

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

(Part 1)

“The stockings aren’t the ONLY things HUNG this year . . .”



Christmas Day

Thursday, December 25th, 2014

IT was Christmas morning. Kim JaeJoong and Saffire Ryu had finally settled into a relational understanding of sorts. Quite by accident, the hippie soul from California had landed herself the ultimate Idol Oppa (BOYFRIEND). Having spent years in the company of (her biological father) Young Jae Ryu, Saffire had been privy to Uncle’s numerous stories about the holiday, mostly concerning couples frequenting the café, some even meeting and falling in love only days before the actual date rolled around. Christmas was a day to spend with your family, or significant other, sharing your heart and soul, snuggled together against the cold of winter.

Now years later, there was something surreal and romantic about JaeJoong and Saffire spending their first night together in Uncle’s small, café apartment before the dawning of the holiday that S. Korea considered a day for ‘couples’. They were two of the most unlikely people to collide hopelessly in love. Both recovering from a broken heart, unexpectedly tumbling into a chasm of inexplicable ecstasy. She, having grown up a free-willed, open-minded musician, neither a

follower nor a leader, splitting her time between California and S. Korea. He, an innately talented, straight-forward, sensitive, family-oriented young man, working hard to make a name for himself in the Korean and Japanese entertainment industry. With all luck today would be the beginning of the end of their hesitation to fall together . . . Had Young Jae, a loving desperate father, finally gotten his wish for his daughter's happiness from the afterlife? And, where did that leave Xia? Kim Junsu?

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10:00 A.M.

Gangnam, S. Korea – Cup of Hotness Café



A **HHH**, the bed was plush and soft, the sheets enveloping Saffire's bare legs like a sea of satiny ribbons. Hovering between dreamland and reality, the warm rays of a late morning December sun shone through the tiny apartment window, bathing her in a swath of light.

Visions of downtown L.A., wrapped in glistening, glass and metal high-rises, coupled with the smell of freshly brewed coffee, flooded her drowsy senses. By now, Antonio should have a light breakfast tray ready at her bedside, consisting of fruit, wheat toast and her favorite blend of vanilla coffee, enriched with exactly three spoons of sugar and a quarter cup of creamer.

Huddling further down under the tent of covers, her bare feet scraped the hard oak floor beneath the skimpy Asian bedroll, the vision splintering recklessly into a million pieces. No coffee, no fruit, no satiny sheets. The scratchy texture of the wool blanket thrown haphazardly across her, was proof positive she was still in Uncle's miniscule bedroom, waking up on a slick, hardwood floor.

One hand making its way toward her face, she yawned uncontrollably. Shaking her thick main of blonde hair away from hooded eyes, she peered through the blinding shard of sunlight, out the half-opened door.



Her muddled sleep-ridden brain colliding with concrete reasoning, she began piecing together the events of the previous night starting with . . . dinner and JJ.

She wasn't in an L.A. high-rise, no king-sized pillow-top mattress underneath her, and definitely NO signs of Antonio! Thank God for that. If her memory served her correctly, without a jolt of caffeine to assist, it was Christmas day, and she'd entertained the prince of KPOP, 'Hero' JaeJoong last night, to a rousing romp in the sack. Not only that, caving in the passion of the night, it was nothing short of a miracle, they had both confessed their undying love to one another.

Shifting beneath the brusque quilt, she lifted one corner, her long lean torso shining back at her in all its naked glory. *I'm not dreaming, am I?* Pinching the soft skin of one thigh to make sure, she winced, the picture becoming clearer as the seconds ticked slowly by. *Nope, alive and well. Shit . . . he's in the shower. What time is it, and where'd I leave my phone? Saffron. Why aren't you home yet? I need to talk to you, NOW!*

Over she went, dismissing her nakedness, clambering on all fours around the corners of the cluttered room, in desperate search of her phone. Unintentionally exposing the bare cheeks of her bottom to the cool air, unruly hair swinging about her face, she resembled an enticingly sleek, female cougar, creeping stealthily in the underbrush, ready to pounce.

Stepping unannounced into the partially opened doorway, (fresh from an uncomfortably cold shower), JaeJoong chuckled inwardly at the sight of her naked backside, running a tempting scenario through his head like a hot steamy X-rated movie, hoping in finding her butt in the air, she was experiencing the same urges he was.

What was it about her that 'didn't' fascinate him? He wanted her, that's all there was to it. Everything that made up who and what she was. All her quirks, smiles, bad habits and especially her sassy attitude. He wanted and accepted it all. He craved it in fact. And, discovering in the split second it took to evaluate the last few weeks with (and without) her, he felt incomplete when not in her presence. It seemed corny to say but, when she breathed in . . . he breathed out.

