

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“COFFEE keeps me going . . . UNTIL it’s time for wine.”



(Part 1)



Friday, December 19th, 2014

5:30 P.M.

JeJu Island - 'Toscana Hotel'

JUNSU sat forward in the balcony chair overlooking the circular entrance. It was pushing 5:30. He had been notified the plane was running a little late. His last text message was they should be pulling up at any moment. The sister's parents were already seated in the VIP dining room, having cocktails.



The sun was going down in a blaze of fiery glory, the silhouette of a transparent moon already visible in the colors of the sky. The stream of cars, limo's and taxi's pulling up to the front doors of the hotel were indicative of the crowd that was gathering for tomorrow's upcoming festival. But, he couldn't think about that right now.

His mouth dry with anticipation of seeing Saffire, he leisurely sipped his glass of wine, reveling in the few rare moments of peace and quiet, aware of the fact that the second he descended down toward the lobby, the normal chaos of his presence would begin. It was hard for him to spend time alone once he exited his private suite, whether it be to eat in the restaurant, look for gifts in his own shops or attempt to walk the halls checking out the condition of the hotel in general. He was after all . . . one of the owners.

In truth, he should have been attending the dinner downstairs with his other JYJ members. Now all he could hope for was that hyung Jae, wouldn't catch wind of what he was up to this evening.

His secret was safe so far . . . but JJ was like a dog in heat when it came to his women, and if he sniffed out Saffire in the general vicinity . . . Junsu knew he was done for!

Focused on a group of American tourists stepping out of a small shuttle bus, babies and children in tow, taking pictures of the hotel, he couldn't help but concentrate on the unusual events surrounding the Ryu family in general, and his own complicated relationship with Saffire.

Having met her father years ago, quite by accident on business in Seoul, it seemed impossible that the man never once mentioned having a daughter, (or two for that matter). *What father in their right mind didn't talk about his own children?*

By the same token, Saffire 'Renault' (as Junsu had known her), never mentioned names when speaking of either parent, and never included him in her inner family circle, only complaining tirelessly about her mother's, cold demeanor, unacceptance and absence in her life.

Now here they were, all entrenched in a strange twist of fate involving not only the sister's but Uncle Ryu's death as well. To him, Young Jae's brother, Kyong Ryu was merely a business associate, and he was regretting having agreed to make an appearance at the dinner meeting that could perhaps suck him headlong into their private emotional vortex.

Having seen photos on the wall of the café of Saffire's mother, Sandra along with Kyong, he wasn't so sure how to contend with her either. She came across as relatively harmless, what with her massive diamonds, perfectly coiffed hair and expensive designer dress . . . but, with her nose stuck too high in the air for his liking, and the fact that she flirted (a 'lot') too much . . . it made the onset of their real first meeting, awkward and uncomfortable. Now in retrospect, the years of Saffire's complaints, were beginning to ring true.

Sighing he stood, cracking his back to relieve the kinks, and tapping his ear piece heard his bodyguard say quietly . . . "Come down boss. They're pulling in."

"YES!" Fisting the air his excitement evident to only himself, he slipped inside the warm room, headed for the hall elevators, hoping the way was clear.

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“**W**HERE? You sent them to the underground garage?” Junsu asked, tipping his head toward the suited man at his side. “Wae? I requested they be escorted in the front.”

“Too many fans and photographers this evening sir,” was the quiet reply.

“Arasseo. Well, make sure their luggage gets to the Suite. I’m headed upstairs to meet them in the dining room.”



“De.”

Of course, he knew. What was he thinking? With witnessing the festivities already in full swing, not to mention the conference, the place was swarming with fans, media and photographers. None-the-less, he would have preferred the girls experience entering ‘his world’ first hand at the front doors of the lobby, not ushered in undercover in the dank, concrete garage. He hoped they would understand, he was doing it to protect them at least temporarily. As it was, once they hit the upstairs lobby the exposure would be unavoidable. His palms sweating profusely he swung back around, his merry whistle to the upbeat Christmas music testimony to his anticipation of what was to come. *It was going to be a great night!*

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5:30 P.M.

'Toscana' Hotel – Lobby

JAEJOONG stared at Yoochun, confused as to why Junsu wasn't meeting them for dinner after practice.

"What did he say he was doing?" His face crinkled in disbelief he thought back to that morning when Junsu mentioned something about a 'meeting' of sorts, and to expect him late for dinner. At the time he hadn't indicated the possibility of missing it entirely.



This was about to be a media nightmare without him. The Idols, festival film crew and photographers always joined in the final hours before the big day and now it seemed, Junsu was shirking his responsibilities to the group? *What the hell?*

Yoochun shrugged his shoulders, digging through his backpack for earbuds. "Don't ask me. You two are the twins. If that's all he said, I'm clueless too. Since he got this hotel, he doesn't tell me anything anymore."

