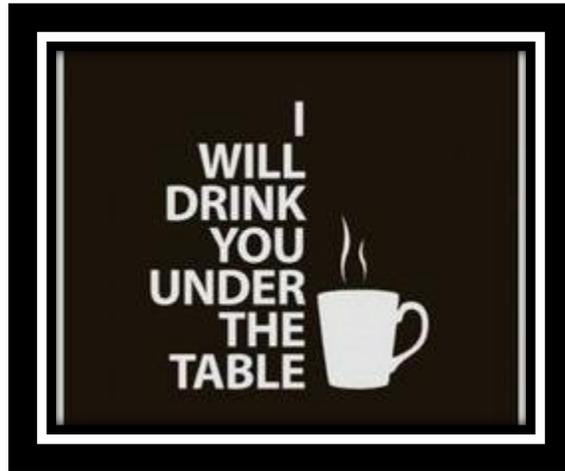


CHAPTER TWELVE

(Part 2)

“I will drink you under the table . . .”



Friday, December 19th, 2014

JeJu Island – ‘Toscana’ Hotel – VIP Club Bar

THE crowded bar didn’t serve any purpose except to force Saffire deeper into herself as she perched precariously atop the hard leather covered stool. After the confrontation with her folks, and now JaeJoong, what else could possibly go wrong?

Staring into her cell, she scrolled down her list of contacts, searching for even one friend in California who would be available to talk at 6:00 A.M. in the morning. But, she knew it was no use. They would all either be up showering for work, or still in bed, not to mention she hadn’t reached out to any of them since arriving in Seoul.

Despite the rough beginnings, the night was still young, and she and Saffron were supposed to be checking out the conference and doing some twisted version of ‘ladies’ night. Where the hell was this damn networking conference supposed to be held anyway? And why hadn’t they gotten

at least an agenda, name tag or pamphlet when they arrived? Now, she was wondering if the conference hadn't just been a random excuse by Junsu, to get her here for more than dinner.

Parked next to her at the bar, a heavy-set American man was nursing his Soju, having already downed two shots in a row of straight Whiskey, scratching his scraggly beard, and burping loudly. Was this what her fancy 'Toscana' dinner evening would end up being like? Drunken and wallowing in self-pity with the other disgruntled and disheartened patrons at the bar? Ewww . . .

Turning aside to escape the smell of onions from his breath, she leaned closer toward the muscular and handsome bartender, whisking frantically up and down the marble-topped slab, with bottles and glasses flying around him.

Maybe if she concentrated on him, she would feel better. And where were her cheesy fries? Right now all she wanted was food. Her cravings were taking over the longer she drank, almost forcing her to step away in search of chocolate, mac n' cheese, or a potato pancake . . . somewhere . . . ANYWHERE!

Lifting her shot glass in the air toward his twinkling eyes, she forced out a hesitant smile. *Be cordial, Saffire, engaging . . . sexy even, this is what you're good at. Anything to get his attention and get a rush on the food.*

“De?”

He was there in a flash, flinging a towel across one shoulder, reaching down into the belly of the bar for the Vodka bottle. “Another beautiful?” he asked cordially, not missing the way the curve of her voluptuous breasts burst forth from the center of the low cut gown, directly in his unassuming face.

Nodding ‘yes’, she paused momentarily, before reaching into her purse for a tissue. As he poured he watched her scrounge around methodically before pulling out a crumpled piece of paper. Glancing at him she blinked, snatched the shot glass and downed the clear liquid before he even had a chance to put the bottle down. Someone had this angel drowning her sorrows tonight.

“Thank you,” she said quietly, spreading the small piece of paper out on the bar in front of her and peering apathetically into the handwritten note. She shouldn't care. She should rip it

into a million pieces and throw it over her shoulder with the carefree unassuming attitude JJ had expressed when staring into her face without speaking.

To the young bartender, it looked like an autograph. Chuckling at her winsome face, he discerned that this beauty in white was probably a sad, disgruntled fangirl, drowning her inability to get near her one true love, in alcohol . . . whoever he was. They were a dime a dozen here at the hotel this weekend.

“He said we could fall together,” she muttered into the note, her eyes forlorn and lifeless, as the third shot disappeared from the crystal glass.