Approaching her cautiously muttering, “Such a nice ass,” he ruffled a wet shock of blonde hair with the towel before (being the gentleman), dropping it to cover her bottom. “Well good morning Princess. Lose something? Or can I assume you’re ready for round three? It’s no secret you couldn’t get enough of me last night.”

Recalling her sweating by the moonlight, (only hours earlier) in that exact same position he smirked, a boyish gleam in his dark, dancing eyes. Teasingly bumping against her crouched form, his fingers immersed themselves in the thick cloak of tousled hair at the nape of her neck.f



Provocatively letting the towel against her cool skin slip off to one side (satisfied she’d gotten his full, undivided attention) Saffire desperately wanted to give in to his suggestion for another round.

Straight out of the shower, hair and skin glistening with dampness, this God of a man was even more sinfully erotic in the light of day. Christmas morning or not . . . to spend the rest of the day rolling about the tiny bedroom entangled in his long muscular legs was nothing short of her idea of heaven on earth.

“Merry Christmas to you too, ‘Mr.-Arrogant-I’m-a-God-in-bed’. As amazing as that sounds, unlike you, I need to shower first . . . and my POSTURE is due to the fact that I can’t find my phone. You didn’t wake me. It’s already late and I have to text Saffron.” Sitting back on her heels, both hands perched precociously on each creamy thigh, she smiled radiantly, satisfied she’d still managed to cut his ego down to size.

Still restraining the urge to laugh out loud, JJ tilted his head, staring out the window into the snowy street below. *Aishhh, he’d been called a lot of things but, never a ‘God’ in bed. Did it even do any good to respond to something like that? Well, if it was true, then for sure he’d met his match.*

“Ahhhh. So it’s not getting a Merry Christmas from me you’re upset about is it? Arasseo. Sister before sex, whatever.” Seemingly perturbed he sighed, his long, nimble fingers skimming through the mass of wavy strands in his grasp, itching to drop the towel around his waist and ravage her anyway. Hesitating, he felt her quiver anxiously against him, aware that his (already raging) hard-on typically came with a mind of its own.

Gently yanking on the rope of flaxen hair, her head tipped backwards, his lips crushing to meet hers with the certainty of a man who'd finally accepted his fate. Just like he was her poison, she was his drug of choice.

Falling into that place he knew he wouldn't recover from, he forced himself away from the intoxicating dance of her tongue against his. Ignoring her nakedness, his eyes dragged on downward in search of the missing phone. Spying it on the floor, tucked halfway beneath Jae Bear's furry paw, the muscles of his legs strained as he bent to retrieve it.

"Oh look. Here it is," smiling he handed it over, "right where you threw it last night before losing your clothes. Remember?" Hissing in her ear, the scent of his minty sweet breath, toyed pleasantly against her skin.

"Jae . . . how could I ever forget?" Tolerant of his seduction, she cocked one eyebrow, blushing despite her earlier brazenness, fingers curling around the base of the cell.

Of course she remembered. Every second of every minute had been imprinted into her memory banks for life. Now, in light of his flirtatious bantering he'd rendered her helpless. Not to mention . . . his enticingly erect manhood, stood at attention, directly within her line of vision.

Unashamedly studying the towel curving over his bulging crotch, she shuttered feeling her lower region convulse in unexpected spasms. *Dear Lord have mercy, she was having a mini-orgasm just being in his presence. Was her own body deceiving her so wickedly, this early in the day?*

Wanting to accept the inevitable and give in to the fire coursing through her insides, instead she found herself unexplainably mortified. Flinging over into a miniature ball in an unsuccessful attempt to cover her private parts, both blue eyes cascading quickly to the screen of the cell.

"Ahhh I told you, it's ahhh, Christmas and I uhhh, need to see if Saffron's texted me about when she'll be home."

Fumbling to get to the contact, on one shoulder, the Devil was telling her, 'Forget Christmas morning with Saffron, she'll understand. Take this hot, piece of man-flesh right now before he changes his mind'. But, the Angel on the other responded with calm resolve, 'He's not going anywhere. If he loves you he'll let you celebrate with your sister and save the rest for later.'



Ignoring his own physical manifestation of need, JJ watched her crumple over at his feet. “You okay?” *What was she doing? One minute the ‘seductress’, the next the ‘self-conscious’ little girl.*

“Agh-hem. Why wouldn’t I be?” Clearing her throat she gathered her courage, sitting back up unapologetically. *He was right, what WAS she doing? She was a grown-ass woman. Groveling naked on the floor at his feet like some blubbing fangirl waiting for a pity fuck. This man belonged to her, and everything that came with him.*

“I don’t know. Listen don’t mind me. Go ahead and call Saffron, she’s probably on her way. But, just so you know Joong texted me earlier, said he’s coming over shortly to surprise her, asked me to open the front door.” Staring into the innocence of her makeup-free face he sighed, “Romantic S.O.B.’s gonna whisk her off for a special over-night in the country. Damn. I knew he had something up his sleeve when we talked last night. Wish I’d have thought of it first. He needs you to pack her an overnight bag too. Just the bare essentials. Drop it out of sight inside the store room where she won’t see it.” Cupping her chin, his expression changed, knowing despite his lack of pre-planning, they would end up alone, and he would have this little fireball all to himself the entire day.

