

CHAPTER ELEVEN

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



(Part 2)

Friday, December 19th, 2014

6:20 P.M.

‘Toscana’ Hotel – Men’s Room

BY the time the elderly Kyong reached the restroom door, his knees were shaking, his heart pounding out of his chest, beads of sweat popping up around his receding hairline. It was only a matter of time, and they would know. ‘Everyone’ would know. Every relative, every friend, every co-worker. His career would be over, hell . . . his life. Feeling as if he were about to have a heart attack he shoved through the door, eyes glazed over as he dragged the tie down away from his neck.

Leaning motionless against the swinging stall door, Young Jae observed him, disheartened. It had never been his intent to break his brother’s heart so blatantly. They were close growing up. But, if ever there was a time for the truth . . . it was now. There were the girls to consider. The distraught aging man in the reflection of the rest room mirrors had played every hand dealt to him badly. He expected redemption, but wasn’t willing to forgive to receive it.

Shaking his transparent, ghostly head if he thought it would have served any purpose, he might have attempted a gesture of kindness. But, instead he could only feel sorrow and sympathy for the man his brother had turned out to be.

“It didn’t have to be this way Kyong.” he mumbled, kicking the door with the back of his foot.

“Huh?” Kyong’s head flung around, hands to his throat, certain he heard Young Jae’s voice at his back. As the steel door creaked shut, he shivered uncontrollably. “Are you in here you son- of-a-bitch?” he growled, his eyes squinted into narrow slits, looking for the ‘ghostly’ voice he was sure was haunting him.

“YES!” Young Jae screamed directly in his face, his arms outstretched attempting to touch the flesh on the hand of the man verbally confronting him.

As the skim of feathery fingers careened down Kyong's exposed wrist, the bile rose in his throat. He was going to puke. This was too much. Between Sandra, the business deal that was going all wrong, and the sight of Saffire and Saffron, together . . . happy . . . and angry all at the same time . . . he knew his number was up.

"Get the hell away from me. It wasn't my fault." he screeched, brushing across his arms hoping to God no one else could hear him from outside the rest room door.

"Never!" The ghostly apparition hollered back. He was finally making progress. HE COULD FINALLY BE HEARD! "Not until you make this right. DO IT! AND, DO IT NOW!"

As the sensation of heaviness immediately lifted from the room, three young teenage boys slammed through the doors and into the spacious area, jostling and pushing each other on their way toward the urinals.

Kyong sniffed haughtily, readjusting his tie, leaning over to splash water on his flushed face. Ignoring their playfulness, he shook his hands, fisting the door on his way out, returning to the noisy crowded dining room.

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6:25 P.M.

‘Toscana Hotel’ - VIP Dining Room

SEVERAL moments passed, following Kyong’s flight from the table, with the silence around the three women mounting. Sandra, growing increasingly agitated at being left alone at the mercy of her disrespectful daughters and Junsu, someone she didn’t know except by name, shifted in her seat uncomfortably. Rolling her eyes from one corner of the now crowded dining room to the other, clearly the guest she had invited was either unfashionably late, or not coming at all and small talk was not her strong suit.

The Christmas music in the background reminded her that this was her least favorite holiday. Everyone clinging to one another, couples on vacation . . . families out shopping together. Happiness everywhere. Everywhere but on her front doorstep. Being away from the things that kept her ‘grounded’ in Chicago this time of year was disconcerting at best. Korea during the holidays. Her worst nightmare.

Almost glaring at Saffire and Junsu, it was clear he was wealthy and attentive, but he was also Korean. That would never do. She would have to work harder at convincing her estranged and free-spirited daughter that life back in L.A. suited her more than . . . this! Regardless of the girls childish tirade only moments earlier, she was certain if things went as planned, they would both end up being a piece of cake to deal with.