Skimming by her, (despite the urge to stay put to hear the story about her supposed Idol ‘dilemma’), he noticed her blonde head drift down onto her folded arms, a loud sigh emanating from full, pouty lips.

“Where are my cheesy fries? Can’t drink without food. I’ll puke.”

Shutting off the sights and sounds of the mayhem around her, Saffire attempted to maintain her balance in the swaying room, sensing he might be ignoring her.

“They’ll be right up,” he called, from the other end of the floor, washing his hands down and deciding she might be fun to talk to during his break. Spotting the waitress, coming through the door, the large steaming plate in hand, he snatched it from her, whisking around the other side of the bar and dropping it directly in front of Saffire’s bent head crooning, “Cheesy fries it is beautiful.”

“Ooooo, they look good.” Lifting her face, she pushed the plate farther to her left ignoring the long stare from the disgusting man beside her as the meddling bartender slipped in.

“SO! Who’s the guy?” he questioned, pointing directly at the now folded piece of paper underneath the hot plate of food. After seeing her state of inebriation, he didn’t much care who it was, some idol of course. All he cared about was the fact that she looked like a movie star, was amazingly sensual and if he played his cards right, might actually agree to a little one-on-one later on after hours.

Saffire, picked at the hot fries, blowing on them as the steam formed a veil about her lips and face. Should she tell him it was the Prince of ‘JYJ’ himself ‘Hero’ Kim JaeJoong? Was it supposed to be a secret? Everything in the Idol world was secret. But, she was pissed. As a

bartender he saw them all the time. Hell, Junsu was the damned owner of the hotel. What would it matter?

“Kim JaeJoong. JYJ? Have you seen him tonight?” she blurted out carelessly.

“JaeJoong? Hell yeah. He was in here not more than thirty minutes ago. You know him? Really?” he asked.

“Of course I do. We’re . . . friends, ummm . . . good friends,” she stuttered, pulling the note from under the plate. “In fact, we were supposed to meet up for drinks. I guess he must’ve forgotten, doesn’t answer his phone when he’s really busy. Did he say where he was headed? Maybe I can catch up with him.”

Hearing her excuse of being ‘good friends’, the young man figured she was really just trying to get JJ’s whereabouts out of him to do some secretive ‘spy’ work on the popular idol. Fangirls were so devious! Should he sweeten the pot or not? Nooo, probably not, (afraid if he did, she would up and bolt, off to search for him elsewhere in the hotel).

So, opting out instead, he twisted in the seat, tapping his fingers satisfactorily on the counter top. *She was a JJ fangirl alright. But, no matter . . . he could sway her in his direction just by one little white lie.*

“Ahhh, I don’t think you want to do that.”

“Why not?” Perching both hands on her knees she scrunched her eyebrows peering into his face quizzically, her demeanor changing from melancholy to attentive.

Truthfully . . . did she ‘want’ to know what JaeJoong was really up to? Especially if he was with someone else? Oh hell. Despite being angry, the suspense was killing her. Only a few days ago she’d hated him and his seemingly self-assured attitude. On the heels of Antonio, surely she could force herself to go back there again. A little perseverance, and a lot of alcohol could make all the difference. If he was done with her, it was better to know now, so she could mourn him over her favorite Vodka and move on. What was one more disappointment in an already disastrous evening?

“Cause he wasn’t alone. If you know what I mean . . .” Tipping his head close to hers, he smiled. “Probably shouldn’t tell you this, but he was with some photographer lady. Kept after and after her to get pics of him naked around the owner Kim Junsu’s private pool. They were

getting pretty down and dirty up in here, if you get my drift. Lots of skinship. You know what that means right?”

The bomb dropped, assessing her facial expression, he waited momentarily before resting one hand on her satiny knee adding, “He’s really not a friend is he?”

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“**M**MM! Yummy . . . lady in white . . . I’ll take a few of those . . .” A deep voice over one shoulder, dipping into her large plate of fries sounded curiously like ‘Super Junior’s’ very own Cinderella, Heechul. Slapping his long probing fingers, Saffire shifted feeling the now disgruntled bartender’s hand slip from her knee as he rose.



