

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

“I run on . . . Coffee & cuss words.”



Hyun Joong's Cabin in the woods

6:30 A.M.

THE snow had stopped, Saffron sat on the window seat wrapped in Hyun Joong's terry cloth robe. It was a beautiful clear day, the ice crystals on the trees sparkling like diamonds as the sun peeked over the horizon.

Idly brushing her fingers thru the tangled mane of hair, she contemplated her actions over the last twenty-four hours. Even without saying the words, she'd committed herself to Hyun Joong. Might as well put a ring on it. Spying her left hand bare of any band, she flipped it back and forth resembling Beyonce in the popular video.

Drawing her knees up, she laid her head down, observing him as he slept, spread out on his stomach the blanket skimming his shoulder blades. His long bangs, obscuring the handsome face made her insides twitch. *Dammit, she was starting to sound like a broken record. What was wrong with her? Why were doubts still rattling around in her brain? Was it too soon after Ian? Or didn't she deserve to be this happy? Blah blah blah . . .*

Ruffling her tangled hair in frustration she shook her head indecisively. She was making herself crazy. And, let's face it . . . one crazy sister in the family was enough. Rising she strolled to the nightstand noticing it was only 6:30 A.M.

“Debutante, why are you up at the ass crack of dawn? Come back to bed, I'm lonely.” Whipping the covers aside, Hyun Joong jerked the bottom of her robe, catching her as she tumbled into his arms.

“Aishhh, I had to pee.”

Yanking at her hair, he'd given her no time to braid it last night and now they were both paying the price. Gathering up the thick locks he flipped them over his head and around his neck spooning her in the process. “Aishhh? What's this? You're starting to sound Korean. And, don't lie, I've been laying here awake watching you, what's wrong?”



“I'm not lying, I DID have to pee about an hour ago.” Squirming she tried to keep his hands from sneaking into her robe, distracting her from the matter at hand. “Okay, quit and I'll tell you . . . Are we making a mistake Joong? I don't want us to be each other's rebound.” Rolling to face him, she searched his eyes for the answer.

“Why would you think that Hani? Ahhh . . . First, Chung A and I were actually over long before you came along.” Tweaking her nose he added, “And, secondly, I believe ‘Baek Seung Jo’ was your rebound guy in our sorted love triangle. Was he not?”

Lips pursed, she worked the idea around in her head, confusion overtaking her. “Huh? But, you ARE Seung Jo.”

“Yes, and no.” Tucking the comforter under one arm, it rustled around them. “This is the way I see it. From the time you left Chicago it really was all about him. Right?” Nodding in agreement, she reached out, brushing a stray hair from his sleepy, hooded eyes. “So, HE was the one who found you drunk and acting all cute at the drinking tent. Unable to resist your charms he carried you home while you serenaded him in your lovely, but off-key soprano.”

“Yah . . . I DO NOT sing off-key!” Slapping his shoulder weakly, she tried without success to act repulsed by his monotone realism. Sadly, all she could muster up was the inability to

determine how in the world he could wake up looking so beautifully scruffy and unkempt, when she was the epitome of the term ‘a HOT mess’.

“Aigoo, you always this violent so early in the morning?” Wanting to play, he pinned her body to the bed biting down on her lip, feeling the belt of her robe give way underneath him.

“Damn, you’re so horny in the morning! Patience . . . we’ll get there.” Wiggling her hands free she rolled her eyes, re-tightening the belt in order to stop the progression of his probing fingers. “Now, please continue. I want to hear your reasoning.”

Transferring her small hands together into his larger one he eased them over her head, “The rest is a piece of cake. You, ‘Oh Ha Ni’ went about seducing ‘Seung Jo’ in MY very apartment.” A smirk toying at the sides of his mouth, he proceeded untying the robe yet again, roaming inside, brazenly cupping one breast.

“OH.” Gasping at his touch, she was about to lose interest before his lips fluttered a trail down her neck. “Mmmm, now that feels good.” Reveling in the euphoria that came with his foreplay, she was hard-pressed to continue her interrogation. But, continue she did. “Agh-hem . . . so when do YOU sir . . . Kim Hyun Joong enter this little drama?”