“Okayyy.” *So sister was going on an overnight with ‘Baek Sung Jo’? Lucky little shit.* Remembering the disgusting mess awaiting her downstairs between the kitchen and the lunchroom, Saffire’s lips pouted out against JJ’s fingertips. “Damn. That means we have to spend Christmas day here . . . at the café?”

“Mmmm, what’s wrong with that? I can think of worse things.” Standing upright, his index finger dropped to the exposed skin of her collar bone, caressing a burning streak downward, settling in the crease between both ample breasts. “Don’t think I said whether I could stay all day or not love. I thought you’d be busy.”

As soon as the words fled from his mouth he knew he’d teased too much. Clutching the towel around his midsection, he bounced away from her, one palm in the air in surrender. “Just kidding, don’t get mad. I am . . . I am. Promise. Wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

Jumping to attention, breasts bouncing, Saffire kicked out at him in mock anger. “That wasn’t funny. You’re so arrogant sometimes. I just . . . I just wanna . . . Ooooo . . .”

“AISH CAREFUL! Watch the jewels Princess, we need these.” Cringing, protecting his crotch, he tried desperately not to laugh at her stance. Arms out, fists poised in preparation for battle she was naked as a jaybird, shamelessly displayed in her birthday suit.

“Saffire Ryu, stop right there.” Backing away cautiously, he feigned a cough, easing one hand away from his upper thigh. “I know where this is headed and we REALLY don’t have time.”

“Says who?” *How dare he? This was HER special Christmas. She could rape him if she wanted to.*

“Says me. Joong’s gonna be here in about thirty minutes. You should probably get dressed.”

“Why? He’s not coming up here is he? No. He’s headed straight for the kitchen to meet up with Saffron. Lock the door then.” Finally easing into the confidence she’d displayed earlier she perched both hands on her hips, her lengthy, persistent stare following his hands to the dwindling bulge between his legs.

“Yah, I’ve already showered. Thanks for sparing me though, this’ll keep.” Turning without hesitation (anxious to be out of the line of fire) he dropped the towel around his mid-section, exposing his own backside, shaking the remaining water droplets out of his hair, as he slipped casually into his boxers.

So he wanted to be flippant, did he? Well so could she. Stomping the floor indignantly, Saffire barked into his broad, tattooed back. “YAH? Already showered? THAT’S your excuse? I didn’t SPARE anything mister I was thinking of myself . . . Humph, I’ll get dressed when I’m good and ready. And, don’t TEMPT me like that again. Not cool. I haven’t had my coffee yet.”

“Excuse me? Who was tempting whom? Seems YOU were the one groveling buck naked on the floor when I got here Princess. I tried to ignore you. Really I did.”

Struggling to zip tight jeans over his waning erection, he reached over, plucking his dark button down shirt from the back of the desk chair, tossing it at her feet. “If you’re going down to make coffee, at least put this on. You’ll give Joong freaking heart failure if he comes early and you’re downstairs ummm . . . au’ natural like that. Pretty sure Saffron’s more than he can handle already.”

Puffing her cheeks out, she wagged a finger at him in warning. “How dare you talk about my sister like that! She’s not that bad.”

Still showing off the feisty side of herself that he loved, JJ turned snickering, without acknowledging her sudden change of attitude or facial expression. In or out of the sack, she was proving to be one hell of a ride. He’d thought so the first night he laid eyes on her, and he still did. Darting bare-chested out the door to the kitchenette, clearly sometimes ignoring her was half the fun.

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10:15 A.M.

FOR Saffire, Christmas’s past had never consisted of anything more than a day spent opening expensive gifts, before being relegated to her room to put on a pretty dress and help her Father ‘entertain’ random guests. Mostly consisting of boring businessmen with their haughty, busty wives or mistresses it seemed the older she got the worse it got, until she no longer even looked forward to the holiday. Maybe that was why now the days leading up to Christmas (after Uncle’s untimely death) didn’t seem to faze her much.

Sure she missed the few friends she was close to, concerts and parties that had surrounded her. But, after years of putting up with fake friends and family members, along with finding out about Antonio . . . the lure of the holiday was relegated to the passive part of her life she’d grown oddly used to.

Now here she was . . . on a beautiful, snowy Christmas day, deliciously in love, unsure how to cope with a holiday morning that had suddenly turned from passive to phenomenal, overnight.