“Owwww,” Heechul moaned in mock pain at being rejected by her hasty comeback. “Look who it is . . . sweet, blonde café owner Saffire Ryu . . . Anyeonghesayeo.” Licking his lips close enough to her ear to hear him, he reached again, this time finding success.

Hesitating, he saw his opportunity to make a move whispering, “You my dear are not only stunning tonight . . . but, courageous. I saw what happened upstairs in the dining room. You have your redheaded sister’s spunk. Hwaiting (Fighting).” Fisting the air beside her head, the fry still between his fingers, he reminded her that the last comment made to her parents and Ian had been bold to say the least.

“Didn’t expect to run into you here this weekend. Not sure why not though. Festival . . . networking conference . . . Idols . . . etc. What brings you to the VIP Lounge all dressed up like one of my favorite Disney characters? ” he asked candidly, glancing down the crowded bar on either side of her looking for any signs of the JYJ threesome. “By the way . . . where ARE all your escorts . . . sister? Are you alone?”

“Busy, elsewhere.”

“Nicceeee, how about you let ME be your knight in shining armor tonight then? I’ll make sure you get home on a white steed by midnight. Shoes or not.”

“Hah! Not likely. And, midnight without shoes is your M.O. Cinderella,” she quipped, tipping her final shot of Vodka, studying his tousled hair and persistent smile, attempting to stuff JJ’s note back inside her purse before he spied it.

“Saffirrrree . . .” he drawled lazily, resting his chin in the curve of her creamy shoulder, “Wae? And, wae do you find the need to drink alone my sweet? That just won’t do.”

Feeling his fingers secretly tickling the small of her back as he cooed, she shivered under his touch remembering what Maud had told her about the sinfully, flirty Idol and how easily he could coerce her out of her clothes.

However, if nothing else, he was quirky, engaging and fun, regardless of his suggestive demeanor . . . already managing to make her laugh, lifting her melancholy spirit. Certain Saffron would be down to join them any minute, she was more than ready to relax, forget about the drama of the night and let loose, (even with Heechul by her side).

Surrendering the glass from between her fingers she swiveled, giving the sassy Idol a polite hand. “Ok, be a knightly GENTLEMAN then, and I’ll agree to be your lady,” she giggled, a shy smile emanating from her lips.

“Arasseo, arasseo . . . DEAL ‘Single-Miss-Ryu’. Now how ‘bout you share those fries with me the proper way? It’s not often I get good greasy American food here in Korea. Gotta give hyung Junsu credit . . . he’s always been good at this shit. Turned it into a gold mine this time. Wish I’d gotten in on the ground floor.”

“You’re right, he is.” Saffire responded, stuffing another crispy, cheese covered bite between her teeth, thinking in the process however . . . he busied himself relentlessly trying to be everything to everybody. Maybe that was why she felt like he didn’t have time in his life for her.

Staring at Heechul’s grinning face she considered the upcoming weekend. Maybe he could substitute as the makeshift escort of the night. He lived on the edge, and didn’t seem to care who saw him doing what. He was hands down, the bad boy of ‘Super Junior’ and not afraid to show it.

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With the dance music kicked up a notch, and liquor still flowing, Saffire leaned back into the warmth of Heechul's body. Studying the gathering crowd, she allowed herself to unwind as the airy feeling of weightlessness unburdened her heart and resolve.

Why did all the Idols have to be so damned gorgeous in person? She was the first to admit . . . she could potentially be attracted to any one of them. Maybe Saffron's idea of playing the field wasn't so crazy after all.

Where the hell was Saffron anyway? She was missing all the fun. The music, dancing and especially the Idols. Had she found the missing conference attendees and gotten trapped? Did that mean, 'she' would have to leave this Idol heaven to rescue sister from some stuffy crowded conference room, packed between suited men and women chattering mindlessly about their failing businesses? Ohhh . . . hell, nooo, she would rather stay here, sipping a cocktail, dangling her tired bare feet, waiting on Heechul to check his text messages.

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'Toscana' Hotel Elevator

SAFFRON huffed disgruntled, repeatedly punching the elevator button mumbling to herself, "Who needs him, not me . . . any man will do. Right Saffron?" Trying not to remember how he always knew what she was thinking, or the way she fit into his hard body. Feeling the tingling between her legs, maybe it was just the sex she remembered. "He isn't the only man that knows how to screw."