“Ohhh, not long after that first night. Remind me to thank YooChun for calling me in JeJu about a certain red-head needing rescue.” Pausing his smile radiated his satisfaction. “And, I believe the rest, my dear . . . is history. I think you never quite wrapped your head around the fact that life in Korea wasn’t like ‘Boys Over Flowers’. Clearly, you couldn’t resist a hunk like me so you were forced to throw ‘Seung Jo’ away and return him back to his second lead status . . . poor guy.” Staring into her clear eyes his head cocked quizzically. “You follow?”

Maybe he was right. Feverishly nodding ‘yes’, even though not sure how to follow his 4-D logic, truthfully, at some point the same reasoning had crossed her mind but, it seemed silly. Now, however . . . coming directly from him, it did make more sense.

Willingly losing the battle and the robe, she laced her long, deft fingers through his thick mane of hair, deciding she would ignore the nagging underlying feeling that her happiness was fleeting.

10:30 AM

THE young woman emerging from the black SUV, (back straight, head held high), was a far cry from the sad and beaten down girl hunched over in the middle of a snowy Gangnam street the night before. A firm grip on the arm of her companion, Kim JaeJoong, Saffire's attitude was uncommonly serene and relaxed.

Like the saying . . . 'When one door closed, another opened', with the possibility of giving up her friendship with Junsu (part of the inevitable downfall accompanying her new relationship) none-the-less she was happy. Ecstatic in fact, to have finally met the man she considered her soul mate. And, why wouldn't she be? Her dream of a 'happily ever-after' was about to come true, just as she'd hoped. Her Prince Jae was exactly that . . . a Prince. Everything she'd ever wanted in a man, handsome; sexy; funny; sensitive; caring . . . the list was never-ending.

And, along with that, Junsu (in the wake of his proposal) had left her with the most incredible opportunity. A chance to turn her life around. An invitation. Quite possibly one of the most important invitations she would ever receive. The white envelope squeezed into the side pocket of her purse was proof she was, more than a café owner. So much more.

Stepping toward the front door of the lofty cabin, golden hair glistening in the late morning sunlight she smiled broadly at JJ whispering, "Thanks for giving me the space I needed last night. Was it worth it?"

"Hell yeah. You're always worth it. And, don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise." His smile sincere, JJ curled her fingers against the crook of his arm. In the light of the glittering snow around them she looked like a 'Disney' snow princess. He was one lucky man!

It was no secret she'd needed some time to process everything that had brought her to this point. But, today was a new day. And, the look on her face earlier this morning when he'd presented her with a crazy, (off the cuff) gift of mac'n cheese, Tylenol and chocolates had been worth every second to him.

Last night, ending with liquor and drunken confessions had thankfully faded away to chocolate, coffee and sex for breakfast. His insides leaping for joy he could still see her languishing complacently in bed allowing him to pamper and seduce her until the clock crept way past 9:00 making them 'officially' late for brunch in the country.

“You ready for this Princess? Headache gone?” His concern was touching as the doorbell buzzed, announcing their arrival.

“Yep. Gamza. That hangover drink you gave me was disgusting but, by God it worked.” Her face pinched with the memory of the bitter drink he’d forced on her at the crack of dawn was a clear reminder of her promise to lay off alcohol going into the New Year. “Why aren’t they answering the door? It’s freezing out here.” Stomping her feet against the snowy stoop she pushed the bell again, still hearing only silence.

“Beats me . . . But, hold on, Pretty sure I still have a key here somewhere.” Digging through his coat pocket JJ produced his key ring, searching out the right one. Slipping it gingerly into the lock, he pushed open the large oak door ushering Saffire inside before him.

Met with the smell of firewood she took in the cozy décor, high ceilings, and large Christmas tree stuffed at the bottom with unopened gifts. Suddenly at ease, she sighed dreamily. It was stunning. Her vision of Saffron’s description had been much smaller, more rustic, and certainly not so updated but, after all . . . look who the owner was.

“Wowww Jae. It’s gorgeous. I want one!” Unraveling the woolen scarf from around her neck, she stepped around him, running her fingers across the fireplace mantel. “No wonder Saffron was so excited for us to come today. This is the kind of place she’s used to hanging out in.”

“Aishhh, it’s alright I guess. It serves a purpose when we all want to get away alone for a while.” Rubbing both hands up and down her arms, JJ scanned the living area his eyes resting on the upstairs loft. “Bet they’re still in bed.” Snickering, he eased himself away from her toward the bottom step.

“You really think so? They knew we were coming right?”