Careening childishly down the steep wooden stairs, her nearly bare butt bouncing as she went, she was reminded of mornings as a little girl (in the silence of the household) before anyone else was awake. Those were the only happy memories she had, of bounding from the circular staircase to the massive festive, living room at the crack of dawn, met by a barrage of brightly colored packages proving the true existence of Santa Claus.

This morning, not even close to the ‘crack’ of dawn, the only comparison to those Christmas’s past was the sight of the decorated tree in the lunch room, surrounded by perfectly wrapped packages, that wouldn’t see daylight now until Saffron returned.

Still excited to aid and abet in Hyun Joong's surprise for her, she was happy for them both, considering what had transpired in their lives over the last few weeks and months. Hopefully, it would be a new year, and a new beginning for them all.

Chuckling the small bag down the last few steps, it thumped end over end in unison with her uncontrollable giggles echoing through the deserted staircase. Lunging to meet it, she skipped over the top snatching the already prepared note taped to the handle. Sticking it firmly on the bannister, (knowing Saffron had a penchant for pastries in the morning) it wished her a Merry Christmas then tempted her to check the kitchen for fresh sweet buns before coming upstairs. A sneaky (but, effective) way to ensure her sister didn't go anywhere but, right into Hyun Joong's waiting arms.

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ONE hand in the air, directing an invisible orchestra, Saffire whistled her own rendition of 'Jingle Bells', mingling it with the sound of her bare feet tapping through the empty hallway. Dropping the small overnight bag on the floor inside the store room, she shivered noticeably (in only her panties and JJ's shirt) sauntering merrily toward the belly of the café.

Seemed like she'd done nothing 'but' shiver ever since arriving weeks ago. Obviously, asking JJ to turn on the heat when he went out to the car, hadn't done much good. Eh, why did that surprise her? It had been frigid and snowy last night. And, even on a good day it took eons for the old heater to work itself into a warm, tantalizing frenzy, leaving the rest of them scrambling for sweats and sweaters the minute it dropped below freezing. Still, it came with the territory.

Flinging the back door wide, anxious to take a look outside and see the end results of last night's snowfall, she ignored the goose-bumps prickling her bare legs and feet, reveling in the crisp, mid-morning air.

Her breath forming frosty little clouds around her face only served to prove the stark opposite of waking up to balmy holiday's in L.A. Loving everything about winters at the beach, 'this' morning however, gratefully the snow had played a major part in mysteriously blowing in her 'Cotton Candy Prince' for a Christmas she wouldn't soon forget.

Wishing she had time to run upstairs and coerce him into joining her for a snowball fight, she crouched down instead pressing both palms into a cold, white drift at her feet. Shaking off the

excess wetness over the prints that remained, she studied them carefully, noticing the wide palms, and long narrow fingers. As a child, Uncle had informed her they were perfectly proportioned, meant for the exact octaves of a piano, as well as able to reach for the high notes of her violin. He'd been correct as always. Sighing in retrospect, she wished he were still here to meet her on the roof for a Christmas Aria in the snow and see how happy she was, with JJ.

It was too late for Uncle but, maybe that would be her special Christmas present to Prince Jae. A private violin concert in the dining room hideaway, close to the heavens. It was time to share every complicated side of herself, especially her music.

Standing, she tugged the door closed, shutting out the winter wonderland, wiping both hands down the sides of the borrowed shirt. Bouncing up and down like a little girl, she hugged herself to stay warm, forcing the blood back through her freezing limbs. *What had she been thinking rushing down here only half-dressed?*

Giggling, she headed back toward the coffee bar before Hyun Joong made an appearance, reveling in the freedom to express her emotions without someone at the café commenting. Halfway through the room, (finally giving in to the music in her heart), she wove in and around the tables, spinning and twirling, the oversized dress shirt billowing around her slender hips like a make-shift tutu. *No one's Christmas was as amazing as this! Not even sisters.*

Pausing at the still twinkling tree, last night's romantic table set for two caught her eye, the dried candle wax oozing onto the expensive white table linen. With no time to clean up, clearly it would have to wait. Shaking her head, she sized up the damage. *Yikes, someone's head would be on the chopping block for that one.* For all practical purposes (in her haste to hook up with Prince Jae) they were lucky Uncle's precious café hadn't burned to the ground. Glancing back at his photo on the wall, she whispered a sincere, "Thanks Uncle . . . father . . ." grateful he'd kept a watchful eye on the establishment and them.

Finding it impossible to release herself from his proud, smiling face, standing on one side of her mother, she felt a sudden stabbing remorse for the evident agony of their circumstances and guilty for never taking the time to spend Christmas's with the man who couldn't claim his own daughters.