Where in the hell was Kyong? He was acting like someone had just stuck a knife in his back for God’s sake. Spineless man, always seemed to throw a monkey wrench into things at the last minute. Well, this time she would through no matter what. She hadn’t come nearly 7,000 miles just for a martini, a steak and a denial. That wasn’t how she operated.

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SAFFRON satisfied that she and Saffire had made a dent in the armor of both parents with their snappy comeback’s scrunched down into the comfortable dining chair, hoping that the food would be coming soon, and she too wouldn’t be tempted to drink herself under the table out of nervousness alone.

Noticing another place setting next to Junsu, she began to wonder if someone else was expected at dinner. *A business associate of father’s? Mother’s husband? Her ridiculously young and*

disgusting 'step-father'. Oh hell no! Surely he wouldn't be the surprise of the night? A friend of Junsu's maybe? But, why? After all, this was supposed to be a 'family' dinner. Junsu had mentioned not staying long. What were they up to now?

“Mother?” The question flew from her lips. If she didn't find out soon it would dog her the rest of the evening. “Is someone else joining us for dinner? They haven't taken away the other place setting.”

Sandra glanced over to Saffron, her eyes twinkling deviously. Ready to confess she had invited someone extremely important, no sooner did she open her mouth to speak than Junsu's other 'JYJ' member Park Yoochun slipped up behind the small gathering, and down into the empty chair beside him.

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“**J**EFF! JEFF! Over there . . . but, don't turn around.” Helen hissed, waving her fork in the air toward the Ryu table, where there seemed to be a flurry of activity, with one half of an older looking couple rushing away from the table, and another younger Korean man now taking a seat beside owner Kim Junsu. Heads together they appeared to be deep in conversation, totally ignoring the snickering ladies beside them, and frowning 'diva' twirling her martini glass disgustedly.

“Should I care?” Jeff drawled, cutting in to his juicy steak with abandon. If he was going to have to tolerate her disruptive behavior the least he could do was enjoy the food. “Not looking dear. Wouldn't dare. You're embarrassing yourself nicely without me.”

“Stop that!” Slapping his suited knee under the table, she couldn't figure out what in the world was going on over there that screamed 'important'. “Mr. Yoochun just sat down with Junsu. Ohhhh, I wonder what they're talking about? Not only that . . . Ice Princess and Red seem really animated all of a sudden. And the fancy lady, with the drink in her hand. Gotta say, she looks pissed about something.”

Her mind reeling with possibilities Helen prided herself in her ability to 'read' people effectively. She had done her homework before coming to Korea. Yoochun was not only the third member of Idol group 'JYJ' he was also a drama star. And a good one. Ice Princess HAD to be an actress, at dinner with her assistant and flamboyant agent, the poufy-haired martini drinker.

“I’ll bet Ice Princess and Mr. Yoochun are making a movie together,” she assessed, grinning, (pleased with herself that surely she had figured it all out). “Probably going to shoot it here at the hotel. Yep, that’s it.” Leaning into Jeff’s ear, she whispered. “Junsu might not be very happy that his girlfriend is about to spend all her time with his best friend huh?”

Jeff rolled his eyes, hoping to God that this wouldn’t be her only topic of conversation throughout their entire weekend at the ‘Toscana’.

“But, know what? Mr. Yoochun is making eyes at her pretty red-headed assistant. Ooooo, maybe he has a thing for her. You think?” Nudging him jokingly, she perceived that there was certainly a drama-like triangle going on between Junsu, Yoochun, and possibly both women as well. Now THIS was worth coming to Korea for. Idols, triangles and drama. A lethal combination.

Ignoring Jeff’s complacent attitude, she laughed out loud crumpling slightly in the chair itching to get up and go greet owner, Xia Junsu, let him know what a fabulous hotel this was, and get a good look at everyone at the table to boot. If only Jeff would have consented to the pictures when they first arrived. She would have to find a way to get at least one before leaving the dining room. Her friends back home would never forgive her if she didn’t.

Jeff saw the look of hunger in her eyes, grabbing her arm before she had a chance to even lift forward away from the table.