Right now the hotel was full of hard bodies, she just had to find one that fit her requirements. Could it be that easy? She didn't think so, but she didn't have anything else at the moment.

Stepping into the elevator, not really caring in what direction it was headed, she leaned against the mirrored wall, her insides lurching with the sudden decent. One thing was certain, she needed food and quickly, the olives were threatening to work their way up and out.

Unable to keep from focusing on her stomach, when the doors opened again a gorgeous man stepped inside, gazing curiously as he checked her out.

Recognizing him from the dining room, she returned his intense stare, one thumbnail clicking her front tooth nervously to hide her discomfort. (Thankfully, one of her best attributes was . . . she never forgot a name.) Chansung . . . from ‘2PM’. That was it.



Working his memory, Chansung allowed his eyes to slide over the lovely woman in the brocade dress. She had graced a table in the VIP dining room. How could he forget her stunning red hair and saucy attitude? Looking a tad squeamish and unkempt, right now . . . she appeared anything ‘but’ saucy.

“Excuse me,” he offered kindly. “You alright? You look a little green.” Reaching one hand out, attempting to help her maintain her footing he winced as she wobbled (balancing precariously in extremely high heels).

Lifting blue eyes to his smiling face a loud unexpected burp emanated from her rosy lips. Covering her mouth in embarrassment she cupped her rolling stomach apologetically, “Oh God, excuse me . . . too many olives without dinner.”

“It’s ok,” he snickered, scooting over next to her politely to make room for an older couple who entered, turning to face the closing doors in haste.

“Don’t quite know WHERE I’m going . . . But, I’m starving, do you know of a place to get regular food? Anything? I’d settle for McDonalds,” she giggled, finally noticing herself in the mirror, appalled at the reflection of the pale-faced woman staring back. Dear God, she looked like she’d just tumbled out of bed. Chansung probably thought she was ‘working’ the hotel.

Laughing at her choice of eating establishments being ‘real’ food, he whispered, “No Micky D’s, but you can get a killer cheeseburger in the VIP lounge. That’s where I’m headed. How about we go together? My treat.”

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MEDDLING conference attendee, Helen Cobb, craned her ear attempting to listen in on their private conversation. Puffing her buxom chest out like an agitated mother hen about to flap her wings, it startled her recognizing the stunning redheaded ‘assistant’, smashed intimately against the hip of an extremely handsome man . . . looking like . . . God forbid! A high-class call girl!

Was it possible that the beautiful Ice Princess's 'assistant' had a side job? Looking at her now, it was beginning to cross her mind that what she'd witnessed at dinner between the woman and (JYJ member) Yoochun, might well have been a 'different' kind of deal. What sort of an establishment was Mr. Junsu really running here?

Hoping to conceal her disdain, she swung back around catching her husband Jeff just as he rotated his head, raking the attractive redhead up and down with hungry eyes, for the second time that night.

Confirming her worst fears, Chansung smirked at the older man, passively slinging one arm over the woman's shoulder announcing, "Forget it dude . . . you can't afford her."

Helen's hand flew to her mouth in horror, gasping at his suggestive words. Despite her husband's feeble excuse at their first encounter with this apparent 'lady of the evening', she couldn't believe he would actually repeat his blatant behavior standing directly beside her.

Throwing Saffron a scathing look, as the doors opened on the lobby floor, she shoved the meekish looking man off the elevator in haste, slapping him across the back of his balding head, snapping, "Jeffrey Cobb, I can't believe you! I was standing right there!"

As the nosy couple huffed away, (swallowed up in the belly of the crowd), a giddy Saffron stepped forward locking eyes with Chansung before bursting out in laughter, breaking the tension between them.

"Well there goes my reputation," she announced candidly. Did they really think she was a hooker? "I need a powder room. Look at me, I'm a mess." Unable to stop the blush from coloring her pale cheeks she dug self-consciously around the inside of her purse, searching for lipstick.

"I'm sure there's a logical explanation for your scandalous appearance. And don't get me wrong but, I can't help thinking the guy's bed you rolled out of is one lucky bastard," Chansung uttered, his dark eyes gleaming as he guided her back down the hall toward the nearest woman's rest room.