Following her gaze down the perimeter of the wall to the familiar photo of Xia Junsu, with his stylist, she was totally unprepared for the way her insides lurched upon seeing it. Remembering her text to him only moments before, out of JJ's watchful eye, it had been brief and to the point.

That she would be unexpectedly tied up most of the day. And, to be sure to let her know when he landed. She would explain later.

Tied up was an understatement. Dammit. How in only a few short weeks had she ended up falling head over heels for the pretentious Kim JaeJoong instead of the steady, reliable friend, Kim Junsu? Peaceful and complete after an amazing night in JJ's loving arms, it was impossible to rationalize.



“Ahhh, Junsu. How am I going to make you understand? You know as well as I do we're better off as friends. I love you but, I'm not IN love with you. And, God knows you hate the alternative. Sorry, it just happened.” Whispering into the picture pointedly, she knew in her heart the moment those words became a reality she would probably lose him and (the thing she cherished most) his friendship.

Why was she suddenly feeling so sad? Fuck . . . of all days, she shouldn't allow herself to visit those grey areas of her heart that pitted the two idols against each other. JJ was in, Junsu was out. That's all there was to it. In all honesty, she'd made her choice long before last night's magic began.

Leaning down she fingered the smooth top of JaeJoong's gifted snow globe. Make no mistake . . . it was a risk she had to take. Didn't mother of all people always say, “No more blubbering over spilt milk, put on your ‘big girl’ panties and get on with it.” Imagining that would be Saffron's suggestion as well, she put the frustration with herself aside, wriggling her bare toes against the cold wood floor, tugging the already wrinkled shirt down over both bare thighs.

Needing to ‘get on with it’ and back upstairs before Hyun Joong caught her fumbling around the bar minus her britches, she pointed in the direction of the coffee bar ordering herself like a general in combat. “Onward and upward. Your Prince awaits you Princess Saffire!”

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TURNING the corner, anxious to get to the coffee machine, Saffire nearly tripped over the black cat, curled up at the foot of the first bar stool, purring quietly, licking her furry back, fascinated with the task at hand.

“Yikes! There you are my sneaky little sweetie. Where have you been all this time?” Cooing like a mother over a newborn babe she leaned over, cradling the large feline into a ball against her ample chest. Nuzzling the black coat she was met with the scent of an unusual mixture of JJ’s hair coupled with Uncle’s cologne. Rearing back perplexed, she scolded, “Why do you smell like JJ dipped in Uncle’s favorite cologne? Did you mess with my man last night when I was sleeping?”

The massive intense blue eyes stared up at her, telling nothing, yet saying everything. JJ was an animal lover of the worst kind. Dogs, cats, birds . . . you name it, he loved it. Of course . . . the persistent black vixen had probably slipped stealthily into the apartment last night, looking for some JJ love (not unlike herself). Hussy!

“WELL. I don’t know what I think about that now. If you’re going to share an apartment with me, you’ll have to get another boyfriend. JJ’s mine.”

Chuckling she stroked the soft fur unable to comprehend why she felt so drawn to the devilish cat all of a sudden. It was a well-known fact, it had terrorized not only she and Saffron but, the entire café and staff ever since their arrival. Lately however, something about her seemed calming and familiar.

“Okay . . . back down you go. I’ve got coffee to make for me and Jae. Sorry, you’ll have to wait. Promise I’ll get you something in a little while.” Laying her back in the same spot she’d found her Saffire shook one finger at the lazy, black feline warningly. “And, if you value your nine lives, you might want to go wash up somewhere else. Saffron’s on her way home.”

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WHAT else could possibly happen on a sunny Christmas morning to make Saffron believe that Kim Hyun Joong held her future in the palm of his hand? He had succumbed to her every whim. Giving in to the fan girl, allowing her to be ‘Oh Hani’ to his ‘Bae Seung Jo’ . . . loving her despite her insecurities and letting the spirit of Uncle Young Jae Ryu, guide his heart in the process.

What would today bring? Was she destined to spend the holiday for ‘couples’, with her sassy newly found sister, Saffire? Or had Santa Clause favored her for being a good girl this year and dropped a specially ordered package directly on her doorstep?

As unlikely as it seemed that JJ and Saffire would still connect in (more than) an exasperating love triangle . . . Saffron and her ‘Baek Seung Jo’, seemed destined from the moment they laid eyes on each other in the middle of Uncle’s favorite drinking tent.

This coming New Year, could very well be the beginning of the end for the single, Saffron. Her Prince had finally arrived.

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10:30 A.M.

THE lingering smell of Saffire’s favorite flavored coffee, drifting through the café hallway greeted the perky, Saffron (a self-satisfied grin on her face) tossing her winter coat on the nearest bar stool, as she leaned over fumbling with the zipper of a wet, snowy boot. *Where was she anyway?*

“Saffire, you down here?” Calling down the hall she sighed, muttering to herself, “Damn, for somebody who can’t work the machine your coffee always smells amazing,” Marching to the staircase her eyes rested on the small note taped to the bannister.