“Doesn’t matter what they ARE or ARE NOT doing. You my dear are staying PUT. And unless you speak fluent Korean, which we both know you DO NOT, even if you could pick up on their conversation, you wouldn’t understand. Now eat your steak. It’s delicious.”

“You’re such a bore. And I’m NOT hungry.” she huffed loudly, at his direct order to mind her own business, fidgeting in the chair like a fed up, impatient child, ready to be turned loose in a room full of toys.

And then it happened . . . the handsome Yoochun looked up from across the room, nodding and flashing a sly dimply smile directly at her startled expression. As a shiver of excitement raced up and down her spine, she attempted to remain calm, not letting Jeff know the Idol had acknowledged her. Now temporarily silenced, she dropped her head, a flush rising to her cheeks.



“Not hungry huh?” Jeff watched her curiously, as licking her lips, she reached for the water glass.

“Not really,” she murmured. “But, I DO need to go to the rest room. I’m not feeling so good all of a sudden.”

The excuse was a bad one, but the only way she knew to distance herself from her less than understanding husband, regain her composure and rethink her strategy for getting an introduction.

“Helennnn . . .” he warned her, as she rose, eyes focused away from the table she had recently been observing, looking only in the direction of the entrance. “Stay out of trouble.” And she was gone.

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6:50 P.M.

FROM across the room, a still visibly shaken Kyong Ryu sauntered back toward the table, attempting to collect himself before sitting down. Noticing Yoochun perched beside Junsu, he attempted a weak smile, tipping his head in greeting.

“Where the hell have you been?” Sandra grumbled, clutching the stem of her martini glass in aggravation. “These ridiculous girls are embarrassing, and HE’S not even here yet. You need to say something. They won’t listen to me . . . Shit, never have.”

“Do you blame them?” Kyong responded angrily. When Sandra thought she was at her best, she was inevitably at her ‘worst’. The rift between them, and the girls was wide . . . and not getting any closer.

Saffron craned her neck, picking up on mother’s livid, infuriated, tone, saying ‘they won’t listen’. *Listen to what? Her huffing about them noticing an Idol? That was just plain stupid. This wasn’t the ‘Waldorf Astoria’, and she wasn’t sitting here in the shadow of Mr. Big . . . afraid to breathe, afraid to speak, hell . . . afraid to be alive. She and Saffire were young and single. Well, she was the last time she looked. Hot guys were just that. Hot guys. And she would gawk, and stare at every one she came in contact with if she damned well pleased. Mother and Mr. Big didn’t rule her world any longer.*

And thus, in the middle of her eves-dropping, the devil came knocking, when seemingly from out of nowhere a tall, dark and handsome American stepped up beside them, drink in hand . . . eyes locked on an unsuspecting Saffron.



Saffire saw him first, rising up for a well-needed potty break. Gulping uncontrollably, she followed him as his eyes darted from Saffron to hers, one eye-brow raised teasingly.

Elbowing her sister she forced out a gurgled, “Who’s that? Do we know him?” watching as shifting his weight, he cradled his coffee cup nonchalantly, with the ease of someone who knew he needed no introduction.

Beside her, Saffron stiffened . . . her face going blank with shock, mouth open slightly, remembering with clarity the smell of his cologne, arrogant swagger and taste of cigars on his breath when his lips pressed over hers.

“It’s Ian,” she growled, “my ticket to Hell, sister.”

Disregarding Saffron’s cool greeting, he extended his hand boldly, taking her sister’s and rubbing the underside of her wrist, seductively cooing, “Hello, I’m Ian . . . You must be the beautiful Saffire. It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

Saffire flinched under his stare. Not Ian? THE IAN? Saffron had only described how utterly despicable he was. Not that he was f’ng sexy and gorgeous as hell. Not that he could devour her with one carnal gaze. She shouldn’t be responding. Her stomach needed to stop churning. She was in the presence of pure evil. Just like Antonio had done to her, Ian had taken Saffron, bit off her head, chewed her up and spit her out. And now? Was he gunning for her? Who had invited him? Her hand . . . get away from him. Hurry . . .