Grateful for the company and attention, Saffron flashed him a sweet smile rolling the tube of lipstick in her fingers, thinking his glasses made him extremely irresistible and manly looking.

“To be honest, it was a sofa, and you’re really cute, you know that? I think I like the idea of eating together,” she declared. Maybe this handsome man could give ‘Baek Sung Jo’ a run for his money!

“Arasseo. Here we are. Ladies room it is. I’ll wait for you,” he reassured, opening the door like a gentleman.

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STEPPING out, ten minutes later . . . it was an unexpected surprise to see he was still standing there against the wall, arms folded patiently.

“Wow, I really didn’t think you’d actually be here,” she uttered, straightening her dress.

Pushing away he cocked an arm out toward her. “Wae? Miss an invitation to dine and have drinks with a beautiful woman? Never.”

“Perfect,” Saffron beamed. “It’s been a long time since I had a good burger and Soju.” Taking his arm she wanted to forget her problems, and with the help of ‘Mr. Charming’ and lots of booze, maybe even make some new friends along the way.

“Well, the least I can do is buy dinner for a ‘working’ girl,” he chuckled, winking and bowing gallantly as they approached the door to the burgeoning bar lounge.

Suddenly determined to spend some quality time with the seductive American, Chansung was grateful there were no shows for ‘2PM’ until tomorrow afternoon. Hopeful he would get lucky, his night was finally beginning to look up. It had been awhile since Nichkhun had been ousted from a hotel room, and had to find another place to crash.

His low seductive voice could barely be heard as the heavy door swooshed closed behind them, “Love the red hair by the way. What do you think? Should I dye mine the same color? I tried blonde . . . not really a good look for me though. Oh, by the way . . . in case I forgot to mention it, my name is Chansung.”

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‘Toscana’ Hotel – Dining Room Bar

THE two figures bent over the bar couldn't have been more different. Kyong slammed his empty shot glass against the slick wood grumbling under his breath at the enormity of his current situation. Beside him a defeated Ian, toyed with the rim of an empty Soju bottle, listening to the squeak of his finger against the wet glass.

“She hates me,” he mumbled, “am I that disgusting?” Looking over at a disinterested Kyong, lost in his own thoughts, he shook his head mourning the death of what he'd hoped would be the renewal of his relationship with the feisty Saffron, the one girl he could always count on. “I just don't understand,” he continued, now staring up into the face of the equally disinterested bartender. “I've got money, prestige, friends, hell I'm a stand-up guy. I even own my own airplane.”

“You're a pathetic son-of-a-bitch. We both are . . . Should've never agreed to let you come.” Kyong grumbled beside him, nodding to the bartender to pour him another shot of whiskey.”

BRAVO! Young Jae Ru's hands fisted the air above both men's heads in victory. It did his ghostly heart good to see the two of them finally seeing themselves for who and what they really were.

“You're right, you are a son-of-a-bitch,” he whispered in Kyong's ear, the feathery tinkle of his voice startling the man out of his momentary depression.

“You DIDN'T have to agree with me,” he barked, nudging Ian in the shoulder defensively.

“What the hell? You said it first. I didn't say anything,” Ian shouted back, “Call me a son-of-a-bitch. As a matter-of-fact . . . now that you mention it, YOU ARE TOO. So there.”

Now Kyong was confused. Had he not just heard a voice? Disregarding Ian's outburst, he blinked several times, swiveling on the stool to check behind him. The crowded bar was bustling with activity, but no one stood out.

Young Jae smiled brightly, reaching one tentative finger out toward his brother's anxious face. Brushing against the man's cheek he felt skin, real skin. Just like in the rest room he was beginning to make progress.

Jolting against the touch, Kyong slapped at his face as if swatting an annoying fly, but felt nothing. It couldn't be! Not here, in broad daylight, amongst scores of other onlookers. Or even sitting beside Ian. Young Jae wasn't that brave . . . or was he?

“What in the fuck are you doing?” Ian squinted at the elderly man next to him swatting the air about his face and head. “You need to wrap it up and go to bed. I think you've had enough.”

“Leave me the hell alone.” Kyong snapped furiously.