“Yeah but, in their defense we’re nearly an hour late. Just enough time for . . . well . . . you’re a big girl. You know what I mean.”

“Ahhh, yeahhh . . . probably shouldn’t yell up there and bother them then, huh?” Snickering at the insinuation that Saffron and Joong were in the process of ‘getting it on’, upstairs, Saffire tossed her heavy coat over the back of the nearest chair. “So now what? I thought breakfast would already be on the table, I’m hungry.”

“Me too.” Meandering through the large chef’s kitchen JaeJoong opened the fridge in search of something they could snack on while waiting. Met with a pan of already breaded fish, bowl of cut fruit and vegetable frittata along with a pitcher of juice, it was clear someone had at least started on the preparations.

“Yahhh, look, we’ve got a few dishes at least. I know this place like the back of my hand. I can pick up where they left off. How about you? Wanna help?” Motioning her over beside him he met her hesitant eyes encouragingly. “Come on Princess. I know you’re not much of a cook but, at least give it a try.”

So this was where the rubber met the road. Nodding slightly, Saffire hated admitting her lack of skill in the kitchen. She had not inherited the family cooking genes. That was Saffron’s forte.

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“Oh my God, there you are, finally!” Saffron squealed with delight at spying the absentee sister and JJ rummaging around the vast kitchen. “Merry Christmas you two! Welcome to our own winter wonderland.” Arms spread wide she encompassed the grandeur of the cabin, motioning Hyun Joong down from the upstairs landing. “Look, they managed to sneak in without us even hearing them. And, sister . . . he’s got you at the counter, and not for sex. I’m mildly impressed. Good job JJ.”

“NOT FUNNY, YOU!” Waving a large spoon in the air, Saffire chuckled in spite of herself, hoping that Saffron’s twisted sense of humor would dissipate there.

“She’s a natural!” JJ hollered, “In EVERY way . . . Merry Christmas Saffron . . . hyung.”

“OH JAE, I can’t believe it, they’ve got on couples sweaters!” Swatting his arm teasingly, Saffire’s face beamed. “I told you it wasn’t silly. I want one.”

“De, arasseo . . . like you want a cabin in the woods too, yah?” Nodding his head in mock agreement, he stepped away as Saffron’s bare feet cleared the bottom step rushing into Saffire’s waiting arms. Hugging as if they hadn’t seen each other for weeks they grabbed hands, skipping off and into the open living area chattering away like little girls.

Watching them speed away, JJ wiped his soapy hands, before glancing up at Hoong Joong still hanging over the railing. “Hyung . . . Thanks for the invite. Love the sweater,” he announced, winking boyishly.

“De. You heard her, your turn’s coming.” Smirking at the tongue-in-cheek compliment, (knowing he would have to ‘play’ nice where this newly debuted couple was concerned) Joong hiked up his baggy sweat pants, meandering toward the top step. “You know Saffron. Wouldn’t be able to live with her if I didn’t extend an invitation.”

Meeting at the bottom the two friends stood facing each other awkwardly. JJ was more than aware of the fact that Joong wasn’t his biggest fan. His now somber face held the same stoic look it had when he’d talked about Saffire in the apartment only days earlier. Maybe with luck, they’d be able to avoid the ‘elephant’ in the room and concentrate on the holiday.

“Hope you don’t mind, us barging in like that. I still have my key, and we sort of took over in the kitchen.” Stretching, he ignored Hyun Joong, turning his back on the girls (who had taken up residence in front of the Christmas tree).

“Ani. I can take it from here.” Feeling the breeze as he whisked past his friend, Hyun Joong busied himself with brunch, his head stuck in the refrigerator, digging out fruit, juice and condiments. There was no way he would let on that (after JeJu), being in the same room with Saffire, was almost making him sick to his stomach. He was an actor . . . he could do this.

Moments later, loud laughter coming from the backside of the tree alerted the idol boyfriends to the fact that they were still in the presence of two very enamored American ‘fangirls’.

“He didn’t?” Saffire’s question could be heard clearly but, Saffron’s response was muffled in the sound of the oven timer going off.

Shivering at what he could only ‘imagine’ they were talking about, Joong slapped at the button hurriedly, hoping to lure them back out into the open with food, announcing at the top of his lungs, “Come on ladies it’s ready.”

