

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

(Part 2)

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



Thursday, December 25th, 2014

Gangnam, S. Korea – Cup of Hotness Café

12:00 P.M.

A shirtless JJ stood in front of the blinking Christmas tree, jeans slung low on his hips leaning down to examine the neatly stacked packages at the base. With Saffron gone, Saffire would have no ‘real’ Christmas today. No opening of presents, giggling excitedly at what lay inside each gift that bore her name. As special as his snow globe had been, it wasn’t the same. In his haste to have her, he had inadvertently overlooked the fact that Joong was taking her sister from her today.

Overcome with guilt, the laughter and festivities of his own family last night rang out in his ears. He’d even deserted them to satisfy his own compulsion. His problem? Simply put, he loved her.

“I’ll make it up to you Princess, I promise.” Whispering the oath to the smallest present on top of the pile, he zeroed in on the tag.

To: Junsu. My sweet friend, Merry Christmas. I hope this reminds you of me forever. Hugs, Saffire.

Forever? Wow. Guilt, now meshed with jealousy coursed through his insides as lifting the box, he shook it gingerly in his ear. Nothing. Humph, why did he care? After all, he'd gotten the best present any man could ever hope for. The giver herself. Stripped down . . . transparent . . . loving . . . and willing. This tiny gift (for all its innuendo's) would never compare.

“Mianhe hyung. This time you'll have to understand. I'll make it up to you too.” Optimistic about the future, he returned it back to its original resting place, stepping away shoving both hands deep inside his pockets.

Separated from the kitchen by only the staircase, loud clanging and singing could be heard on the opposite side of the hallway. His Princess was tackling the leftover mess with gusto. After hours upstairs, engrossed in nothing but each other, they'd come down, agreeing to split the task of cleaning up. He handling the table in the lunchroom, she the kitchen.

Earbuds in her ears, soapy water streaming down each arm, hair swaying back and forth across her t-shirted back, she hummed unashamedly, tapping the large metal pot with a wooden spoon, before lifting it in the air, (doing what she did best) directing the imaginary orchestra he was certain she was playing conductor to.

Lazily scanning her slender, lean body, his libido leapt to attention without any excuse, other than he was desperate. A man desperate to crawl inside the very soul of this woman he loved. Thinking back to their poignant conversation, lying curled up in each other's arms, clearly there were so many layers to her he still needed to uncover.

Was she happy with him? Today she seemed to be. Four days ago . . . not so much. What was it about Junsu that she insisted on hanging on to? The music? Years of friendship? Later today he would be returning from Japan. It was time to confront him.

Slipping away from the door jamb, his long legs crossed the short span of floor in only a few seconds. Snaking one arm about her thin waist, he picked the earbud out from under her expanse of blonde hair, soft lips grazing the velvety bottom of her earlobe whispering, “I can't get enough of you Saffire Ryu. Down here directing your own orchestra. Tell me, what REALLY makes you tick?”

“You.” Her answer immediate and honest . . . a blush crept into her cheeks at the gentle caress of his fingers against her backside.

“Aishhh. Right answer.” Considering their push-pull relationship over the past few weeks it was no surprise she was significantly more complicated than he’d originally thought. “But, let’s be honest. I’ve read your Profile, there’s got to be more.”

“Welll . . .” Despite the butterflies churning in her stomach she knit her brows pensively thinking about the things that had ultimately brought them together.

It really isn't the music, the fangirling, or even your looks. It's the fire burning between my legs when you kiss me. The way I see a future in your eyes when you look at me. It's the genuineness of your soul Jae. Those are the things that make me tick. But, how do I tell you all that without sounding like some boring, love-sick heroine in a Korean Drama?

Nibbling around her ear he could hear the strings of the classical song she was listening to rise and fall with intensity sensing a sudden nostalgia in her demeanor. “Mmmm, what’s that look for? Don’t want to tell me, yah? Trying to be the mysterious, blonde seductress? Arasseo, I’ll play along. Put that pan down, it’ll keep.”

Saffire dropped the wooden spoon in the cavernous pan beneath her, soapy water splashing up to dot the front of her white t-shirt. Her insides twitched recklessly at the ruffling of his light touch, tugging the elastic waistband of the skimpy red thong she wore.