"Well damn." JJ cursed in mock disgust. "That means I'm going to have to go looking for him, and that's gonna be a disaster. Check this place out, it's teeming with fans and cameras. He has to at least make an appearance, freaking meeting or not. And I should go to the room and clean up first, change clothes."

"I hear ya. That's where I'm headed. Fans and photos at 6:00, dinner at 6:30. Just try not to be late. I don't want to brave this one alone either, 'cause we both know what the gossip will be. You've found yourself some chick and are holed up in a room somewhere. We definitely don't need that kind of publicity this weekend. It's all about the 'families', remember?"

"De. Arasseo. I'm getting ready to text him right now. Maybe I can avoid running the halls."

Already reaching for his cell, JJ couldn't stop his thoughts from revolving around the beautiful Saffire, who he'd opted out of confiding in, as to his weekend whereabouts. Sadly, Yoochun was right about the misunderstanding of being seen with an American girl on his arm, no matter what the circumstances. If she had shown up despite that, he would have been hard pressed to keep his focus intact. Even dwelling on her now, was shifting his libido into overdrive.

But, the more pressing issue at hand was the missing Junsu. He was the hotel owner, and JJ understood his reasons for being AWOL to some extent, but this weekend wasn't just about the hotel, it was about them, as a group. He and Yoochun would be enlisting soon, and the three of them in concert together 'anywhere' was essential to keeping 'JYJ' in the forefront of their continual, surging popularity.

"Junsu, hyung. Where the hell are you?" he muttered, texting as he bounded into the stairwell to avoid the crowded elevators in the lobby area. "Dammit!"

With no response, (after spotting a barrage of squealing fangirls headed his way), he dragged the room card from his pocket, changing his mind reluctantly, and heading for the suite he and Yoochun shared instead. Hanging around the halls searching for their third member, would only cause trouble and waste precious time. He needed to get ready for dinner.

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YOOCHUN stepped away as well, opting for the elevator instead of the stairs. Practice had been grueling, and his choice was to brave the commotion rather than take the numerous flights of stairs up to his room.

Whistling mindlessly, he tapped the 'UP' button again, unable to disregard a couple of remaining giggly fangirls, reaching for their cell phones in earnest.

"Selca? De?" the one girl asked, hoping for a positive answer, already lifting hers toward his tired but smiling face.

"Arasseo, de."

Posing between them, he barely detected the elevator on the opposite side open, Junsu making a hurried exit, surrounded by his usual posse of bodyguards. By the time the Selcas were over, the waiting crowd at his back had shuffled him on inside (the doors closing) making him powerless to step out and respond.

Scrambling for his phone, he texted Junsu quickly, hoping for an equally as rapid response. However, in the time it took for the elevator to reach the 4th floor, he still hadn't received an answer. Whatever his hyung was up to, he had already morphed into hotel owner mode, leaving

‘JYJ’ and their business behind. *When the ‘Toscana’ was involved . . . this was Junsu . . . there would be no stopping him until he was ready to ‘be’ stopped.*

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5:30 P.M.

‘Toscana’ Hotel – Kim Hyun Joong’s Room

THE shower was warm on Hyun Joong’s bare chest. Head back, he washed his hair, letting the water careen over him momentarily, relieving some of the stress in his neck and shoulders. Without much time, this was at least another opportunity to calm his rattled nerves and contemplate the future of the weekend.



If only he could have brought the lovely ‘Ha Ni’ (Saffron) with him today. She would have loved to see him perform, and he would have reveled in having her adoring, sexy face front row in the audience. But . . . knowing the level of her feelings, no matter what she told him, he knew it was an impossibility.

Besides that . . . there was Chung A to consider, who knew the festival was on his calendar and managed to finagle herself a spot in the onstage crew. Being pregnant and unable to dance hadn’t stopped her. Not one little bit. Determined to ditch her at dinner, he was certain she would be front and center at the upcoming ‘fan meet’ due to convene in less than 45 minutes.

“F”, he murmured, tomorrow’s televised concert would only serve to make her clingier and determined to announce to the world that he belonged to her. It wasn’t true, and he was desperate to come up with a plan to stop it.

Water dripping from his naked body, he wrapped the massive white hotel towel about his waist, going over his last ‘Set’ in his head. (Anything to take his mind off Chung A.) Hair, teeth, mouthwash, a little make up, and a dash of cologne. The clock was ticking down, and he was forced to hurry.

What to wear? Realizing he should have covered those bases before getting here, he flew naked to the open suitcase, digging for something unwrinkled and appropriate to take him through both the fan meet ‘and’ dinner.

Black T? Striped? White? V neck or not? Dammit. Flopping down on the foot of the massive king-sized bed, he shot backwards until his body molded comfortably into the soft mattress. Could he not just stay right here for the next hour? He needed an energy drink, he was exhausted already. He needed a back rub. He needed Saffron. Closing his eyes he imagined she was hovered over the top of him kneading his shoulders and down his bare chest to his groin, her long auburn hair tickling his cool skin.