Looking flushed and embarrassed both girls careened over toward the low table, cluttered with side dishes, dropping cooperatively to the floor.

“What was THAT all about Hani?” His eyes darting from one face to another, Hyun Joong sat the last tray of fruit in front of Saffron, his fingers grazing the top of her head questionably. “Did we miss something?”

Staring over at JJ his knees bent to sit. The silence around the table was deafening, all eyes focusing anywhere but, on each other. It was plain to see both couples had their own set of secrets (with none of them willing to discuss out loud).

Finally, coughing slightly, JJ looked down into his lap muttering, “Well . . . since we’re all here. Ummm, Saffire and I DO have something important to tell.”

Jerking her head up Saffire blinked warily, whispering, “We do?”

“Ahhh, de.”

“OH SHIT. You’re not getting married already are you?” The question burst from Saffron’s mouth before she could stop herself. “Whoops. I . . . I’m sorry you two. Really.” Giving her one of his signature ‘confused looks’, Joong frowned shaking his head. *What was she doing right now? Married? Saffire and JJ? The relationship itself was a joke, but marriage . . . not in a million years.*

“Nooo.” Jumping to the chance to nix the idea of a wedding before military service, JJ looked over at Saffire lovingly whispering. “At least not yet. I thought we decided last night to tell them about the invitation Saffire.”

Sighing in relief, a smile crossed her face almost immediately. *Wow. He was actually thinking about marriage someday? To her? For a second, the way he looked, she’d thought he was going to relate the whole sorted story of Junsu, leaving her standing in the cold after an inconceivably gut-wrenching proposal. One of which she hadn’t even relayed all the information to him about yet. Saffron would get all the details of course . . . just not right now.*

“Invitation? What invitation? Are you going somewhere?” Now off the subject of marriage, (assuming the worst) Saffron stood, nearly hurdling the table, rattling the dishes in front of her.

“Hell no. Sit down.” Her smile broadening, Saffire squeezed JJ’s thigh under the table. “Junsu gave me an invitation to audition for the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra.”

Nearly spitting out his tea, Joong’s eyes lurched over to JJ’s. *First talk of marriage, now this. Had he lost his ever-loving mind? He was about to run down the same road he had with SooMin, letting himself hover in a triangle of the worst kind. Not drawing the line between his friend and his lover right from the start, was relational suicide.*



“Babe. You okay?” Slapping his back, Saffron peered at his pinched face concerned. “You shouldn’t drink so fast.”

Her attention back on Saffire, she too suddenly realized what an invitation to audition for this sister, (missing her musical roots) could mean. She was good. Amazing in fact. She would get the position. It was a no-brainer. And . . .

“That means you’re leaving the café aren’t you?” One hand still on Hyun Joong’s back, the other at her throat she felt faint. *It was too soon for that. They’d just met and had barely connected. Too much, too fast.*

Jumping in quickly before she could make any more assumptions, Saffire’s voice was firm. “Didn’t you hear me? Of course not. Why would I? It’s just an opportunity. A chance to play again. And, who’s to say I’ll even get the position. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“I told her to do it.” JJ broke in reaching for a piece of fish. “She didn’t want to at first. Said if she got it, it would interfere with her time at the café.”

Now Hyun Joong ‘was’ even more confused. Why in God’s name would JJ encourage her to accept a gift that clearly spelled out Junsu’s continued affection for her? Wasn’t this the very thing Junsu had done for her in L.A. knowing she was involved with someone else there too? He’d offered her an opportunity she couldn’t refuse, keeping him in the limelight.

Her eyes misting over, Saffron grabbed Saffire’s hand across the table. “That was selfish of me sis, I’m sorry. Of course you would want to pursue your musical career if you had the chance. I have no right to hold you back. Not me OR the café. Uncle started you playing the violin, he knew your passion for it. Just like he understood mine for cooking.”

Joong scoffed inwardly, handing Saffron a napkin to wipe her tears. *She was so gullible sometimes. If she’d been a guy, Saffire would’ve already had her by the balls!*

“I know . . . speaking of Uncle . . .” Still clutching her sister’s hand, Saffire’s voice quivered. “I really do miss him. Especially now, considering . . . everything. He would’ve loved this. Us being here, celebrating together. We all know Christmas was his favorite time of year. I can’t believe I blew him off when he asked me to come see him in Vegas.”