With the frantic response and questions flying around her head, she dropped back into the chair beside Junsu, hoping no one else at the table picked up on the quaking of her knees as she buckled.

But, Junsu, in a conversation with Yoochun over practice in the morning, looked over just as the stranger stepped up, not missing the way he caressed his ‘almost’ girlfriend’s wrist while greeting her.



American Bastard. What did he think he was doing? In Korea that would have been the ultimate form of disrespect to a strange woman. She wasn’t his friend, his girlfriend, his anything. And, now it seemed . . . he was to be the parent’s ‘missing’ link.

Sandra bolted from her seat in a flurry of perfume and diamonds, arms outstretched, lips pursed as if she had just met a lover for the first time in years.

“Ian! Darlinnnggg . . . Where HAVE you been love? How long does it take to park that jet anyway?”

Reveling in her epiphany moment, she giggled girlishly, cupping his elbow, allowing him to lean in and brush her cheek with full eager lips. *The evening would be complete, he had finally arrived. Saffron would have to listen to her now. Ian would see to it that she did.*

Ignoring the others around her, she barely saw Yoochun stand up and graciously offer Ian his empty seat at the table, and excusing himself.



Watching the drama unfold around him like a weekly Episode on Mnet, Junsu was at a loss for words. In the meantime, he was reminded of all the reasons he was falling for Saffire. But, since her arrival weeks ago, she was different . . . detached, and he couldn’t pinpoint exactly why. *Could it be JJ? Hell no, he wasn’t even in the room. Was she putting up walls against him in front of her parents? How could she have even begun to respond to the likes of Ian the way she did, sitting right at his side? He was confused. And he didn’t like it. His plans for later would have to take precedence over the night time festivities with his members. He needed to draw her out, make her his . . . once and for all.*

He knew he had to go. He didn’t want to, his objective had been to stay at least until the meal was served, but the photographers were anxiously awaiting him downstairs. It was his duty, just like the Hotel. He was the missing link. Having to leave Saffire to deal with not only her parents, but now the (more than obvious) snake in the grass, Ian was making him extremely uncomfortable.

“Saffire.” Now distraught, he scanned the room before wrapping a protective arm about the back of her chair. “I have to go. They need me downstairs, I can’t get out of it.”

Saffire blinked, the three shots of Vodka and glass of white wine beginning to play tricks with her limbs and her vision. “Ohhhh. Already? You sure you can’t stay just a little while longer? Pleezeeee? We haven’t even eaten yet.”

“Ani, mianhae. I have my phone. I’ll text you okay?” he reassured her the lilt in his voice hinting at something more later.”

Giving Ian a dirty look, as if to say, “*I know what you’re up to*”, he rose rapidly, bowing to the rest of the table, and reaching over to shake Kyong’s hand. “Mr. Ryu, Mrs. Kroes. It’s been a pleasure. Enjoy the rest of your stay.” Then leaning in, disregarding everyone else in the room, he bent and whispered in Saffire’s ear. “Bye yeobeoso (sweetie). Thanks for understanding.”

Saffire melted like warm butter under the feel of his breath to her face. Maybe her perception of him throughout the evening had been wrong. “Okay. Bye.” she answered back . . . and like a puff of smoke, he was gone.

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IGNORING the exiting pleasantries and little display of affection playing out beside him, Ian dropped into the chair across the table from Saffron, leaning back satisfied that he and her mother had caught her completely off guard. That’s what he liked about Sandra. She was as calculating as he was, and always had an agenda that kept him on his toes.

“SO!” Sandra started, folding her napkin solicitously. “Let’s not beat around the bush. Ian is here to take you home Saffron. Actually after this weekend, Saffire included.”