As the vision took shape he licked his lips, wishing he could smell her scent, and taste the flavored lipstick she wore. She energized him . . . gave him a sense to go on. He wished she were here. *Was it too late to call her? Maybe having her come 'would' be the right thing to do. Chung A could kiss his ass. Why did he always go about letting her control his life?*

As the thought started to take root, he reached for his cell, determination in his heart. But, out of nowhere he heard the strangest voice in the far recesses of his mind. An voice sounding oddly enough like Young Jae Rue. A mere whisper of a warning . . . *"Don't do it. She deserves better."*

"Huh?" Joong bolted up in bed, his head swiveling from one side of the empty room to the other. *Nahhh, surely he was just dozing off and hearing things.* So opting out of the text message, he roused himself up, to continue his clothing dilemma. He would have to go it alone.

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5:40 P.M.

'Toscana' Hotel – Underground Parking Garage

ONE would have thought the long, black stretch limo housed two important dignitaries the way it slid soundlessly into the underground garage, cruising to a seamless halt. Behind them, conference attendees, Helen and Jeff Cobb scrambled for their personal belongings strewn out across the backseat of the taxi, as it too stopped slowly.

Peering out the window at the tail lights of the limo, Helen's comments and curiosity were beginning to wear on her husband. She hadn't stopped chattering about the inhabitants of the vehicle, (two stylish American girls) all the way here from the small island airport. Now that they had arrived, he hoped maybe she would give up the unending inquisition.

“OH! Hurry up and get out dear.” Helen barked with excitement, wondering if the blonde and red-headed girls were movie stars, or maybe one of Korea’s movie star, girlfriends, like Psy, or maybe even Rain . . . So far between the first class plane ride over JeJu and wonderful informative cab driver, her first worldwide S. Korean conference was turning out to be the adventure of a lifetime.

Nudging her exasperated husband in the ribs she literally shoved him out the barely open door, in her haste to get another glimpse of the two glamorous young women stepping across toward the inner hallway.

Certainly they were important in some fashion? Rushing to smooth her hair and dress down, the middle-aged housewife licked her lips, smiling coquettishly at the guard in the dark suit, opening the glass doors for the two women.



The tall blonde, donned in a wickedly stylish white gown, indicative of an ‘Ice Princess’, tossed her hair behind her with abandon, confident in the way she towered over the smaller, man at her side.

What was he? Bodyguard? Friend? Acquaintance? Policeman? FBI? Did Korea even have FBI? Stopping short of the duo’s backside, she examined the short party dress of the other woman, and reddish braid that cascaded down her slender back. ‘Ice Princess’ had to be an actress and ‘Redhead’, her assistant. One glamorous, one attractive.

Jeff lumbered up behind his wife, eyeing the curvy rear-end of the ‘Ice-Princess’, a sly smile on his pudgy face. He hadn’t gotten a good look at the two coming out of the airport and slipping into the limo, but now that they had arrived . . . *Holy SHIT! She was a knockout.* And the saucy looking redhead behind her had long slender legs that went on forever. Whoever they were, he was hoping they would make an appearance at the conference, somewhere along the way.

The pinch to his upper arm, reeling him back into reality along with the hushed voice of his ‘spouse’, was clearly a warning in disguise.

“Tsk, tsk. She can’t possibly be wearing a bra.” Helen clucked at him, hoping the gleam in his eye wasn’t what she thought it was. “Were you looking at her butt?” she hissed. “Shame on you. I should’ve known. Once a butt man, always a butt man. Behave yourself.” Slapping him

across the shoulder playfully, she smiled in spite of herself. “She IS beautiful though huh? Looks like a Barbie doll.”

Coiling up to peck her still smooth cheek, Jeff grinned. “I prefer the red-head darling. Reminds me of you when you were young.” He wasn’t stupid. He knew the moment he showed his continued adoration for the once striking girl he had fallen in love with years ago, she would be putty in his hands.

“Flattery. Gets you everywhere.” Helen giggled back, her eyes never leaving the women in front of them, despite the kiss. “Bet she doesn’t have any underwear on. Ain’t no way she could’ve pulled off that skintight dress otherwise.” She scoffed quietly, tugging Jeff along in order to make it into the elevator with them as soon as the doors opened. But, much to her dismay the aide in the dark suit stood aside, one hand up in denial, as the door began to close on the three of them inside.

“Damn. Hurry and hit that UP button for the other elevator,” she ordered her husband, adding in warning, “and don’t forget the luggage. We aren’t rich enough for a porter like those two.”

Now her curiosity at its peak, all she wanted to do was follow them, wherever they were going, and deal with the conference and finding their own room later.

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6:00 P.M.

‘Toscana’ Hotel Elevator

SAFFIRE lunged into the awaiting elevator, Saffron at her side. Giggling uncontrollably at the steady stare and peaked face of the bodyguard ordered to accompany them, the girls couldn’t help but wonder why Junsu had insisted they have ‘back up’. Their parents knew they were coming, there was a festival and a conference going on. They were merely two little minnows in a sea of exotic fish. Not much to look at, and certainly not worth coveting.