Why was he such a scoundrel sometimes? Here she was concentrating on all his amazingly, adorable qualities and his mind was already in the gutter. His honey slick voice literally seducing her away from the dishes on to other things. Why did she continually want to slap him one minute and kiss the hell out of him the next? He took her to the top of the mountain and threw her off, then ran to catch her at the bottom. Damn. That was her biggest problem . . . no one had ever made her feel that way.

Whirling around she catapulted into his anxious arms wrapping both legs around his lean hips, her mouth hungry for satisfaction. *Sex, sex and more sex. The perfect way to spend a lazy Christmas day.* His dark, smoldering eyes stripping her ruthlessly, they grappled at each other’s clothes, absentmindedly obsessed with greed and lust before realizing exactly where they were. He had parked her directly atop Saffron’s ‘precious’ baking counter, her bare bottom skidding across the cold marble.

His head bent to her exposed breasts with determination all she could hear was Saffron's voice squealing at the top of her lungs, 'Clearly, you and 'Mr. Sexpot' there were about to DO IT in the freaking kitchen weren't you? My kitchen! Where I bake!' *Oh, this was not a good thing. What was she thinking? She wasn't . . .*

"OH MY GOD JJ, STOP . . . STOP. Not here. Shit, shit, shit. I promised Saffron I wouldn't. I need to get off, hurry." Horrified, she pushed his face away from her chest, jumping clear of his rising body, her bare feet slapping the hard tile floor on the way down. Losing her balance, nearly knocking him over in the process she scrambled for the white 'T' to cover herself.

Amused but disappointed, JJ wriggled back into his jeans, wishing the café's precious kitchen didn't have such ridiculous boundaries.

"Wowww, way to spoil the mood Princess. I thought maybe you were more adventurous than that. Obviously one of those 'sides' of you I haven't seen yet . . . How about we finish cleaning up and take this to my place instead? No rules there. Wherever . . . whenever. And, I've got a REAL bed!" Chuckling, he propped both elbows on the counter top where only seconds ago she'd perched buck naked, ready to play.

"That's not funny. And, for your information I AM adventurous. Just not here." Snatching up her panties in one hand, Clorox wipes in the other she shoved him to one side slamming the plastic container down on the area where she'd been. "You obviously don't know Saffron like I do," she quipped in frustration. "All she has to do is stand here and she can tell something unusual or out of place has happened. She's has this weird sixth sense about shit like that."

Knowing she was being paranoid (considering Saffron was currently miles away with Hyun Joong) the last time she'd thought she was home free . . . well, obviously hadn't turned out exactly the way she'd planned it either. So moving forward, her motto would continue to be, 'better safe than sorry'.

"Arasseo. I still think you'd have more fun at my place. We'll spend the rest of the day together there. I need to get back at some point to feed the cat." Looking at her pitifully, his voice waned, "Didn't think I'd be here this long."

"Oh, stop pouting. It'll give you wrinkles. What about what I want? Maybe I want to stay here. It's freaking cold outside." Her mind sliding into that zone she was desperately wanting to avoid, the real reason was, she knew Junsu would be contacting her when he landed. Being here

at the café was her first choice, however in the long run, no matter where she ended up, (even with JJ in tow) it wasn't going to be pretty.

“Not pouting Princess. Just horny. Come on, tell me you don't like it.” His eyes zeroed in on her round butt cheeks peeking out from under the hem of the shirt only serving to make it increasingly difficult to continue reigning himself in. “And, you should probably put those panties back on or I can't be held responsible for what happens, anywhere. I told you before, my lower extremities have a mind of their own.” Pecking her on the cheek solicitously his face was boyish and contrite. “I'll try to be good though. At least till the dishes get done.”

Looking at the bright red Christmas thong still crushed in her fist, Saffire cringed. “Oops, shit. Forgot I was holding it. Almost used it instead of the dishrag.”

Splitting the sexual tension in the air at the thought of her silken thong serving as a rag to scrub the pan with, they broke into giggles. Letting her rely on him as she stepped into it, his fingers grazed her back wondering if she was aware that even in the thong . . . her bare bottom was 'still' exposed and 'still' enticing his wayward mind to things other than cleaning up.

Hands back in the soapy dishwater, she flicked him playfully watching as he jumped away, his look threatening. “What's wrong? Afraid of a little bubbles? Are you going to melt away?”

“Listen you!” One finger wagging in her face, JJ's arm muscles rippled as he tensed, readying himself for what was undoubtedly her version of water play.