In the course of a split second Saffron wasn’t sure she hadn’t lost her hearing. *Ian was there to do what? Take her HOME? Home where, Chicago? AND Saffire? What the hell? Had her mother lost her ever-lovin’, fucking mind?*

“Take me home? OH I DON’T THINK SO,” she barked out at them her face pinched in anger.

Grabbing her hand from across the table, Ian nearly knocked Saffire’s wine glass over in his haste. “Now before you jump to any conclusions, hear me out babe.”

Wrenching away from his grasp, Saffron sputtered out expletives, confusion locking around her subconscious like a vice grip. *BABE? What had her mother done? More importantly why had she done it? Ian of all people. The spawn of Satan. Did these parents of hers hate her and Saffire that much? What had they ever done, but live their lives to the best of their ability?*

All the questions that plagued her the day of Uncle Ryu's funeral service, standing outside in the cold December wind, came flooding back to her with renewed vengeance. The lies, the deception, the sister she never knew, and a newly inherited café. Only now, after weeks of hard work and acceptance these two people sitting next to her, breathing the same air were pulling the proverbial rug out from under not only her, but Saffire as well. *FUCK THEM. FUCK THEM ALL!*

“Screw you Ian. And you too mother. And why are you so damned silent father? Oh wait. You're just mother's puppet anyway aren't you?”

Leaning as close to her mother's ear as she could manage, she growled. “Do you honestly think Saffire and I are going anywhere? Oh HELL NO!” Pointing one newly manicured fingernail at her ex-boyfriend's face, she rose out up of the chair, “And especially NOT with YOU!”

Snatching up her purse and spinning away from them all, she stomped off, her red braid flying behind her, eliciting more than looks and comments from not only the normal dinner patrons, but also the gathering of Idols around them.

Unable to respond quickly enough, Kyong Ryu heard only one thing as she stormed away. Young Jae's warning in his ear . . . “*Fix it . . . and fix it now!*”

But, how could he possibly do that? Especially here . . . in front of the entire S. Korean Idol community, (or so it seemed).

“She'll come around.” he stated, motioning to the waiter they were ready for their dinner order, acting as if nothing unusual at all had happened between them.

“What do you mean by that?” Saffire burst out, unable to take anymore, finally standing as well, teetering tipsily over them in the massive high heels, her blue eyes flashing. “She'll come around? She won't. That's bullshit.”

“Saffire, calm down. I meant just what I said. She has a career back in Chicago, Ian's willing to take her back, and you have your music. You've neglected it for too long already.

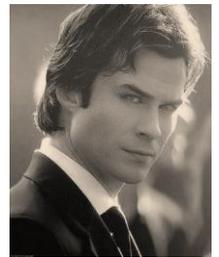
Your mother and I let you have your fun. Now it's time to come home. Sit down, you're drawing attention to yourself." Kyong reprimanded her.

Saffire wobbled, her hands fisting the back of the chair to hold her steady. "I will not. I don't know what you expected coming here like this, summoning us like a couple of wayward children . . . but I can tell you this much . . . we're staying put. And nothing you can say is going to change that. ANY OF YOU!" she added, glaring over at Ian, her stare volatile. He however, was unfazed.

Still ignoring the argument around him he rose suddenly, scooting back the chair, eyes peeled in the direction of Saffron's exodus out the dining room doors.

"I'll go after her. Try to calm her down," he offered up to Sandra and Kyong. "It's time we talked anyway."

And before Saffire could move her inebriated body to protest, he was gone, his long legs carrying him halfway across the room in only a few quick steps. There was no graceful way out of the current predicament. Feeling the eyes of the Idol members boring into her back at she and Saffron's loud display of rebellion, it was certain she was finally the one in control.



Feeling newly energized her only recourse now was to finish what she had started and leave while she was ahead. Didn't matter that her stomach was rumbling with hunger, her feet burning from tight high heels, or even that there was no reason on God's green earth why she would 'want' to stay.