Uplifted by the festive holiday decorations and songs surrounding them, Saffron stepped back against the mirrored wall, instinctively humming ‘Jingle Bells’. She was excited to be back among smart savvy business people, and even happier Junsu had given her and Saffire a reason to avoid any more than dinner, with their parents.

Catching the holiday spirit, Saffire curled her tall frame about the shorter Asian man searching for a name tag. “Heyyy, ahhh . . . you . . . what’s your name? Sing along. It’s Christmas.”

“Stanley.” His voice came across deep and foreboding, but his brown eyes twinkled mischievously at the two behind him in the small space. *Junsu was a lucky man. Beautiful American woman, accompanying him to dinner. But what else was new? The Idol always surrounded himself with stunning women. Tonight would be no exception.*

“Well . . . STANLEY . . . Can we expect you to follow us around ALL night?” Saffron quipped, leaning back against the railing, hearing the 2nd floor ding, announcing their arrival to the main lobby. “’Cause we’re definitely not THAT important. Are we sister?”



“Nope.” Saffire swayed back and forth in front of him, hands behind her back, breasts pushed forward almost to his shoulders. “What time do you get off anyway? ‘Cause after dinner we’re headed for the bar, and some killer drinks. Any suggestions? Maybe Junsu would let you join us.”

Without saying another word, or confirming his status to stay by the girl’s side the entire night, Stanley shrugged his shoulders with casual importance, holding the door as it opened into the crowded lobby, bustling with media, fans and conference-goers.

“Damn, he’s a tough nut isn’t he?” She uttered, stepping out, the animated redhead behind her.

Between the photographers, fans and patrons, it didn’t take long for the ‘sharks’ to begin circling about them. They were used to crowds, and knew how to play to a camera and take control. But, from what little bit Saffire knew about Saffron’s life, she was more of a meeting and seminar’s person, while on the other hand, her comfort zone was the limelight of the concert arena. That being said, neither of them had been prepared for ‘this’! What had Junsu always told her? Be yourself, and there would never be anything to worry about. Now she wasn’t so sure.

Feeling like royalty, clutching hands, the two sisters nodded and smiled through flashes of camera bulbs, and gawking onlookers, allowing Stanley to create a path down the corridor in front of them, even in their excitement, attempting to remain and look humble.

Now, Saffire couldn't help but be curious. This wasn't just a hotel conference, it was also the scene of an upcoming KPOP Festival. So, in the midst of all that, where was 'Prince' Jae and 'Seung Jo'? She and his 'Oh Ha Ni' were about to enter a hornet's nest of hot, young idols, without them, Junsu or not. If they were going to get through this dinner and the remainder of the weekend, they needed to put on their fierce American personas and kick some ass. For Saffron that wouldn't be a problem. For her . . . it would take alcohol. And lots of it.

"So Ms. Corporate mogul. What did you do with 'Oh Ha Ni'? Leave her back in the limo? You're pretty frickin' hot for a café owner," she muttered as they walked.

For the first time since meeting her auspicious sister, Saffire was envious of Saffron in her exquisite designer dress, with her long fiery, copper-colored hair, quiet confidence written all over her face.

"You're right. I am huh? And 'Oh Ha Ni' hasn't gone anywhere, she's under here," she smirked, having checked herself in the mirrored elevator wall only moments ago. She had to admit . . . the highlights, darker make-up and new fancy outfit . . . did make her look pretty f'ng amazing! Almost back to her normal corporate Chicago-styled self.

Taking her cue from Saffire's mention of 'Oh Ha Ni', she speculated inwardly about whether Hyun Joong really was in attendance at the hotel wishing at some guttural level she would get lucky and actually run across him. "Did you manage to see the sign and who's playing the festival?" she asked.

Saffire her face steady, responded matter-of-factly, "Nooo, who could read the list in the 1.1 seconds it took us to pass it outside? All I know is . . . it was freaking long. Looks like every damn idol in Korea is here. That'll be great for networking though. But, I AM sort of pissed that JJ didn't trust me enough to tell me he would be here. I told you earlier I thought he was. The massive 'JYJ' sign out front proves it. What did he think I was gonna do? Tie myself to him the entire weekend or something? Clearly, we're not on the same level."

Saffron toyed with the bottom of her long braid wondering why her sister thought JJ 'needed' to check in with her before doing something, (especially work related). She and Hyun Joong had a closer relationship, and she 'still' wasn't sure he was in attendance. And if he wasn't . . . it certainly wouldn't be the end of the world.

“Not sure why he thought I wouldn’t find out.” Saffire rambled on, “We run a damned café specifically for the Idols. Most of which ARE probably here this weekend,” she sighed, adding. “It was nice of Junsu to give us this opportunity though.”

“Us? You mean, you? This isn’t even remotely about me. So face it. This is your chance to see what life would be like as Mrs. Kim Junsu. Look around.” Spreading one arm wide Saffron scanned the crowded area, down the hall of shops. “This could ALL be yours. Pretty impressive huh?”