“Listen whattttt?” Grabbing at his index finger she coaxed him temptingly. “Get over here my 'Sex God' and dry this thing. You need to prove yourself somewhere else other than in the bedroom.”

“Yahhh, I'm perfectly capable of doing dishes. Just not sure if I can trust you right now. You're being extremely unpredictable. One minute serious, one minute sexy, one minute playful. Not sure who I'm dealing with.” She was as 4D as he was. It was interesting to see himself mirrored in her actions. They were well suited to one another. His little 'cotton candy bitch', did absolutely deserve his love.

“Ahhh yesss,” Cooing, she rubbed one soapy wet finger down the expanse of his bare arm. “I'm dangerous to a fault. Tsk, tsk, tsk, that's the beauty of being a woman. Always keep them

guessing. Get used to it Kim JaeJoong. You have sisters, you should know we're famous for being emotional and hard to read."

"Well, that's an understatement." Sizing up the situation that was certain to lead them into embarrassing territory once again he barked eagerly, "Arasseo, gimme the towel. I don't need Saffron coming home and worrying about what we were REALLY up to in the kitchen."

Standing beside her, his finely manicured fingers twirled the towel about the inside of the roasting pan until it was perfectly dry. Proud of himself he held it up for inspection, grinning from ear-to-ear. "I think we make a great team don't you Princess? My family's gonna love you! Especially my eomeoni (MOTHER). I'll make sure to get us all together soon. She'd love to cook for you."

Bumping his hip against her his heart swelled. All the worrying he had done at the Christmas tree over Junsu faded away in the drying of a roasting pan. Whatever she had with him paled beside their amazing connection. She was peeling back the layers for him to see as easily as she peeled off her clothes.

The buzzing of his cell from the opposite counter momentarily directed his attention away from the nearly clean kitchen.

"Hold on a sec. Might be important, especially today. Don't go anywhere." His tone warning, he darted across the floor, whisking it off the counter, before turning away to talk privately.



Watching him Saffire's gaze followed his tattooed back out the door until all that could be heard were his feet pounding quickly up the stairs. *Why was he running? Had something happened?* Swiping her hands on the front of her t-shirt to dry them she took off after him, skidding around the bannister just as he slammed the apartment door.

What was going on? He sounded upset. Should she go up? Listen at the door? Biting down on one fingernail anxiously, she weighed her options. If it was a business call would she be overstepping her bounds? No one was clear about their relationship except Saffron and Hyun Joong. But, if it was personal?

Tiptoeing hesitantly to the landing, the closer she got the louder his voice became, babbling so fast, despite her fluent Korean, she could barely understand him. Only until catching his niece's name, hospital and 'I'll be right there' . . . did she finally have her answer.

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Ice Fishing in the Country

12:00 P.M.

HUDDLING over a six inch hole Saffron perched on a small canvas stool, fishing pole in hand. Outfitted in winter gear, Joong had layered her clothes, stuffing little packets of hand warmers in various places to help keep her warm. Bobbing the line, she stared down into the cold clear water, sure all the fish had gone south for the winter.



Shading her eyes she gazed up at the sun hanging low in the horizon, wrapped in clouds giving the illusion of a glowing light bulb covered in cotton. *What the fuck was she doing here?*

With no wind the quietness of the frozen lake was eerie. She didn't like silence and sitting still was work. In Chicago she never had moments to do 'nothing'. Phone calls, client meetings and Ian consumed every minute of her day.

"Jooonnnnggg, I'm so booorrrred." Seeing her breath she shuffled her feet on the ice, the scraping noise filling the air, giving her a sense of triumph at breaking the deafening calm. Snapping her head toward the bushes she spotted birds flying out, (following her lead) the squawking and flapping of wings everywhere. Tickled, she waved her arms wishing she too could soar above the crop of trees seeking out the cabin where they'd be staying the night. Imagining herself in a warm cozy kitchen, wearing a ruffled apron, baking Uncle's special bread for her man.

Hyun Joong's anger quickly rose to the surface, surprised at hearing her complaining. Normally she reserved whining for her drunken rants or the throes of passion. Spinning on his stool, ready to reprimand her for making a ruckus he froze, speechless. The sudden joy in her face lifted his spirits defying every perception of fishing etiquette.

“Saffron you’re scaring all the fish away,” Trying to sound stern, instead he guffawed at the sudden change in her posture.