She would text Saffron, they could hook up for the conference agenda then head to the bar. She could drink away her distress, meet up with Junsu later, and try to put this entire disastrous dinner behind her. Maybe there was a way to save the night after all.

"I'm out of here too," she snapped, turning on her heel and staggering away, head in the air, leaving the surprised look of both parent's faces in her wake. On her way past grinning '2PM' members Chansung and JunK, she raised her hand, high-fiving them both in victory. *The warrior princesses had finally won!*

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7:15 P.M.

‘Toscana’ Hotel - Ladies Room

PACING the small powder room Saffron now recognized the motive for the family dinner. Ian. Newly disgusted, she opened the small clutch, and digging out her lipstick attempted to calm down, her hand visibly shaking as she applied it.

Determined that nothing was going to ruin the night for her she flipped her bangs back in place. After all she had already dealt with Chung A thru grace, (and a large amount of tongue biting). Surely, she could muster up the courage to walk away from Mr. Big and her parents, making it clear to them that her life was now at the ‘Cup of Hotness Café’. *Go back to America . . . no freaking way!*

Even in light of mother’s obvious collaboration with the devil Ian, why in the world hadn’t Father stood up for her at least? More importantly, for Saffire? Only weeks earlier he had handed the Will over to them both, nodding and smiling as if owning the café was their key to eternal happiness. What had happened to alter that? Did mother have that big of a hold over him? Even after their divorce and years apart? How was that even possible? For all his blustering about being an important wealthy businessman, inside he was a spineless coward. Mother obviously held all the cards (whatever that meant).

Now even more determined to dig up the answers she and Saffire needed to crack this mystery of the Ryu family she nodded to the striking woman in the mirror, whispering, “You deserve better than this.”

Forging a plan that didn’t include Ian, or her parents . . . now (despite her comments to sister Saffire about going it alone tonight) her focus needed to be finding ‘Baek Seung Jo’ and enjoying the remainder of her evening.

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IAN stood across from the ladies rest room doorway waiting for her. It was essential that they talk alone, confident that with the right words she would eagerly fall back into his life. Rocking on his heels, he slid both hands into his pockets smirking at the scenario going through his mind.

First, she would be all fired up like a cornered kitten, hissing at him for dumping her the way he had. Second, he would admit to being wrong, beg for her forgiveness, throw in a couple, “I can’t live without you” and “I love you’s”. Then lastly, promise her a vacation to Europe for fashion week, or something along those lines. *And bamm, she’s on the plane, in my life, and my bed . . . right where she belongs.*

With purpose written all over her, Saffron marched out of the restroom after deciding the evening was over with . . . well . . . at least dinner was. Without warning, she pulled up short, clutching her heart as Ian stood towering over her five-foot, six-inch frame.

“Dammit Ian why are you skulking outside the women’s bathroom?” she squealed, quaking unnaturally at the raw sexuality the man before her emitted.

“Saffron . . . can we talk privately?” he purred, a loving smile on his handsome face, taking her elbow, intending to guide her out by the pool, alone.

“No, if you have something to say do it here. I already told you, I’m not going anywhere with you,” she reminded him, brushing his unrelenting hand away. She didn’t trust him . . . hell, she didn’t trust herself. Despite that however, the charisma he eluded was hard to resist.

“Babe, I’ve been wretched without you . . . I can tell by the catch in your voice you’ve been missing me.”

Eyes widening in disbelief she gulped, “God Ian, stop acting like I’m one of your dumb blondes and I specifically told you NOT to call me babe. It’s no secret, I can see how miserable you are with that fiancé of yours. It’s all over the internet.” She expressed, cocking an eyebrow up in sarcasm.

“That’s only for the purpose of the family . . . it’s you I’ve always loved. You should know that.”

“Please . . . quit with the bullshit. I’m not sure what Mother promised to get you here, but, whatever it was, it didn’t come from these lips. I’m through with you . . . the business . . . and especially the influence you’ve had over my life since college,” she stated, poking his hard chest with one finger attempting to drive her point home.