“OH HELL NO!” Saffire hissed bluntly. “Not ready for that!”

“Well fine then. Just blow him off, we can forget about JJ and Hyun Joong and after dinner we’ll go enjoy a girl’s night. We wanted to come have fun this weekend anyway, right?”

“Not sure I wanted to get this dressed up just to have a girl’s night out? You’re kidding right?” Saffire somewhat whined. “Did you have this planned all along? You can be pretty underhanded sometimes Oh Ha Ni.”

“Sure, why not. It’s my corporate side coming out. It’s called turning lemons into lemonade. Besides you said it yourself . . . every Idol in Korea is here. You never know who we might run into. We are here to network for the café . . . at least ‘I’ am.” Turning around they both smiled innocently at Junsu’s appointed bodyguard, hoping he wasn’t eaves-dropping on their pointed conversation.



Smiling back, the kind man stopped them at the entrance to the main dining room, shaking his head slightly, announcing, “This is where I leave you in good hands ladies,” then, winking he whispered, “VIP lounge down the hall. Be sure to try a ‘bomb drink’. Tell the bartender Stanley sent you, he’ll fix you up.” Thinking, after hearing their conversation . . . the two might well be ‘trouble’ with a capital ‘T’ and Mr. Junsu probably wasn’t so lucky after all. He was glad he was being relieved in less than half an hour. Stepping aside to allow a savvy, well-dressed and (somewhat) arrogant-looking Junsu stride forward, he disappeared, melting back into the crowded hallway.

Saffron chuckled, cupping her hand to Saffire’s ear girlishly. “Whoahhh, here comes ‘Husband-the-King’ now.”

“Not funny.” Saffire hissed through her smile as Junsu pulled up right in front of them. With his own entourage of bodyguards around to stave off fans, and a few lingering cameramen trailing behind snapping pictures, his face breaking into a pleasurable smile.

There was his beautiful Saffire towering over him as usual, tall and lithe in all her glory, wearing a shamelessly low cut white gown, her blue eyes smoldering into his, with a single-minded intensity. While next to her . . . the feisty Saffron, stood equally as gorgeous, head erect, just a hint of sensuality in her unyielding stance. Staring into their inflexible eyes, he swore they looked like a set of warrior princesses preparing for certain battle. Ahhhh, the parents . . .

Raising one hand, to stop the group that followed him, he greeted the women formally, bowing low in respect. “Anneyonghaeseyo ladies,” muttering under his breath, “look out eoemma and appa (mother and daddy).”

Saffire, unable to avoid noticing the new barrage of snapping cameras, unit of ‘suits’, and sudden gathering of fans around them, was flung back to Saffron’s flippant remark about the perks of being Mrs. Kim Junsu. It was glaringly clear that the man she knew as JR would be hard pressed to reveal his true identity this evening, because this was what the Idols considered being ‘ON’. And she and Saffron stood directly in the line of fire.

Putting her camera face back on, she responded politely nodding, “Good evening Kim Junsu,” the sister at her side doing the same. They were now ‘officially’ in the Kings court.

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6:10 P.M.

‘Toscana Hotel’ Main Dining Room

THE walk through the already crowded dining room was like maneuvering a mine field, not knowing when your foot would miss a step and something would blow up in your face. Junsu was the perfect ‘host’ to the already dining guests. With his best foot forward he greeted everyone with the same respect, while maintaining his composure when approached and asked a myriad of expected questions about his relationship to the women at his side.

Nearing the double doors housing the VIP section in the back, he let out a sigh of relief, scarcely noticing that Saffron had wandered toward the side veranda to look out over the grounds, and quite accidentally stumbled upon a table of festival workers, accompanied by none other than Kim Hyun Joong’s ex, Chung A.

As the two women locked eyes, the chattering at the table died down, until one young man grinned openly at Saffron, raising his eyebrows in approval of her fancy cocktail dress, and dazzling red hair, glistening under the lights.

Hearing Chung A mutter, “Street whore,” under her breath, Saffron spun back around toward Saffire and Junsu, blinking in repressed anger. With media people everywhere she knew ‘she’ had so much more class, but none-the-less would have liked to punch (not only the bitch) Chung A’s face in, but her friend’s as well, letting them know who was in fact was, the ‘street whore’. *Of all the nerve. And of all the places. Not that she didn’t have enough on her plate already. Did the unexpected presence of Chung A mean the presence of Hyun Joong?*

When the doors opened, revealing the private room, the media and fans filtered away, and the real reason they were there, sat staring them in the face. For lounging at a table in the middle of the floor was the ‘enemy’. Mother and father. Together, but typically alone . . . mother, nursing a cocktail . . . Father, elbow’s on the table, hands folded under his chin, eyes squinted as if looking for some unforeseen fly that might be buzzing about the table.

“I’m not going to sit here all night without getting this finalized Kyong.” Sandra took another sip of her martini, rolling the olive in the glass in agitation. “They’re here. We need to

speak our peace, and get on with the night. Because, God knows none of us truly WANTS to be here.”