Dropping to the stool, the legs groaned threatening to give way under her weight. After giving him a death glare, her expression drooped in defeat as if he’d criticized her butt in the bulky snow pants.

“I don’t care. You said this was exciting.” Arms crossed, she pouted like a petulant child. “Liar, we’ve been out here for almost two hours and nothing.” One stomp of her boot accentuated her frustration. “Every little thing scares the stupid fish. You’ve shushed me for talking, humming and God forbid I should try to SING. I can’t move an inch or my damn shadow will frighten the ugly, slimy things away.”

Rolling his eyes at her behavior, Joong’s voice calmed. “Patience Hani . . . you never stop, always want everything right now. You need to learn to relax, breath in the brisk clean air. Let your mind wander. That’s the beauty of the great outdoors.”



Squirming uncomfortably on her seat, she picked the pole up again. “My mind drifts in only one direction . . .” Catching his eyes she smirked. “You and me naked in a warm cozy bed eating my pastries. Not sitting on a patch of frozen water dangling a string in a six inch hole.”

“I promise we’ll get there but, right now we have to catch dinner. So save those thoughts for later and . . .” Trailing off he noticed her line twitching, “tug on your line. Looks like you might have a bite.”

“Huh?” Jumping to her feet she felt the weight, straining the short pole as it bent. “OH SHIT. Joong what do I do? Help.”

Grabbing the net in a panic he slid over beside her, “Pull up, pull up,” yelling as the thrill of the hunt rose inside him. Man against beast, granted the beast was ten inches long but, size didn’t matter, it was the instinct to survive, knowing he’d fended off starvation and would be able to feed his family.

Her scream turned from laughter, to victory, as doing what he commanded she watched the fat trout jump from the hole and land on the ice, flopping beneath her boots, gasping for breath.

“I did it. Joong I caught a fish.” Hopping around in a victory dance Saffron beamed excitedly launching herself at him just as her ‘first catch’ flipped into the net.

Not ready for her full weight against him, Hyun Joong dropped the net, catching her at the waist, toppling over onto the hard ice. Losing his breath when she landed on his chest he winced (once again) a victim of her clumsiness. But, this time he didn’t mind, meeting her cold lips when she initiated an intoxicating kiss.



Negotiating her underneath him, he drew away from the arousing kiss, sizing up her zealous expression. “Debutante you are DEFINITELY one of a kind.”

Hearing the smoky voice, her mischievous eyes opened smiling at him coyly. “Hmmm, that’s why you like me.”

“De. Saranghae . . .”

* * * * *

Hyun Joong’s Cabin

7:00 P.M.

LANGUISHING in the bubble bath Joong had insisted she take after spending so many hours outside in the cold weather, Saffron gathered a handful of bubbles blowing them as if she was the star of a commercial. Sighing, she watched the soapsuds float to the rim disappearing over the edge.



With soothing music filling the room, she settled deeper into the tub attempting to relax, as she listened for his foot fall, her eyes growing heavy. After only a few moments, shivering in the cooling water, she lifted the drain releasing it to add hot by turning the knob with her toes, (a talent every girl needed).

Scowling at the unopened door, put out he hadn’t made an appearance yet, Saffron studied her wrinkled fingers, signaling it was definitely time to get out. Delaying the inevitable lips pursed, she wondered why he hadn’t shown.

Surely he wasn’t still upset she’d caught most of the fish they were having for dinner. Recalling with an impish grin, after she’d caught fish number five to his three, he’d called it quits,

insisting she needed to get out of the cold, even though she'd assured him she was used to the wintery weather, coming from Chicago. Gathering bubbles she scoffed, "Pfff . . . what a baby."

The bathroom was small but lavish and she'd been surprised when he'd mention camping here on his down time. She'd envisioned a small three room shanty smelling of burnt wood and sweat socks. The 'cabin' was far from that. With its ten foot ceilings, fireplace in the large living room and chef's kitchen, it made her wonder who might have been some of its previous guests and what had transpired when they were here.

The place beaming with Christmas cheer, from the eight foot tree to the personalized stockings hung over the fireplace showed he'd gone to a lot of effort for the holiday season. Blowing the last of the bubbles high into the air, Saffron felt bad at missing her chance to have a real Christmas with Saffire.

Throughout her childhood, Mother had turned the trimming over to her secretary and he in turn hired someone else. Funny, how that had become the family tradition. Even being carried on at the Chicago penthouse she and Ian had shared. (Only then 'she' was the one hiring a decorator, demanding the place be all decked out by December First.)