Merry Christmas sis. Fresh red bean buns in the kitchen. I’ll be down shortly. Hugs, Saffire

Ripping it off the wood she crunched it between her fingers, tossing it into the trashcan at the front door. “Mmmm, yummy. Somebody’s been busy this morning. Not like you to bake for me sister. But, it IS Christmas morning Thanks!”

Headed straight toward the kitchen, her feet skidded to a stop in the open doorway, one hand to her throat in dismay at what was inarguably her twin's handiwork, gasping loudly, "What the fuck happened in here?" Confused, her head spun, eyes scanning each crack and crevice of the room, like a detective looking for clues.

Directly in her line of vision, an untouched, slightly overcooked ham, sat jelled in sauce atop the cluttered stove, joined by a large bowl of hard, cracked, mashed potatoes, the wooden spoon cemented to the bottom. To the left . . . scattered around (like a bakers window display gone awry) dirty utensils, pans, and random spices dotted the counter top.

No sweet buns, no coffee. This wasn't at all what she'd expected. Instead the inept culinary display seemed to have been the holiday dinner prepared for father and his favorite daughter to celebrate. Fisting both hands at her sides, unable to hold it in, the anger rose in her voice, scolding the absentee Saffire.

"SAFFIRE . . ." Her voice rose, rage evident by the shivering copper pots hanging above the butcher block. Picking up a crust encoded saucepan, she thrust it into the sink, mindless of the clattering as it side swiped the dirty plates.

"What the fuck kind of Christmas present is this. And, not even a freaking sweet bun in sight."

Hyun Joong lounged in the doorway of the storage room. It was a good thing for Saffire he was whisking her away, otherwise he didn't think she would make it through the day. Ah, a true redhead. His girl was fired up.

His low husky snicker floated into the room, "Debutante don't waste your energy on sister. Save it. I can put it to better use." Pushing off the doorjamb he planted both feet, hands clasped behind his back, military style. He'd learned from past experience to expect the unexpected from the fiery redhead.



Wide-eyed, she clutched her heart, raking the tall Idol from head to toe, certain he'd grown more gorgeous over the past few days. Her reaction immediate, she blinked with disbelief.

"OH MY GOD, Joong what are you doing here? Gushing, butterflies fluttering deep in her stomach he advanced, lifting her off the ground, and seizing her lips reminding her anew why

she coveted 'Baek Seung Jo' back in Chicago. Arms and legs eagerly wrapped around his hard body, her fingers dug through his dark hair forgetting she hadn't heard from him in three days.

Breaking the kiss a bright smile stretched across his face. She smelled delicious, like a sweet sugary dessert. Caressing her backside his only desire was to lean her against the wall and take her right then and there. Until from upstairs, a thump, followed by a girlish giggle stopped him.

"Merry Christmas." Ecstatic at her welcome, he slid her down to the floor brushing the long hair from around her shoulders. Lost in lusty blue eyes, he grazed the freckles across her nose with his thumb, admittedly worried about his reception after leaving her alone on the plane coming back from Jeju.

"Merry Christmas, did Santa drop you off? I don't remember asking for a tall, sexy man for Christmas." A twinkle of mischief in her gaze she rubbed his chest, resting her palm over his heart, feeling it beat faster.

Chuckling he raised an eyebrow, "Well, you must have been an exceptionally good girl this year. And, as a reward we're going on a date. Are you ready for an adventure?" Retracing his steps he darted out to the store room, snatching her overnight bag from behind the doorway. Grinning, he lifted it in the air, pleased with himself for pulling off the surprise so effectively.

Torn between her two options, Saffron stared at the overnight bag, lips pursed. *What are you thinking Joong? I can't leave. This is literally mine and Saffire's first Christmas together. We've got plans for the whole day. And, from the looks of my precious kitchen, now half of it will be spent cleaning up.*

"We're going to be outside today so I left the thermals here in the store room. Hurry up and change, you're all mine for the next twenty four hours." Dropping the bag at her feet, he leaned back, lifting the pile of clothes from a wire shelf. JJ's idea of the store had proven to be the perfect plan.

"What? But . . . I can't leave Saffire alone on today. It's Christmas, I'm not . . ." Her protests squelched by the large palm of his hand to her mouth, Saffron met his playful expression cautiously.

"No 'buts' debutante. I got it straight from the source, sister has her own Santa to keep her company today." Grinning, he nodded toward the staircase, hoping he wasn't going to have to

explain in detail. Adding weight to his statement, they both looked up as muffled voices drifted from the ceiling.