Kyong Ryu studied the tables of laughing, joking young people in front of him. *That used to be him. Happy, carefree, loving life. And then ‘she’ came along. The woman at his elbow. She came, and destroyed everything. His youth, his future and his life.* Now years later, she sat patronizing him as if he were a mere child, sitting patiently by to do her bidding.

“I’ll get to it. Stop badgering me.” He muttered, realizing their voices were beginning to draw attention to themselves. “At least let them sit down and order a drink first.”

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6:12 P.M.

‘Toscana’ VIP Dining Room

“**H**ERE we go.” Saffire prompted, dragging a livid Saffron (cussing mercilessly under her breath) behind her toward the table. “Can’t be any worse than the pregnant bitch you just encountered. Chill. We’ll get to her later.”

“I’m good. Just helped give me what I needed to deal with THEM.” Saffron admitted, pasting on a fake yet disarming smile. “No choice, we HAVE to get this over with. Can’t you hear the bar calling?”

“I do.” Saffire snickered in agreement, swiveling halfway at the last minute noticing Junsu, smiling and waving to several tables around them, looking like he wanted to stop and chat. Despite his personal attention to them, he was in his own version of ‘networking’ mode,

“You plan on staying don’t you?” she asked, noticing the other empty dinner chairs.

But, why would he? Staying was unnecessary. Their main purpose at the Toscana, was to attend the conference. This opulent descent into the VIP lounge on his arm could only be to show them off, for the sake of his own publicity.

“De, but only for a little while,” he added, barely touching the small of her back in silent admission. “I have some other important things to take care of. You understand.”

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ACROSS the table, Jeff Cobb arrived in the VIP dining room, slipping unnoticed into the seat beside his wife Helen, handing her the purse she had forgotten in her haste to exit their room and find the two ‘mystery’ women.

“Look honey . . . there they are over there.” Her voice on edge, she snatched at the purse, reaching into it for her wayward cell phone, in an attempt to snap a photo of Saffire and Saffron sitting primly beside the ‘Toscana’ owner himself, Kim Junsu.

“Put that blessed thing away.” Jeff scowled, stealing it away from her underneath the table. “You can’t be taking secret photos like that in here. It’s bad enough you’re practically ‘stalking’ them.”

“Why?” Helen whined, rolling her eyes at him pleadingly, as she fought him for the cell, knowing that the minute he turned his back she would take them anyway. *It was an innocent picture for God’s sake. Only meant for her own Facebook page, and personal friends and family. No harm done.*

“You want to land us in jail? This isn’t T.V. They have the place crawling with undercover agents and press people. You don’t know much about stuff like this do you?” Jeff, unwillingly gave in to her grasping fingers, wishing she would’ve presented this weird ‘obsessive’ side of herself earlier ‘before’ they got into the hotel. Back home she was a passive, unexciting housewife who stayed in the background, only showing up for the annual Christmas parties and fund-raisers. *Who was this woman sitting next to him?*

“But look . . . the owner is seated at their table, what’s his name? Kim Junsu? God, this is so exciting. What do you think THAT means?” she persisted, tapping the phone anxiously. “I’ll bet one of them is his girlfriend. It’s obvious he’s smitten with the Ice Princess. He’s staring at her and look how he just touched her back.”

“OH MY GOD!” Jeff barked. “Isn’t it bad enough I had to come ‘straight’ to the dining room without even going to the room first to unpack, just so you could keep track of your two new fancy pre-occupations?”

Now that they were in the dining room there was so much else going on he wanted to talk about and experience with her. The gorgeous view of the grounds, the amazing smell of food, the trickling of Idols being seated around them. It was true, the women were striking, interesting and attention-worthy but, not to the extent his wife was taking it. Obviously she was envious. Or maybe even jealous. He was hungry, thirsty for a good stiff drink, and ready to get on with the networking parties. Maybe he could just give up a few hundred dollars and send her to the spa for the evening. No, that would only give her an excuse to continue spying. It was a no-win situation.

“Are we going to order?” he finally asked. “Have you even looked at the menu?”

“In a minute. We have time.” Helen responded, squinting down her nose, now seeing several Idols she recognized from the attempts she had made to understand the KPOP industry better, before coming to the conference. “Isn’t that Heechul and Donghae from ‘Super Junior?’ and Onew from ‘SHINee’ being seated over there?” Pointing an obvious finger in their direction, Jeff slapped her hand back down, twisting the menu underneath her, forcing her to pay attention.

“Don’t point! And yes, it is. Now . . . can you focus enough to find something to eat, so we can get on with the night? These people will be here all weekend. I’m starving and you’ll live.”