“Yeah, me too. Some daughter’s we turned out to be, huh?” Agreeing wholeheartedly, Saffron sniffed again, feeling the warmth emanating from Saffire’s grasp.

Now partially afraid to address the subject without opening a can of worms Joong wasn't sure could be closed, he waited out the sniveling twins. *How had brunch deteriorated so damn fast? JJ and his 'helpful', 'I'm-the-perfect-boyfriend' attitude that's how. Damn him. He'd given up HIS status last night at the unveiling of the 'couple's' sweaters.*

“It's true . . .” he piped up cautiously, “He WOULD'VE loved being here. And, he wanted all of us to be happy. He was like family to JJ and I too.”

Biting into a piece of melon, the sweet taste oozed down into Saffire's parched throat. “Joong, you never really said when the last time you actually saw him was? A few days before he passed? Did you visit the café as often as Jae?”

Kicking him slightly under the table, JJ's eyes narrowed, wondering why he was bothering to bring up something that would only continue to drag out the pain and hurt of losing the one man they'd all cherished. Today was supposed to be light-hearted and happy.

“Ahhh, nooo. Not really.” Disregarding the inquisitive looks, Joong rose, headed to stoke the fire, his back to the table. “I saw him . . .” he mumbled almost incoherently, “after that.”

“After?” The twin sister's voices rose above the clatter of chopsticks against the glass dishes.

After meant . . . post-death. Not unlike their own experience in the upstairs dining room. Had he freaking visited ALL of them after he died?

“WHEN?” Saffire barked standing as well, now convinced this spirit of her deceased father had dabbled in not only her love life but her sister's as well.

Swinging around, a log in one arm, Joong met her startled expression guardedly. *It needed to be told. But, how? And, what would the fall-out be? Was he willing to push aside his own reservations about Saffire, so she and Saffron could finally have closure in their life? He was obligated. Uncle had never been anything but kind and fatherly to him. It was his duty, no matter what happened.*

“Go on . . . answer the question.” Impatience overtaking her, arms folded, the room around Saffire faded away to nothing more than a ringing in her ears as she waited out his answer.

“I’m not sure.” Rising to the occasion, ignoring JJ’s look of disdain, he barreled forth anyway. “It might have been a dream, but clearly he was speaking to me. It was last weekend at JeJu.”



“What the hell?” Now standing as well, Saffron left poor JaeJoong defenseless to stop the ghost train barreling through the cabin, horn blaring. “Why didn’t you tell me this last night when we talked?” Questioning his timing, now she was seemingly as agitated as Saffire.

“Because you needed to hear it, together.” Shrugging his shoulders he yelped in his own defense, “I don’t know why the hell he picked me to tell!”

“Wowww . . .” Turning to JJ, Saffire fingers clutched the soft mohair of her sweater. “Did you know about this?”

“Ahhhh . . .”

“YOU DID!” Bewilderment evident, she dashed to the other side of the table, grabbing Saffron by the sleeve. “Why would he tell them something he hasn’t told us?”

“I don’t know. What exactly did he say Joong?” Firing off the first question quickly, Saffron’s mind spun with all the ‘near’ conversations (starting at JeJu) they’d had over the last week involving her newly discovered ‘father’ Young Yae. He’d never even mentioned it once. *Did he not trust either she or Saffire with the information? Why not?*

“It was complicated.” Feeling like he was standing in front of a firing squad Hyun Joong blinked at the wall of bodies nervously. This was NOT going to be easy.

“Most of it was about me. And, I didn’t think you needed to know all the gory details. Either of you.” Pausing his voice lowered in an attempt to steady himself. “In the end, he mentioned hating he couldn’t be more involved in your lives and couldn’t tell you the truth about the family situation and everything. I don’t remember what he said word for word, but he admitted loving you both very much, and wanted the best out of life for you.”

Stopping at the silence in the room he finally laid the log down on the hearth, his knees quivering as he plopped beside it.

“He didn’t want you to blame yourselves. For any of what happened over the years.” The sound of breathing filling in the gaps of the still crackling fire, each of them began to slip into their own thoughts of what he’d just revealed.

Not understanding why, even JJ, (concerned that the day would be ruined after the announcement), was certain his hyung had done the right thing in the end.

“I’m just the messenger.” Were Joong’s final words. “He screwed up. What else is there to say?” Back up, pressing both palms to his knees he scooted the log atop the yellowish flame. “Food’s getting cold. Let’s eat.”