“Okayyy then. Let’s get the hell out before this kitchen sprouts legs and walks off, just to get away from itself.” Agreeing wholeheartedly, Saffron hurried into the storeroom stripping off her sweater feeling overheated as the noises got louder.

In record time she was ready, glancing around the café dining room. Sure she was forgetting something, at the sight of the melted wax on the tablecloth, and unused table setting, her nose wrinkled uncomfortably. *Did father even show up last night? Probably not. But someone had . . .* Smiling at the tree lights twinkling through the morning sun streaking in from the store front, like a light bulb going on over her head, she spied the present she had bought for her boyfriend.

“Joong, wait.” One hand on his shoulder, she swung over, rising on tiptoes to peck him on the lips.

Reveling in the warmth of her mouth pressed against his, Joong hugged her tight, grateful she had stumbled into his life. He hoped he could live up to the promise he’d made to Uncle’s spirit in Jeju.

“I can’t forget this,” Marching back to the tree to retrieve the package, she hugged the box, smiling.

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11:00 A.M.

CHRISTMAS snow. Marveling at the sparkling scenery, Saffron eyes followed the wipers piling up fat wet snowflakes landing on the windshield. There was something special about snowfall on Christmas day. Didn’t matter if it was Seoul, South Korea or where she grew up in Chicago. Santa had granted her wish on this special day.

Being surprised by Hyun Joong and his thousand watt smile filled her with happiness. When she was in his arms his heady scent, made her long for marathon make-out sessions, ruffled sheets, and monkey sex. With Saffire’s help, Joong had managed to sweep her away for their first official date. Without a thought, her loving sister had gladly thrown her over for a man, forgetting the Christmas plans they’d made the day before.

“The little traitor,” Whispering, she clutched the phone in her lap, shaking her head in an attempt to block the vision of her beautiful kitchen out of her mind.

“Debutante, what are you mumbling about?” Stealing a sidelong glance at Hyun Joong’s glistening eyes. “Did I tell you how beautiful you look this morning?”

“Yes, you did. And, nothings the matter . . .”

“Liar.” Slipping her hand into his squeezing it gently. “You were surprised, arasseo?”

“Yes, you’re lucky JJ’s there or you’d have been stuck spending Christmas with just the two of us.” Sighing, she rolled her eyes out the window watching the scenery fly by. “Man, I’m not surprised she picked JaeJoong after the fiasco on Jeju.” Glancing back at Joong, worried he’d heard, she covered her mouth discreetly. Relieved by his silence, obviously he hadn’t caught her faux pas.

Flinching at hearing her mention Jeju, Joong would have been happy to spend Christmas with the sisters if it meant Saffire had rejected both of his friends. The nagging questions stuck like a bone in his throat. *Had she told JJ about Junsu and JeJu? DID they hook up? Should he go ahead and ask Saffron anyway? Would she tell him the truth? They were sisters after all. Damn, was it even his place to ask?*

Putting himself in JJ shoes, he peered over at Saffron, back to gazing out the window. What if . . . sucking in a breath he chickened out, concentrating on the road ahead, “Are you kidding, JJ’s had a thing for her ever since she zipped by us at your uncle’s funeral.”

Recalling the unusual, somber event, she put her phone into the Coach purse, lifting his hand and brushing her lips across his knuckles. “I don’t remember seeing either one of you at the funeral. Of course, I was a little distraught at finding out I had a twin and was half owner of a coffee house, of all things.”

With dogs barking, ‘I wish you a Merry Christmas’ on the radio Joong grinned. “All I remember was sexy hips in tight black slacks, your red hair flying as you sailed out after some blonde.”

Giggling she set their clasped hands on his thigh, “So you fell for my secret weapon, who knew Kim Hyun Joong was a butt man,” now glad for all the hours Ian insisted she put in at the gym. Her cooking had its down side. Loving rich food and sweet pastries were her weakness.

“Ani, the drinking tent . . . how can a guy resist a girl on her knees.” Wiggling his eyebrows at her before returning them to the road, he was glad today was all about her. Them. Getting to know more about each other and have some fun.

“Ahhh, Joong . . . you’re perverted. Please tell me you’re kidding.” Squiggling anxiously in the seat, she tried tugging her hand from his in mock indignation.

“De, pretty sure the heel in the groin as I piggybacked you had my heart beating faster as well. Or it could have been when you spilled hot coffee on my junk. Not sure exactly when I decided you were the girl of my dreams.”

How could any girl have resisted a warm back on a cold snowy night? She’d actually been the smitten one. “Shit I remember stepping on toes in the hallway of your apartment. But, nothing else. Guess I wanted to get into YOUR pants. So, I’M the perverted one?” One finger to her chest, she giggled, flouncing back in the seat coyly.

