching for her sister’s chin, Saffron stared into her eyes intently, “Of course I did, and stop calling me names. I’m NOT now, nor have I ever been . . . STUPID.”

Back to the comfortable way they bantered with each other the girls squared off, looking like a couple of fighters about to duke it out in the ring.



“Okay, okay. I NEVER said you were. I only asked, ‘HOW stupid ARE you?’ Not, ‘You ARE stupid’. Big difference.” Sticking her tongue out girlishly, Saffire grinned. “We both know for a corporate gal, you tend to overlook the obvious. A lot. Especially, where Mother and Father are concerned. My bet is they aren’t staying in Korea for any reason other than to play pretend family, or see what we’re up to. I know it, and so should you. I don’t want them here anymore than you do. By the way, speaking of ‘Mother’, did she by any chance tell you something important when you talked yesterday?”

Now fishing for information about whether Sandra had opened up to her about the two of them being separated and why, she wondered (if indeed she had) how come her happy, perky sister didn’t bother to mention it sooner.

Dropping her hands Saffron stepped back sighing. “Wellll, yesss . . . but, before my feet even touched the tarmac she’d shoved her phone into my face asking why some women was bitch-slapping me. I was thinking, ‘GREAT’ now she’s going to hound me some more about leaving Korea . . . so I told her the truth. You know Saffire, I’m so tired of being secretive, about everything. Ian, the breakup, Hyun Joong and of course . . . the slut of the hour, Chung A.”



Secrets . . . they resulted in this . . . this very thing she and Saffire were dealing with in the dining room right now. She didn’t want that in her life moving forward. Standing her ground,

she turned away, her own curiosities about Mother resurfacing. “You’ll never guess what she told me after that?”

“Hmmm. To follow your heart?” Uncle’s words tumbled through Saffire’s psyche all over again. *‘Follow the music in your heart Fire . . .’* How could Mother not have felt the same, despite her frosty, aloof exterior?

“Yeah, how did you know? It was a real shocker. That island must have some kind of voodoo . . . ‘cause I’m convinced it’s changed Mother somehow.”

Saffire listened carefully. “Does that mean she finally filled you in about how and why we were separated?” *This was what she was after. If so, that meant they were one step closer to getting this mystery solved.*

“Yeah. As a matter of fact she did. I wasn’t sure exactly when to bring it up. It’s sort of been a sensitive subject between us.” Eyes to the floor, for Saffron, it was an easy rewind bringing to mind Mother’s carefully chosen words. *As far as she was concerned it didn’t change things much for her, but what about her recently discovered twin sister?* “I guess that means you already know too. Was that all part of the ‘gifting’ of the violin?”

“Uh huh. Sure was.” Hesitation evident in her voice, Saffire remembered her snippy come-back and lack of sincerity upon initially hearing the news. “I just don’t know why she couldn’t have told us together. It seemed sort of calculating.”

“Mmmm. Yep. That’s Mother. Calculating. Not sure why the choice to do it separately either. But, now that it’s out in the open, what do you think about her ‘explanation’?”

“Honestly . . .” Saffire scanned the small room, cluttered with Uncle’s personal memorabilia. *How DID she really feel? Betrayed? Relieved? Disappointed?* Her eyes resting on the photo album she scoffed. “Humph, I wasn’t too happy with it. Sounded like a bunch of excuses to me. I think she’s hiding something. Why else would we be up here rummaging through Uncle’s boxes and personal crap. It sort of reeks of a bad Korean Drama, don’t you think?”

“You know, that’s exactly what I thought.” Saffron had to agree. “Maybe the answers do lie in all this CRAP, you so delicately put it.”

Stepping back up directly in her face, Saffire quirked her mouth questionably, “I DO think you’re right about JeJu ‘island voodoo’. Whether she sent soft and gave up her violin or not,

she's just acting fucking weird if you ask me. And, Daddy . . . well, he's lost his ever-loving mind too. Definitely didn't see him going along with bringing 'douche bag' Ian here to talk you into going back to the States."

Stomping her feet on the wooden floor, she urged the blood back through her nearly frozen toes, convinced enough had been said about the subject. "I'm freezing. Why don't we break for lunch and go downstairs. Warm up, get some hot cocoa and a sandwich or something. All this isn't going anywhere. Not sure what possessed me to want to reminisce up here in the polar ice caps anyway."

Why 'was' this room so damn cold all the time? She'd opened the one tiny heating vent early this afternoon before they'd even started bringing everything in here, and now nearly two hours later, it still didn't feel like the heat had come on. Was the vent just for show? Even leaving the newly found secret door open to the apartment wasn't helping. With everything already closed, they should've just spread out in the lunch room. At least it was warm.

"Yeahhh, I was wondering that myself but, too late now." Shivering herself, Saffron rubbed her arms prickled with goosebumps. "Pffft, you and your romantic notions . . . Saw the secret door, and suddenly you're some sort of heroine acting out a scene from your favorite novel. Gonna give us pneumonia in the process." Heading back through the opening, she added over her shoulder, "Not sure why I thought one extremely dramatic night at JeJu with the folks would change them into, 'Parents-of-the-Year'. Once a bad parent, always a bad parent. I'm game for a sandwich and cocoa. Come on."

* * * * *

 # so sad . . . Saffron's words rang loudly through the air around uncle Ryu's transparent head. "Once a bad parent, always a bad parent." If they only knew. Sandra and Kyong had never intended to be 'bad' parents. Life just got in the way. Situations arose, taking matters out of their hands. Sandra loved her daughters more than anything, no matter how she came off.