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3:30 P.M.

THE afternoon was wearing down, the sun hitting the snow covered countryside, glistening through the uncovered windows.

“NO . . . It’s my turn!” Saffire protested leaning over the Jenga tower, wobbling precariously beneath her. “You need to stop talking JJ. You’re going to knock it over just by breathing.” Studying it carefully she examined the exposed blocks. “Shit. This is the only one left that’s even possible. Everyone QUIET!” Fingers poised she picked at it gingerly, watching as it slipped out easily, the top still leaning dangerously. “HAH! YAYYYYY.”

Holding it up for the rest to examine, the piece read . . . PICK TWO PEOPLE TO KISS. Looking across at Hyun Joong and JJ she grinned.

“AWWW HELL NO!” Kicking his stocking feet out disgustedly, Hyun Joong glared at JJ his face blushing a bright shade of crimson.

“Yes, yes, yes . . . I wanna see this.” Clapping her hands Saffron bounced around on the floor beside him, nearly knocking over the Jenga pieces in her enthusiasm. “Lip to lip. OMG. Photo op, Where’s my phone.”

“ANI!” Snatching her by the wrist as she rose, reaching for her cell on the end of the sofa, Hyun Joong closed his eyes in despair. *Why did he agree to play sex games like this with JJ? It wasn't the first time he'd been put in a compromising situation, and probably wouldn't be the last.* “NO PICTURES.”

“Awww, come on Joongie. Just one.” Imitating a smooching sound, JJ leaned in taking full advantage of his friend's uneasy situation.

“F NO. You've had sushi, beer AND smoked a cigarette . . .” Turning his attention back to Saffire he cringed. “Ewww, how can you kiss that?”

“Okay, okay. On the cheek then. GEEZ . . . BABY.” Snorting at Joong's inability to play fair Saffire tossed Saffron's cell phone to her, inadvertently knocking over the tower, the pieces scattering across the hard wood floor in every direction.

“I WIN! I'll round up the pieces.” Hands in the air, knowing Hyun Joong wasn't about to kiss JJ anywhere Saffire was glad the game was over. *Why was he being such a poor sport anyway? Ever since they'd arrived he'd been stand-offish and sullen. She needed a one on-one with sister.*

Crawling under the bottom branches of the Christmas tree, she moved packages and stuffed animals about searching for the final wooden game piece. “HEY! Saffron. Isn't Joong gonna open these before he leaves for the military in a few weeks? I helped JJ open his.”

Over on the far side of the tree, Saffron fingered the small package in her hand, already anxious to see what lay beneath the shiny paper, dotted with fuzzy little red hearts. *Military? A few weeks?* Popping her head up, she snapped, “What did you say?”

Squiggling back up to her knees, Saffire shook a large box covered in pink curly ribbon and lip stick kisses. “I said . . . Let's help him open these. Gosh, he leaves in around three weeks. He won't mind, will you Joong?”

Joong's head popped up at the question. *HELL YES I MIND! The cat was out of the bag. After putting up with sister Saffire for the 'entire' day, now, not only had she invaded his quiet holiday space, she'd stolen his friend, spilled his biggest secret, AND made a mockery of his fangirls. More alcohol, that's what was needed. If he could get Saffron drunk, maybe she'd forget this fiasco of a holiday, and he'd be off the hook.*

Tucking the present under one arm, Saffron stomped across the floor, red hair flying behind her, eyes burning with anger. “SO, just WHEN were you going to tell me this little TIDBIT of information? The DAY BEFORE?”

Cowering slightly, Joong scrambled to his feet, reaching for the host of empty beer bottles cluttering the coffee table. “Aigoo, ah . . . soon. Like tonight. Mianhae, it just slipped my mind. I was waiting for the right moment.”

“MY ASS. Nothing SLIPS your mind, you’ve got the memory of an elephant. And, WHAT right moment would that be? When I’ve had too much to drink, don’t care and I’m puking my guts out in the toilet?” Tears threatening to slip down her cheeks she ignored the questioning stares of JJ and Saffire attempting to melt into the background of the darkening living room in lieu of their argument.