Glancing around as she did so, she couldn't help noticing the hall was located far enough from the main dinner area so no one could see them unless they were purposely heading to the Ladies Room.

He stepped closer, blocking her view wondering what had happened to the placid Saffron he could manipulate with a look, or a gesture. Gripping her wrist away from his chest he gently shoved her to the wall. "Saffron . . . enough, stop acting like a child. I've been patient, you've got my attention. What will it take for you to come home with me?" *Why was she being so disagreeable? Her mother assured him she was regretting leaving the States.*

On top of that, he figured it couldn't come at a better time. The boring fiancé had returned to New York, so his life in Chicago could resume normally. Besides, his reality nowadays was chaos without her. She was the one who kept him grounded . . . could work circles around anyone in the office. Fact was, she knew how to handle his moods, business, and insatiable sex drive.

Remembering how eager she was to please, he couldn't help seizing her chin, smashing his lips to the enticing red lipstick (that used to leave traces over his body after they made love). Forcing his tongue into her mouth, stealing her breath . . . She was still an open book. He knew her weaknesses.

Saffron squealed deep in her throat at his manhandling, his kisses had always been her undoing. God, smelling and tasting the liquor on him had her reeling, the fluttering heat escalating throughout her lower region now threatening to consume her. Thinking it was so unlike her 'Sung Jo's kisses, (that promised a sensual adventure, not a claim of ownership).

Ian's kiss was demanding, dominating . . . a need to be in control. Saffron realized he had always been this way. This was proof 'she' had changed, and coming to Korea had been the right decision . . .

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OH hell, she was trapped between the wall and this arrogant, commandeering man. Struggling to break free she wanted nothing more than to be on the floor once again of Hyun Joong's apartment, laughing at the tattoo bird on her ass. She bit down hard on his lip, tasting blood as he jerked away in surprise.

“Damn you, I’m not your fucking toy anymore,” she voiced, slapping his cheek with the force of all the pent up anger she had carried around for the last four years. From the public break-up she had endured, to the idea that she was only good enough to be his mistress, not even qualifying as a girlfriend.

Seeing red, Ian rubbed his stinging cheek, growling through the bitter taste of his own blood, “You fucking little bitch, you’re whatever I want you to be . . . don’t forget BABE I own you. I rescued you from that small girl’s college, where you were suffocating. You were nothing, a fat, ugly, virgin . . . I taught you how to walk, dress, even fuck. ‘I’ made you beautiful, ‘ME’. And this is how you repay me, you ungrateful little piece of shit.”

He trembled, livid with disappointment. *How could she do this to him?* Grabbing both shoulders he wanted only to shake some sense into her, then hang on tightly. *Why didn’t she see he wasn’t going to throw her away?*

Shivering under her own rage, Saffron was shocked at her own violent behavior. Stunned at the venom sprouting from the man who had been her everything, father, friend, co-worker and lover she stared blankly at the same luscious lips that had taken her to heaven countless times over the years.

Oh God, this was what he really thought of her! Even in the end, she was nothing more than a piece of property. No better than his stocks, car collection and real estate holdings. He disgusted her.

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7:20 P.M.

‘Toscana’ Hotel - Ladies Room

RUSHING from the men’s room YooChun heard what sounded like thunder in the small hallway. Scanning the dimly lit area he spotted the fiery red hair of Saffire’s sister, Saffron Ryu with the tall, dark-headed American man he had given his chair up to at the table, just moments before. The couple looked to be having a fight and normally he wouldn’t interfere, except for one thing. This was Hyun Joong’s girl, and more importantly . . . Junsu’s friend.

Slowing his pace he scrutinized the man mistreating her with his cutting remarks and visible signs of anger. Being a gentle man, it was hard for him to tolerate abuse (of any kind) to anyone of God's creation.