Admittedly she'd been looking forward to starting a new family tradition by trimming the tree with her sister this year. About now, they would be done exchanging gifts, digging into the goodies she'd prepared, toasting the night away with eggnog, with Saffire coaxed into playing her violin so they could sing Christmas Carols.

Struggling not to dwell on what could have been she laid her head on the folded towel at the edge of the tub sighing, "Relaaaxxx . . ." inhaling then exhaling before sinking back down in the warm water softly singing unaware, "Sa . . . rang . . . hae," repeatedly.

Suddenly sitting up, (heedless of the water sloshing onto the floor) she shivered, spouting out, "Ugh. Why did he have to ruin a perfectly good afternoon with that one sweet sounding Korean word?" Speaking the English translation out loud, "I love you."

Squeezing the luffa over her shoulder she continued bantering, "I said like, not love. Dammit Joong, you said we'd move slowly. Date first. Hmmm and why didn't I say it back? Shit, I know I reacted wrong." Clearly he'd been looking for her to get all starry-eyed and repeat the phrase back to him. Newly agitated, she snatched the body wash squeezing it onto the sponge.

“No, not the steadfast, sensible Saffron. Of course not. I’m the girl who doesn’t get the idea of ‘love at first sight’, or ‘soul mate’.” Slamming the bottle down onto the shelf, furiously she worked the soap into the rough luffa almost as if she were scrubbing someone’s eyes out. “Why don’t I believe he’s ‘Mr.-Right’?”

Cocking her head she spoke to the flickering candles threatening to burn out, “I mean, after all, he’s gorgeous, funny, dynamite in the sack . . . so . . . what’s the damn problem, Saffron?” Unable to answer her own question, she pounded her fist into the water in frustration. Rising out of the water with determination she flipped the stopper, turning on the shower. Scrubbing across her body she confessed Joong had blindsided her, remembering the look in his eyes when she hadn’t reciprocated.

“Saffron you’re such a coward. Hell, it’d been easier if we’d broken up.”

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Cup of Hotness Café

7:30 P.M.

CHECKING and re-checking her phone for a message from JJ, Saffire wandered through the empty café lunch room, ‘she-devil’ in her arms, counting down the minutes that had managed to turn the day into the most agonizingly dull and dreary Christmas she positive she had ever experienced. The emergency forcing him out of her arms to rendezvous with his family at the hospital, sadly had left her to her own defenses.

Oh make no mistake, the last twenty four hours had been a bright spot in her life but going solo the entire rest of the day hadn’t been her intention when she’d crawled off the sleeping mat at 10:00 A.M.

So, here she was on the precipice of a new relationship ‘still’ re-evaluating her life moving forward, lost in her thoughts of not only JJ but Uncle, Saffron and yes . . . especially Junsu. Father was just arriving in L.A., mother was still in the air and Saffron was out of commission (in the middle of God only knew where).

Her countdown of mundane activities was running low. Short of getting out the cleaning supplies and tackling areas of the café she’d never even remotely thought of, she’d re-organized the cluttered upstairs living room, fed the cat and (like a bored teenager) experimented with new hair and make-up styles.

“Why hasn’t he called kitty?” From questioning the back of the cat’s head to the faces on the couples’ wall, to the blank screen on her cell she was bored and perplexed. After a message at 2:00 P.M., saying the doctor was discussing keeping the little girl overnight for evaluation, JJ had gone AWOL, without a word since.

Silently examining the wall of photos (for what seemed like the hundredth time since her arrival) each one told its own story. Uncle, her parents, Hyun Joong; JJ; Junsu; Heechel; Donghae all hanging beside scores of other idols, friends and loved ones.

Scratching the cats’ bowed tail, her sigh echoed through the deserted room. “Where in the hell do I fit into all this? Do I even fit in at all?” The low growl of her new best friend seemed calculated and timely throwing her thoughts back to her first weeks meandering about an isolated and lonely California beach girl, mourning her lost Uncle, relationships, home and life.

Maybe the famous Hotness Café was a ‘hotbed’ of Idol excitement when it was open however . . . closed . . . it was just another empty ‘establishment’. No matter that it held the title for being the first place JJ had ever kissed her, or was home to Uncle’s secret dining room whereby she’d been fancifully courted by the Prince of KPOP himself. Suddenly, it didn’t seem like home. Deserted and hollow, instead it was beginning to feel more like a prison, without the promise of release.