Floating around the deserted table, his eyes shot down to the few photos that had been left scattered across the top in random piles. Old, distant relatives huddled together in front of an

outdoor well, each looking more somber than the next. Why didn't people smile back then? Was life was so hard, it wasn't worth being happy at any level?

And then there he was. A young, dark-headed, gangly, boy just turning thirteen. The magic number that suggested puberty, girls and puppy love. Clutching the hand of his older brother Kyong. Behind them, tongue out, 'V'd fingers behind their heads, stood little blonde-haired, Sandra Kroes.

Was it possible for ghosts to cry? Wait a minute. He wasn't a ghost. He was a spirit. Ghosts, were nasty, heartless beings who berated their victims, unhappy in their deathly circumstances. He, on the other hand was serving out a purpose. He was here on a mission. But, did it have to be such a gut-wrenching, personal mission? It shouldn't be affecting him this way. It was about them. All of them. The summer that picture was taken, was where it all began . . .

1:30 P.M.

Osaka, Japan – Driving through the Countryside

FINGERING the face of his phone, Junsu watched the scenery shoot by the darkened windows of the moving SUV. Moistening his lips, he swirled his tongue unconsciously over his bottom teeth, the feel of Saffire's mouth over his arousing his senses. It was hard to imagine that only a little more than twenty-four hours ago she had been naked in his arms. And, now . . . he couldn't wait to get back and have those arms around him again. This time he would commit. And, if that didn't do it, he had no one to blame but himself. She'd been right to be angry. He'd never done anything so stupid in his entire life. But, for some unknown reason, he lost all logic where she was concerned.

Having nursed their friendly relationship along for so many years, what in God's name had gotten into him, to make him think he could 'force' her to love him? However, remembering her text last night was all the encouragement he needed moving forward. Thankfully she hadn't given up on him for good. The blackened cell phone cried out to be used. His heart in his throat, he was desperate to call her. Text her. Something to ascertain how she might be feeling after



having slept on the knowledge that he'd indeed fallen in love with her and had only their future in mind.

Turning it on, he felt the car bump over railroad tracks, his body shifting listlessly from side-to-side against the cool leather seats. Osaka, was cold and dreary this time of year. No sun, no warmth, only the spattering of snow covered grass and trees stripped of their leaves, poking up into the sky like skeleton's packed alongside each other.

Why his Manager had agreed to this last minute 'shoot' in the countryside of Japan he would never know. It wasn't like he needed the money, or the exposure. And, he certainly hadn't been prepared to go straight from JeJu to Japan without the opportunity to see Saffire face-to-face and explain himself.

YEOBESO, R U WELL? I MISS U ALREADY. OSAKA IS AN EMPTY PLACE W/O U NEXT 2 ME.

Staring into the message, his face creased in a frown, a sudden nervousness took over his body. Considering how they'd left things, it didn't seem like the right thing to say. Delete. Smashing the 'x' button until it was stripped down to 'ARE U WELL?' he rethought the process more clearly.

What time was it anyway? After lunch. Would she be up yet? He didn't want to wake her if she wasn't. Or would she already be out and about, maybe shopping for Christmas gifts, and getting a tree? Ani, probably not. And now that Saffron was back, what (if anything) had she told her about their 'encounter' between the sheets? Would sister tell her it was wrong as well? She sounded like she'd forgiven him. But, had she really?

Turning the phone off, he closed his eyes in frustration, his head dropping back on the seat. *And, what about JJ? He couldn't be ignored.* For all his own initial confidence at her admission to not do Christmas without him, here he was unable to gather the courage to text her. No doubt JJ had already managed to weasel his way into her phone, her thoughts, and maybe even her day.

Saffron had warned them both to 'back off' and give her time. Shaking his head he wasn't sure that was the answer. Obviously, JJ wasn't going to 'back off'. He didn't operate that way. He was like a bull in a china shop, in every aspect of his life.

Wow. Was 'he' jumping the gun as well? After disrespecting her once, how in the world was he going to justify disrespecting her again if continued pushing and didn't give her the opportunity to figure things out on her own?

Oh God. There were so many other things he should be thinking about, and concentrating on. The concept for the shoot. Preparing songs for the next solo tour before his military service. Even his damned Christmas list.

“Xia.” The Manager’s voice from the front was quiet but firm. “We’re nearly there. About five more minutes. You okay?” His concern noticeable, he glanced over the seat at the young man, sprawled out in the back, eyes closed, gripping his phone with white knuckles.

“Hmmm? Oh, de.” Responding out of necessity only, Junsu pursed his lips pissed off at himself for not caring what was about to transpire. “Just a slight headache. I’ll be fine.”

“Can I get you something? It’s cold out there. Could make it worse.” The man furrowed his brows, hating to see his friend suffer. Maybe agreeing to the last minute shoot had been a bad idea. “Mianhae for making you come all the way here on such short notice. It’s just . . . these holiday shoots only come around once a year, and I hated to turn it down. Especially considering you’re bound for the military in less than a year.”

“De. Arasseo (IT’S OKAY).” Not much caring about the ‘why’s’ or reasoning behind his appearance, Junsu sat up straighter, brushing his hair out of his eyes. “I’m ready. It’ll be fine.”

Reality was . . . he was neither ready nor fine. However, that wasn’t something anyone else needed to know. He wouldn’t be fine until he was back at Saffire’s doorstep, seeing her smile, hearing her accepting his heartfelt apology from her own lips. Back at the place where he could make amends and start over. The next three days would only be the means to an end.

Allowing his fingers to finish out the half-started text with . . . I MISS U . . . He threw caution to the wind, hitting the SEND button before he changed his mind. No matter what, she needed to know his heart. It was all he had to give.

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