Truth be told, the wealthy ex-lover of his daughter wasn't worth the hundred dollar bills he flashed around for everyone to see. Now that he thought about it, why he'd considered turning to him for a business deal, he wasn't quite sure. Pure desperation. That had to be it.

“OH! Leave you alone? You invited me to this little pow-wow. Something about a partnership.” Ian retaliated, cracking his knuckles at the squeamish man perched beside him on the barstool. “Now here we are, and you're acting like you've just seen a ghost.”

“Ghost? I'm not a damned ghost. I'm a spirit. A free spirit at that. And you're lucky I haven't ran that f'ng airplane into the ground you're so proud of!” Young Jae sputtered into the air above Ian's shoulder. “And besides being a Son of a Bitch, you've done enough to my Saffron. I want you out of her life. Tonight . . . FOREVER. Don't cross a dead man, asshole!” Young Jae swung out at Ian's shoulder pleased when the side of the man's hair wafted in an unseen breeze, in the stuffy crowded room.

That was it. Leaving his untouched shot, Kyong bolted from the stool, stomping away and out of the establishment, headed for the elevator cursing loudly, “SHIT! What the hell do you know about ghosts?” (Leaving a befuddled Ian in his wake.)

As a feeling of foreboding fell over the cocky millionaire, he shook his head unable to understand why he felt the need to leave his private jet in the hangar this weekend and take the JeJu Airbus back to Seoul with the rest of the regular passengers . . .

Standing impatiently at the unopened elevator door, Kyong felt a presence circling about him like a rabid dog. Knowing for sure that his brother Young Jae had finally managed to find a way into his thoughts he began talking to himself in a pathetic attempt to stop it.

“Should’ve never come here. You’re a fucking idiot Kyong. What made you think you were going to convince them to go back to the States? Sandra . . . it’s all her fault. Bitch. Should’ve never agreed to let her bring Ian.”

Stepping into the elevator amongst scores of other patrons, he ripped the conference name tag from his jacket angrily, sneering at their glares and looks of concern. *Why did he care what they thought? He was being dogged by the ghost of his dead brother, and nothing or no one in this earthly world could stop it.*

Young Jae smiled watching Kyong stomp into the crowded elevator. He was finally making progress. The night was going well. He always loved Christmas. Waving a transparent good-bye to the disgruntled brother, he floated away hoping his next stop would begin to tie up all the loose ends.

But . . . what was happening? He wasn’t touching the floor, never had, never could . . . yet the outline of wet footprints were beginning to show up beneath his opaque feet. Sensing something was terribly wrong, he shook his arms, a chill overpowering him. With a sudden urgency he quickened his pace, hurtling himself through the glass lobby enclosure, droplets of water beginning to careen off his spiritual body.

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‘Toscana’ Hotel – Junsu’s Suite

WITH the sounds of a stringed quartet soothing his aching head, Junsu stretched out on the sofa, humming the lilting melody quietly to himself. The sixty minute break he had allotted himself after an already hectic day was coming to an end.

As of yet he still wasn’t sure how he was going to convince Saffire to spend the night with him. With his excitement level off the charts earlier, so far things had definitely not turned out the way he imagined they would. Managing to get her



here had been easy, finding the time to spend with her was proving difficult.

The look of disappointment in her eyes when he'd left the dinner table, reminded him of the obligations he couldn't ignore. This was his life. And who he was. To deny it would be suicide. Any other weekend they could have dined by candlelight next to his private pool, just the two of them . . . not including a conglomerate of family members,. His intentions had been good when he promised her that special date. Now, he wasn't so sure he could pull it off.

One hand down, he checked his cell not understanding why she wasn't answering her messages, even though the photo shoot had taken longer than anticipated. Surely she was done with the family by now.

Uncertain what his next move should be, he thought about the chilled bottle of champagne in the refrigerator, candles unlit around the pool, and balloon spray he had snagged in the gift shop. The winter Christmas weekend had turned out to be balmy and perfect for romance.

And then there was JJ. The music had helped his throbbing headache, but not his frustrated heart. The conversation he'd overheard between Onew and his hyung was disturbing to say the least. Having caught only bits and pieces while he stood signing autographs he had picked up on JJ's mournful confession to still having feelings for his ex, 'Sexy Noona'.