Now, as darkness settled in, the eerie shadows of night began to tease her with thoughts of Uncle’s wandering spirit and the possibility of spending yet another entire holiday alone.

Shaking off a shiver she lowered the cat to the floor, forced away from the photo of his smiling eyes, who just this morning had encouraged her of his protection. Focused instead on the tall, still blinking Christmas tree surrounded by packages, earlier their presence didn’t seem to matter. Tonight . . . they spoke volumes to her isolated state of mind.

Muttering in frustration she kicked the bottom of a large box with one slipper’d toe. “What am I going to do when JJ goes off to the military? I’m only human. I have needs too She-Devil. Two freaking years. Not to mention Junsu will be right behind him. Where does that leave me? Probably right here next year, doing this same damn thing, wishing something would change.” Answering her own question she stared out the window watching it snow suddenly wondering if that’s really what she wanted out of life.

The drafty floor drew her attention away from her pity-party, forcing her toward the back hallway to check the thermostat. With it still a frigid 23 degrees outside she contemplated jacking the heat upward to a cozy 75, wallowing in self-indulgence if just for the night. Padding alongside her, She-devil quickly darted left into the open kitchen (no doubt searching for food).

So, this would be her lonely miserable life after next month. A cat-lady destined to wander the empty halls of a haunted café at night, alone with no friends, or loved one . . . straightening chairs, rewrapping silverware, dusting pictures and quite frankly wishing she were dead.

Flipping lights on as she went, until the entire café resembled a glowing light bulb in the middle of a winter wonderland, she parked both feet firmly, hands on her hips examining the old-fashioned device. *Why was it set on 70 but, registering only 62? No wonder she was cold! Of all the damned luck. Now, on top of being by herself, the freaking heater wasn't going to work? What did she know about any of this? Nothing. She-devil didn't care. She had a cozy little refuge under the staircase to keep her warm.*

“FUCK! WHY? WHY TONIGHT?” Screaming at the top of her lungs, fists balled in anger she stomped her foot already cognoscente of the fact that at 7:45 P.M. on Christmas day night, there would be NO ONE available to come to her aid.

Is this what all business owners faced at one time or another? She didn't want this responsibility. This was Saffron's area of expertise. Calling service people, scheduling maintenance, paying bills. And, where was she? No doubt, holed up in a shack with Baek Seung Jo having crazy good sex. They were supposed to open tomorrow and if they didn't, now it would be 'her' head on the chopping block. Not to mention . . . where would she sleep tonight without freezing her ass off? The later it got, the colder it would get.

As it was, a chill was settling in her bones, forcing her to relinquish her stance in the hallway, heading upstairs in search of warmer clothes.

Scratching her head she was wrought with unanswered questions. Who to call first? JJ? No. He obviously couldn't be disturbed. And, chances were he wasn't capable of helping any other way than to offer up the name of a service company to come take a look at the stupid thing. Maud? SaRae? Playing the violin, surfing and doing volunteer work had most assuredly 'not' prepared her for this.

Tossing clothes out of the wardrobe closet she zeroed in on a warm, blue fuzzy sweater. Having only been here a month and not used to the cold winters, her lack of appropriate outerwear was limited. Flinging it over her head, followed by sweats and a warm pair of wool socks she shoved her phone back in her pocket headed downstairs one more time to assess the damage before calling in the troops.

Cementing her resolve to eventually find herself another place to live she jumped the last few steps of the steep staircase fixated on a pair of furry boots parked at the front door.

Knock-knock-knock

Stopping dead in her tracks at the rapid fire banging, her heart leapt to her throat fearfully. *Why was someone here? No one had called or texted. The sign said they were closed.* Her head darting around the vestibule she searched quickly for a blunt object to protect herself. It was dark and she was alone. Of course . . . snatching an umbrella from the stand beside the door, she crept nearer, weapon in the air, ready for battle. She might not particularly enjoy this prison but (just like the night she'd confronted a wayward JJ) she would defend it none-the-less.

“Read the sign, it says we’re closed. Who is it? What do you want?” Hollering through the thickness of wood she could hear feet crunching and scuffling on the snowy stoop.

“Ahhh, Miss Saffire Ryu?” The unfamiliar voice was firm but questionable.