* * * * *

DESPITE her growing feelings for JJ, staring at Junsu . . . Saffire wished his mere presence didn’t tug an imaginary string around her gut. He was more than enticing in millionaire mogul mode, sensing every minute detail about him from his starched white shirt, and dark dinner jacket to the way his jaw clenched when he bit the inside of his cheek. Having scoffed at the thought of being Mrs. Kim, why ‘was’ she still so drawn to the financial side of him? She had banished all thoughts of wealth and prestige after Antonio, digging her heels into the lowly café lifestyle on purpose.

So, breaking into a sunny smile and checking her own thoughts, she gave him the benefit of the doubt, while allowing him to pull her and Saffron’s chairs out . . . sitting down primly across from her parents.

“Good evening again.” Junsu greeted Kyong shaking his hand, while nodding in acknowledgement of Sandra’s presence.

Despite the rapidly growing population around them, Saffire tried to pay attention to the exchange going on in front of her. Junsu was obviously on top of his game. And what was the newfound connection to her parents? Of course he had seen their photos on the wall of the café over the years. But, somewhere between the invitation that morning, and Stanley, (the suited man he had sent as an escort), he knew they were having dinner as a family, so how did that stack up to his involvement in the arrangements? Had he put the names together from the hotel registry, (did he actually check that?) or was he just being cordial in light of their presence. His demeanor now hard to gauge, it all seemed so secretive. Was it worth knowing about? Something was up. More questions . . . without answers.

Saffron had often said earlier ‘don’t let them see you sweat’, but now in the belly of the dragon, it was easier said than done. *In times like these, she always needed help. Liquid help. Vodka, and lots of it. (And soon!) Where was the damned waiter?*

“Hi dad . . . mother.” The smile meant for Junsu made Saffire at least ‘attempt’ to look pleased that they had finally arrived. However, along with her questions about Junsu’s connections, the pounding of her anxious heart in anticipation of the unfinished conversation that had been started the night before, somehow caused it to fall flat.

“Mother.” Saffron greeted their mother, leaning down before she sat, placing a solicitous kiss on the dry, perfumed cheek. Father . . .” Kyong lifted his head in a mild greeting to both young women, noticing how much like their mother they looked, all dressed up. *Sandra ‘was’ right. It was time to undo what his brother had done, before it was too late.*

“So, Saffron deeeaaarr,” Sandra drawled out (in her oft times annoying, snooty accent). “It looks as if you had plenty of time today to prepare for our little dinner. Did some shopping?” True to her usual conversations she hesitated, then continued without waiting for an answer. “Well, you look amazing. Gorgeous as usual. I always preferred you in that color. Good choice.” Patting her thin lips to the tip of the starched white napkin she turned on an already wary Saffire.

“And Saffire . . . darrlinggg . . .” Her slow languid voice permeated the silence of the surroundings, grating on Saffire’s already rattled nerves. “Where DID you find such an ‘interesting’ outfit? Is it appropriate to wear white in winter here in Korea? Mmmm, just asking . . .” Chuckling she waved both hands flamboyantly about herself as she talked, “Whatever happened to that little ‘red number’ I got you for your birthday last year? Forget to pack it? I got the same one for you Saffron, remember?”

Ignoring the men at the table, she leaned forward without hesitation, her piercing green eyes glared condescendingly into Saffire’s blue ones, causing the hair on the back of her daughter’s neck to prickle in anger. But, surprisingly, sister Saffron piped up coming to her rescue.

“That little red number you’re referring to would make anyone look like a back alley hooker mother,” she hissed under her breath, squeezing Saffire’s knee under the table. “Even I hated it. And certainly WOULDN’T wear it out in public. Really. For someone who thrives on being an expert in fashion, your taste leaves a lot to be desired sometimes.”

Suddenly . . . in the innocence of mentioning a red dress . . . a clue . . . that this mother of hers had been in Saffire's life long enough to know she dressed like a 'hippie', and bought the two of them the exact same fire engine red party dress. Saffire had been the first to admit she and mother rarely (if ever) saw eye-to-eye on fashion and style, but to Saffron, hearing it from the horse's mouth made it that much more disgusting and hateful.

Her sister, Saffire was obviously a free spirit. Raised on the beaches of California, an artist and musician. Even though she looked like a 'Barbie' doll, she was the '70's version, flip flops, peace signs and all. *How dare mother judge her so harshly when she had taken this much care to find just the right outfit today?*

A grateful Saffire beamed at Saffron's 'devil-may-care' attitude in telling mother exactly what she thought. *They were finally getting somewhere. Separately they didn't have a leg to stand on against these two formidable opponents, but together, they were a force to be reckoned with!*

Sandra's loud hiss of dissatisfaction at her daughter's insolence, rang out around the table, eliciting an expected reaction from father and the unusually quiet Junsu.

"Well, she looks amazing." Father piped up, his eyes glowing lovingly at Saffire's radiant face, and stylish couture outfit. Both young women were gorgeous, and always had been. Holding back the emotion welling up in his throat, he sipped his water nervously, wishing that Sandra would learn to keep her opinions to herself and her mouth shut when in public. That had always been her inevitable downfall.