Dumping the bottles, the loud clanking sound echoed through the awkward silence in the room. “Saffron. Come on babe. That’s not it at all. You KNOW I’ve been busy. Really busy.” Attempting to cool the fire of her fury he reached toward her not surprised when she turned on her heel, headed for the staircase. *Dammit.*

“JJ told Saffire, and they barely know each other.” Shouting behind her, she took the steps two at a time, the pounding louder and louder with each determined thrust.

Should he follow her? What ‘about’ JJ and Saffire? Hadn’t they had done enough damage? Wishing they would just go home and leave them to their own defenses, he cursed out loud starting after her. “Son of a bitch . . . Saffron . . .”

“DON’T . . . I can’t bear to look at you right now.” Disappearing into the upstairs bedroom, red hair flying behind her the door slammed definitively.

“Oh shit. I’ll go after her.” Rushing past Hyun Joong, (one toe poised for flight) Saffire ignored the snap of his head, and look of distaste as she sailed by. “I know how to smooth things over.”

But, could she really? Especially in light of her own issues. Why would Hyun Joong keep such a thing from Saffron anyway? Did he have an ulterior motive?

“Let her go.” JJ muttered, stuffing both hands in his pockets, beginning to realize that he and Joong were about to hit a wall neither of them had been prepared for.

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HER back to the closed door, Saffron ripped into the fangirl present, scattering wrapping paper around the room, tissue flying in the air over her head. *FUCK. It was an ugly hand-made cloth doll, with scraggly yellow yarn hair, mitten fingers and buttons for eyes. Were his fans ten for God's sake?* Her hands shaking angrily she dragged the doll from its cardboard home, her chest heaving at the insinuation of the signatures and well-wishes written from top to bottom.

SARANGHAE OPPA . . . COME BACK SAFELY . . . A KISS FOR GOOD LUCK . . . XOXOXO . . .
LOVE AND GOOD WISHES . . . HWAITING . . .

Smacking its limp body across the top of the tall wooden chest she screamed at the top of her lungs. “WHY DIDN’T YOU TELL ME?” Stopping long enough to get a better grip she railed the doll across it again, “I SLEPT WITH YOU AND EVERYTHING, AND NOW YOU’RE LEAVING ME.” One more time and she was certain she was going to rip the article in pieces. “THREE WEEKS . . . THREE MOTHER FUCKING WEEKS. UGHHH, I HATE YOU!”

Hearing the pounding get louder by the minute, Saffire knew hurricane Saffron was gearing up and about to blow the roof off, if she didn’t get to her and quickly.

“SAFFRON. CALM DOWN. It isn’t that bad.” Arms out she clutched her sister tightly, feeling her go limp at the touch, whispering, “I thought you weren’t that invested. What did I miss?”

Collapsing against her Saffron whined, “Stupid asshole. I feel in love with him, that’s what you missed.”

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LOOKING into the emptied staircase, JaeJoong sighed, his questioning directed at his friend. “And, you think I’m babo? What the hell were YOU thinking?”

Reaching for the lamp beside the sofa, Hyun Joong turned the switch watching the light flood the lofty room. “I don’t know man. She just figured out how she felt about me. Like yesterday.”

“And? So what? It’s not like the two of you haven’t been a couple since you first laid eyes on each other. She deserved to know.”

“Like you’re innocent ‘Cotton Candy Prince’. What the hell are you doing? Encouraging her to take a gift like that from Junsu. You WANT to have him hanging around for the next few months when you’re already gone? I thought you were smarter than that.”

Fighting back, Joong slipped behind the sofa table, picking at the bowl of peanuts within easy reach. “We’re both thinking out our ass, if you ask me.”

“Maybe.” Having to agree, JJ knew he was caught between a rock and a hard place where Junsu was concerned. The friendship between he and Saffire had gone on way to long for him to stop it. And, he was family. It was like refusing to let your brother socialize with your wife. “I have to support what she loves. No matter who else is involved. She’d do the same for me.”

Emptying the bowl into his hand Joong listened at the bottom of the stairs, hoping to determine what was going on up in the bedroom.

“Quit eves-dropping. You don’t know women at all do you? Even after everything I’ve tried to teach you.” JJ snipped, reaching out for a few left over nuts in Joong’s palm.

“I . . . don’t know women? Aishhh, look who’s talking, Mr. ‘I’ll-just-slip-into-the-icy-waters-of-the-Han’ over a damned couples ring.” His countenance mocking, Hyun Joong patted JJ on the shoulder, then on up to the side of his face. “Let’s be honest. We BOTH have issues where women are concerned.”