Quaking from head to toe she hiked the umbrella higher, her mind spinning with scores of frightening scenarios. *He knew her name! Was it the cops? Had something happened? Or was it possible the Aunt’s got a search warrant after all? It would be just like them to come calling on Christmas day (of all things) to ransack the café when she was all alone. Dammit. Why didn’t this godforsaken place have a peephole, or security system or SOMETHING!*

“I said, state your purpose. Who are you?” Pointed tip to the door, Saffire tried desperately to remain calm. She’d poke his eye out if he tried to come in.

More crunching, sounding briefly like another set of footsteps, was followed by furtive whispering. *There were TWO of them? OH HELL NO. She was not opening the door now, no matter what.* A knife to the throat, or gun to the head, was all she could conceivably conjure up in the painfully long seconds until the other set of footsteps could be heard moving away.

“Miss Ryu. I’m a delivery man, names Ming Go. I can show you my badge. I have an important delivery for you.” Not getting an answer the man coughed into his cold hands, glancing back over his shoulder. “Come on. It’s Christmas for heaven’s sake. Why on earth would I come all the way out in this weather just to harass you? I’ve got a family waiting at home too.”

Now the voice was quietly coaxing. She’d seen and heard it before . . . in movies . . . dramas . . . television shows. The best serial killers and thieves stood at your door delivering or selling something!

“I don’t believe you. Whatever it is, if it fits, leave it in the mail box. Otherwise drop it by the door. **BYE.**” Mumbling she leaned against the door gasping for breath, “Stupid, son-of-a-bitch does he think I was born yesterday? A family waiting at home. Yeah, sure.”

The seconds ticked off, registered by the large clock on the coffee bar wall. Cold, icy chills making a mad dash up and down her spine Saffire gripped her stomach feeling like she was going to be sick. When Saffron returned she definitely needed to have a one-on-one with her about putting a surveillance camera at both doors, front and back. This was the twenty-first century after all!

* * * * *

BANGING her forehead quietly against the inside door panel, fifteen long minutes had passed since the sound of crunching footsteps dwindled into nothingness and the start of a vehicle out front pulled away. *Was it safe? Not only had her afternoon turned into a nightmare, now the evening was going to follow it into hell. Between the heater on the fritz, JJ’s relentless absence and strangers at the door she was nearing her breaking point. 119 never sounded so good.*

Talking out loud to herself, she weighed her options before settling on a solution. “I’ll call Maud. That’s it. I’ll tell her about the furnace and keep her on the line while I check outside. That way if someone drop kicks me or knocks me out she’ll know to call the cops. Hah! This dumb blonde, ain’t so dumb.”

Listening to the call roll to voicemail, the answer to her dilemma was looking bleaker by the minute. Should she get 119 on the line first? Maybe the ‘delivery’ man was a photographer stalking her or the café, looking for a reason to get a picture or harass one of them. In an

attempt to be brave she gulped, gripping her phone in one fist and threw open the door, exposing herself to the frigid December night air.

In the glow of the street lights a handwritten proposal in the newly fallen snow of the sidewalk bombarded her heart with renewed energy and happiness. WILL YOU MARRY ME? Hand to her mouth she squealed into her balled up fist, “OH MY GOD! STUPID DELIVERY MAN! Scaring me shitless.”

Swinging her head from one end of the street to the other, no one could be seen dallying, or waiting in the shadows. Her excitement to retrieve what was inside the mailbox unmatched she accidentally dropped her cell phone from between her fingers, hearing it clatter inside the vast, empty space.

Feeling the satiny corner of paper she tugged out a letter beautifully tied in a bright red bow, hosting the biggest diamond ring she'd seen since her garish step-father had proposed to her (equally as garish) mother.



She was going to faint. All this time JJ had led her to believe he was holed up in the hospital with family and instead he was planning the Christmas proposal of the century. Fingers shaking she swiveled back on the porch anxious to seek him out. He was an expert at surprises, where was he hiding? Clearly he would make her come look for him.

“PRINCE JAE! YES . . . YES . . . YES! Where are you . . . You got me! I accept.” Hollering loudly into the winter night, she hesitated, one booted foot on the step listening in the silence, hearing only the random plopping of snow clumps blowing from atop the roof. With no answer forthcoming, darting out into the falling snow, envelope clutched between her sweaty fingers, she raced around the corner of the café and right into . . . Junsu.

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