"Me too. She's a vision in white. Takes my breath away, always has." Junsu sighed, grabbing Saffire's hand unnoticed under the table, leaning in slightly as if they were about to pose for a photo.

Saffire felt his grasp, as his fingers closed around hers, but no matter how much she 'wanted' it to be real, it came across staged somehow. *For who she wasn't sure. The absent media? Her father? Or maybe even Mother. Was he attempting to make brownie points by cozying up to her in front of them? Suddenly, she didn't quite know how to react to his advances. His greeting in the dining room doorway was professional yet, genuine enough. But, the sudden feeling of 'ownership' (considering the circumstances), had her questioning his motives.*

"Pffft, well . . . vision or not Mr. Kim, it's been my experience that she's isn't very fashion savvy sometimes." Pausing at the blank, irritated faces around her, Sandra shrugged her

shoulders in denial. “Welll, she isn’t! Anyway . . .” Turning her attentions back to Saffron, her brows knitted, she attempted to change the subject quickly.

“Please tell mother how you’re really doing dear? We didn’t have much time for idle conversation last evening. It was sort of disturbing seeing someone of your previous rank and position, looking like a commoner, painting walls no less. Can you girls not afford painters at that God-forsaken café? I swear what paint does to the nails.”

Lifting her hands in the air, she examined each finely manicured fingernail, before dropping them back to the table gently. As she tapped her foot impatiently, she knew the open-ended conversation was only filling in the awkward silence, but with the stranger Junsu at the table, there couldn’t be any personal discussion over the real reasons they were all there.

The odd question hanging in the balance between them, Saffron snickered at Saffire in light of mother’s description of them being ‘commoners’ with ugly, scruffy nails. *She needed to know.*

“Go on Saffire, you deserve this one.” Her voice low, she flipped her sister’s long hair playfully. “Tell ‘em what we were really doing . . .”

Saffire coughed slightly, dragging her hand away from Junsu, her face radiant with pride in front of the one woman who more than once had brought her to her knees.

“We were painting a new addition onto the ‘Couples Wall’ mother. You remember the ‘Couples Wall’ don’t you? Still there. In fact, I believe it was your picture along with Father’s and Uncle Ryu’s hanging front and center when we took over just recently.”

Biting her lip, as she toyed with the crisp crinoline of her white skirt, what she really wanted was to laugh hilariously, feeling like a rebellious child defending herself for coloring on the living room walls, remarking instead . . .

“We’re making some changes to the café. Aren’t we Saffron? Now along with the ‘Couples Wall’, we have the ‘Hotness Wall’.” Folding her arms (satisfied she had gotten everyone’s attention), she settled back in the chair waiting for the preverbal bomb to drop.

“Dear Lord, one wall isn’t enough?” Sandra squeaked out, her voice tightening at the mention of her and the ‘brothers’ still present and hanging on the café wall.

“We ARE the owner’s mother, I don’t know what the big deal is. It’s a damned wall. You act like you’ve never gotten your precious hands dirty even once in your life. For any reason.” Saffron barked out, her voice rising in frustration at her mother’s reaction, as heads began to turn around them. Grabbing a warm steaming roll, she dropped it carelessly in front of her. “Uncle Ryu gave us the deed, and Saffire and I are taking charge. Might not have been our first choice, but now that we’re here . . . we’re sticking to our guns.”

Her personal tirade over, she reached for the butter, but Junsu . . . hoping to throw water on the fire, grinned as he beat her to the bowl, lifting it in the air toward her triumphantly. “Yahhh, sounds like a great idea to me. The place could use a little sprucing up. Uncle Ryu would love it.”

About the time ‘Uncle Ryu’ was mentioned, Kyong choked loudly, nearly spitting his drink out into his napkin. Slapping him on the back harshly, mother frowned . . . the two of them acting uncommonly like children attempting to cover up a dire secret.

“You okay dad?” Saffire asked, her eyes showing real concern, as her father, red-faced and embarrassed stood, excusing himself from the table. *Damn Sandra. Why did the conversation have to work its way around to Young Jae first thing?*

“Yeah. Be right back. Sorry.” Nodding he strode away, adjusting his tie and smoothing down the sides of his dark dinner jacket.

“WHERE are you off to Kyong?” Young Jae asked darting past the round dining table trying to see where his snake of a brother was going. “Hopefully to hell. No, that would be too good for you right now.”

Nearly tripping over the leg of a chair, Kyong’s large hands snaked through his thick hair furiously. “Dammit Young Jae!” he cursed to himself, “Why the hell did you have to go and die right now? And who the fuck gave you the right to leave the girls the café? That was the dumbest thing you’ve ever done. Can’t believe you’d stoop that low. You knew what would happen didn’t you? You under-handed SOB.”

uncle Ryu floated past Idols and people he recognized from the business, dogging the grey-haired man (muttering under his breath), as he rushed in a blind rage toward the men’s rest

room. Adding to his own frustration he growled, "This dinner . . . I see what you're up to brother! If you think you're going to convince them, think again."

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