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Guest Bedroom

SITTING on the bed, dabbing her eyes, Saffron knew it would be like beating a dead horse to attempt to change the situation now. Leaning into Saffire’s shoulder her round blue eyes blinked sadly.

With Joong leaving, and Saffire auditioning for a spot in the symphony where did that leave her? No matter what she said, her sister would surely be more than pre-occupied with a burgeoning career, and the cafe, along with her would begin to take a back seat.

Still unfamiliar with running this new business as a sole owner, she feared even Maud and Sarae would encourage Saffire to pursue what she loved best. *Damn Junsu anyway. Why did he have to keep sticking his nose in where it didn’t belong?* She’d liked him at the start. He was an Idol after

all, and Saffire was enthralled with him, but now that JJ was in the mix, he was just a fly in the ointment. He needed to go away and leave her alone.

“You okay now?” Perking up at the proof that Saffron might finally be winding down, Saffire patted her sister’s leg lovingly. *This day . . . hell this weekend . . . hadn’t fared much better than JeJu had.*

“Yeahhh . . . Hey, can I ask you something?” Picking at the yarn hair on the hand-made doll Saffron stared over into Saffire’s large, round eyes a rare look of pure honesty crossing her previously blank face.

“Sure. Anything. Just maybe not what JJ likes in bed.” Snickering, Saffire slapped the bedspread, picturing a naked JJ sprawled out on the bedroom floor in the moonlight.

“Ahhh, no. His best friend is Joong, and they’re a couple of horny guys. They probably like the same damn things. Blow jobs, hand jobs and doggy style.” Laughing along with her, Saffron tugged at her sister’s hair until they were sprawled out on their backs, gazing up into the wooden ceiling beams.

“Mmmm, that’s pretty close. Anyway. Go on. What do you wanna know? I’ll try for an answer.”

“Why would Junsu go to the trouble of getting you a tryout for the symphony if you didn’t give him any reason to think you would stay with him?”

The silence grew as Saffire mulled over the answer carefully. *What would Saffron say if she knew? She wanted to tell her. But, for some reason . . . after what had just happened with Joong, and the way he had been all day, she didn’t know if she dared. Junsu’s proposal could never get back to JJ. Or the fact that they’d slept together first.*

“Well? I don’t hear anything.” Now convinced that her sister was keeping something from her, Saffron leaned up on one elbow poking Saffire in the ribs. “Tell me. You know I won’t tell Hyun Joong or JJ. Promise.”

“Pinky swear?” Little finger in the air, Saffire held her to the request. Curling their fingers together, Saffron cocked her head. “Is it bad? You didn’t sleep with him again before JJ got there last night did you?”

Now, she was grasping at straws. It had been a lonely day for Saffire yesterday with no one there but the memories of Uncle and the cat. God only knew what the unpredictable girl would do.

“God no. I can’t believe you’d ask me that. Especially after spitting out, “Are we getting married?” *Did she dare tell her more?*

“Well, I’m finding out you’re pretty impulsive sometimes. Obviously, he came over like he promised. Right?” Sitting up she captured her knees, now more than mildly interested in her sister’s triangle love life, yet again.

“Yeah. He did. He came with a ring. An engagement ring, and a proposal.”

There, it was finally said. The look of shock and dismay crossed Saffron’s face quickly, before realizing if she reacted badly, more damage could be done than already had been.

“Oh my God. No wonder you don’t want JJ to know. It’s almost as bad as what happened at JeJu huh? Do you think he’d be mad if he knew? He seems to be pretty head over heels right now.”

“I don’t know. Maybe . . . maybe not. But, just in case . . . PLEASE don’t bring it up. Especially not today. We’ve managed to push through it, and last night I drank and almost said wayyy too much. He’s been an angel so far today. Really great. And, we ARE going to try and make it work. He does love me. He said so. Maybe there will be wedding bells someday.”

Hesitating again, Saffron’s chin dropped to her knees. *Who was she to judge? She was just as confused as anyone, and Saffire deserved to be happy. That’s what Uncle wanted. But, secrets?*

“You’re keeping a serious set of secrets Saffire. You of all people know what happened with mother.” That seemed to be the only thing she could think of to say that made sense. From this moment forward, she could only be responsible for her own life.

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