“Remember darlin’ YOU said it . . .” Laughing with her ridiculous observation, he placed her hand directly over his crotch.

“KIM HYUN JOONG. WHAT ARE YOU DOING? If you think I’m going to . . .” Her voice playful, despite her relative shock, she was certain it wouldn’t take much to give him what he was after.

“I have both hands on the wheel, so how adventurous are you my sexy Debutante? The silence filled the car as Saffron considered the situation. The tension grew thick while he gripped the steering wheel his knuckles turning white as he exited the highway onto a rough snow covered country road.

Breaking the silence she gave a nervous, tinny sound. Longing to unzip his pants and shock him as well, visions of him running off the road, police lights and sirens suddenly stopped her cold. Removing her hand, she placed it gingerly back in her lap. *What has gotten into him, she’d never seen this side before.* Clearing her throat, she asked quietly, “You’re kidding . . . Right?”

Shrugging his shoulders his eyes flared with desire, “Can’t blame a guy for trying.” Hesitating before adding, “Of course I’m kidding . . . unless you’re really game?”

Seriously studying his profile, she squinted her eyes, “Is something wrong? You’re acting kind of off.” How had she missed the dark circles under those beautiful, dark almond shaped eyes,

the slight puffiness in his face (like he hadn't slept). Seeing the stubble on his chin, she couldn't help wondering if he'd even shaved this morning.

“Ani, everything is good. I have my girl by my side. We're headed for a day alone in the country. Let's save serious conversation for later tonight. Right now it's me and you.” For him, the last few days were like something from a drama. It had taken a lot of convincing to keep Saffron out of the sorted affair. For him at least, getting into a discussion about it right now would ruin the whole day.

Hearing the weariness in his voice, she emptied her coffee down to the last drop, giving in to his plea to wait. “Hmm, okay, sounds like a plan . . . you and me. So, where are we going?”

“I wanted to take you to one of my favorite places. I go here when things get crazy.” Seeing the suspicion cross her face, he reassured her with a glance.

“Does this place have a name?”

Examining the flat landscape with only bushes and a few trees lining the sides of what she assumed was a dirt road by the way the car bounced clearly, wherever they were headed, it was isolated. Assuming there would be no worries about nosy paparazzi.

“It's near Hwaseong.” Stealing a glimpse for her reaction the car slid, forcing his attention back on the road. “Shit,” Swerving slightly a little laugh escaped from his lips in relief.

Startled she caught the armrest, jerking as the tires gripped the road surface again. “Any chance we could get snowed in?” Concerned . . . yet not . . . she noticed the flakes were coming down faster and heavier. *How romantic it would be to hole up in a cabin for a week with Kim Hyun Joong. Now there was an adventure.*

“Not a chance.” *Why did he think that was humorous?* Chuckling, he whistled a random song that had played on the radio only moments earlier.

“And, how many women have you taken here?” Her spine stiffening at the thought, she tried not to let him see her wince at the severity of the question.

Hearing the anxiety in her voice secretly pleased him. “You're the first.” *You missed me didn't you Debutante?* Slowing down for an oncoming snowplow, he turned the vehicle onto a narrow driveway traveling an eighth of a mile before stopping at a small stone fence, announcing proudly, “We're here.”

Surveying what looked like an open field, Saffron shifting toward him, her eyes squinting to see through the snowy windshield. “Here? This is Hwaseong?”

“Ahhh, ani, it’s about two miles down the road still. Slinging an arm over the steering wheel he sighed. “This is where I come to create. I can let my mind wander, be me. This is freedom.” Needing a place he could come hang out with friends, he’d purchased the property a few years ago.

“And, what exactly are we going to do here?” There were no hills so she could only assume skiing was out. Hiking maybe? Searching for trail markers, there were none. Now she was getting worried. Frowning, she clicked a nail against her front teeth anxiously.

“Joong we’re not camping, are we? Just so you know, my idea of camping is staying at a Five Star hotel.”

“Wae (WHY)? Don’t want to share a sleeping bag with me?” Laughing at the notion of her cooking over an open fire in a couture dress, he planted a quick peck on her lips, unbuckling her seat belt and motioning her out of the car.

Unexpectedly annoyed, she gripped his unzipped jacket, tired of his teasing, “Joong I’m not going to sleep anywhere with you if you don’t tell me what we are doing out here in the middle of nowhere.”

Last year at this time on Christmas day, she was looking forward to a four-course meal and sipping hot toddies by a toasty fire, with her mother and stepfather. Not out in the middle of a snowstorm, freezing her ass off, with a cold Starbucks and no restaurant in sight.

Throwing his arms out wide, as if enveloping the entire sky, Hyun Joong finally laughed out loud, his voice reverberating through the silent wilderness.

“Whoah . . . if I remember right, you wanted adventure. Ever been ice fishing?”

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