“YAH,” he cut in with a booming voice, pushing Ian away from a speechless Saffron, angling toward her unprepared for the woman to launch herself at his chest and clamp on with a vise-like grip. Snapping to her blue eyes brimming with unleashed tears his heart wrenched at the brutal treatment she had just endured.

Ian stood frozen as Saffron seized the opportunity to jump away from him. Unaware Yoochun had witnessed their discussion until he had been shoved him away from her, he couldn't believe the flowerboy would 'dare' to lay a hand on him.

“This is a private conversation between us . . .” he uttered, raising an eyebrow at the meddler, in his soft commanding voice . . . meaning to disarm any idea that he would mistreat the weaker sex.

Ignoring the towering American, YooChun placed a protective arm around her as she trembled fearfully, announcing with conviction, “Saffron come with me, Saffire sent me to look for you.”

Nodding in agreement she mumbled a hurried “Okay,” immediately feeling safer in the arms of this virtual 'stranger' than in the presence of Mr. Big (even here, at a public venue).

“You heard her, I'll take responsibility.” YooChun said in perfect English, meeting the American's now openly friendly stare, daring Ian to object as he walked her out into the cool night by the pool exit, saving her the embarrassment of going back thru the dining room.

* * * * *

7:25 P.M.

'Toscana' Hotel - Hallway

OUT in the crowded hallway, Saffire checked her phone for the time. It was barely pushing 7:30, and she was ravenous. If this was any kind of a decent hotel, surely there were appetizers available at the bar. Stopping to take stock of her surroundings, she surveyed the people coming and going in front of her. An elderly couple, holding hands

cutely, taking pictures with an old Kodak camera, a family pushing a double stroller with twin girls. Dark-eyed, tiny Korean dolls with their hair in pigtails, pacifiers between their tiny pink lips. They all appeared so happy. Happy to be here at the hotel, happy to be together.

How had she and Saffron's life gone so terribly wrong? Was it true that happiness was merely a state of mind? In the midst of all the drama she had just walked away from, could she still eke out a moment of happiness?

Stepping up to the large lobby cut-outs of 'JYJ' members with Junsu on the right, JJ in the middle and Yoochun on the left, she lifted her phone and squeezing between JJ and Junsu, lifted a white gowned leg to Junsu's paper thigh, her lips positioned at JJ's cardboard cheek, snapping the selca to save as her one memory of the day she grew some balls, and told her parents to quite literally 'go fuck themselves'.

Hearing her phone ding in a text, she paused before giving up on the 'oh so sexy' life-size cardboard boyfriends, glancing down to read it. It was Saffron . . . telling her Yoochun had met her by the rest room, and she was headed to his room to rest, while he did the photoshoot downstairs.

Ahhh, so after all this, what 'about' JaeJoong? No doubt that was where she would find him, downstairs with the rest of his members. But, did she want to risk having to see him and Junsu side-by-side, just like in the poster?

Left the battle
headed 2 the bar
4 liquid strength &
food. Text me
back when ur
ready to meet up.
We did great huh?



As the message whisked away, she pushed lazily toward the elevator. In a matter of minutes she would be languishing in a cool glass of white wine, ordering a plate of cheesy fries. She hoped it would be cheesy fries anyway. She was so done with Korean food.

One foot toward the open steel door, a distinctly familiar laugh could be behind her. Glancing back . . . there was JJ. Walking through the lobby, arm around the waist of a dark-haired Korean girl, snuggling into him as if they knew each other intimately.

“JJ?” Her strained questioning voice, attempted to make sense of the awkward situation. He was after all, an Idol on parade this weekend.

Flipping his head around, he hesitated momentarily, their eyes locking over the girl at his side. In her minds-eye Saffire saw the room spinning in a blur around them, the orchestra music crescendoed overhead like the ending episode of a Korean drama. Blinking once, his mouth set in a firm, unmoving line JaeJoong stared at her unable to speak, until the aggravated girl tugged him away, and he disappeared unwillingly into the crowd. *What the fuck?*

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