Now, after the fact, he wasn't sure what disturbed him more . . . that JJ might find out Saffire was in the hotel, or if he did, he would eventually break her heart. She didn't deserve to take second fiddle to an obsession. Was her short (few day) relationship to his carefree hyung worth that? He didn't think so. But, by the same token . . . JJ didn't know their history or how deeply he cared for this girl either. Maybe that was why he was so at odds with himself. It was a push and pull feeling he wasn't used to.

As the final note of the violin trailed off quietly, and the soothing music wound down, he reared up to a sitting position, with renewed determination. It was time to stop beating around the bush, and confess. And maybe not only confess . . . but, even propose. He was more settled, she was available. Thinking 'What the hell!' why did he waste two whole years? Was he going to let JJ stand in his way like he did Antonio? When he wanted something he went after it. And dammit! He wanted Saffire.

Slipping into his shoes and grabbing his jacket he flicked off the lights, satisfied he finally had a plan. About to step out into the hallway, he spotted Kim Hyun Joong rounding the corner, focused on his open door.

Both men ground to a halt staring at each other curiously. Hyun Joong, his face peaked and worried, sweat beading up across his brow, looked like he had been running a marathon.

“Junsu hyung,” he panted, “I’m looking for Saffron. I thought she and Saffire were still with you.” Falling into step beside him they made their way toward the elevator.

“De, but not since dinner.” It was a fact, where one sister went, the other usually followed. It was time to find them. “Something wrong?”

“Chung A, what else?” Joong swiped his forehead nervously. “Saffron’s been drinking and she’s pissed . . . really pissed.”

“Yahhh, that didn’t take long. Arasseo.” Feeling suddenly single-minded and eager, Junsu patted Hyun Joong’s shoulder accommodatingly, as the elevator opened. “Let’s look for them together then. Guess we should start at the bar, yah? Freaking women!”

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‘Toscana’ Hotel - VIP Club

WITH the day of rehearsals, fan meets and photo shoots winding down, so were the Idols, their staff and managers. Thus, the VIP Club was doing anything but . . . winding down. On the contrary, it was just gearing up.

How would one describe the atmosphere of comradery amongst the Idol family? In a place like the newly opened ‘Toscana’ hotel, owned and operated by Kim Junsu (one of their own), they felt comfortable and accepted. Hosting young and old alike, the excitement level was at an all-time high, with groups representing several of the major entertainment companies.

As they began arriving . . . the younger, non-drinking Idols (drawn like moths to a flame) came to dance, and socialize, while the more seasoned members took the evening’s opportunity to meet up with friends and acquaintances they hadn’t seen for some time, anxious to let down their hair and party till dawn in typical Korean fashion.

One-by-one they filed through, laughing, joking, dancing and jostling for position at the tables with the most activity going on. With a DJ pounding out the latest dance music and lights flashing all around them, more and more idols gathered in a circle about the slew of tables where word had it . . . two crazy American girls were bringing down the house.

At the center of the mayhem . . . A determined Saffron, fighting a ‘Girls Generation’ member in an intense game of ‘Kai-Bai-Bo’ (ROCK-PAPER-SCISSORS) for the right to be the recipient of a drinking game involving hair-braiding. As an uproar of boisterous laughter permeated the electrified atmosphere, Saffron . . . the winner, hugged the defeated girl, hoping not to have hurt her feelings.

Fascinated at the ease with which she’d succumbed to the free-for-all, she was certain this was more fun than attending the real conference. So moving forward this weekend . . . Idol networking and drinking games it would be.

* * * * *

STUFFED between Chansung and JunK, with her arms around each broad shoulder, Saffron slurped out the last of her Peppermint shot. Licking down into the glass she winked seductively into first one and then the other’s face, her tongue twirling around the bottom.

As ‘ooh’s’ and ‘ahhh’s’ rose around the tables at the sexual innuendo, Saffire sat calmly by, watching her sister playing ‘court’ to the throes of men at her beckon call. It didn’t seem to matter that the room was beginning to spin overhead, and her new designer dress clung to her sweat-drenched body like a too-tight glove.

Her carefree sister was indeed the ‘Princess’ of the house tonight . . . and these were her ‘Princes’. Clearly they both deserved a harem of men and alcohol to help divert their minds away from the ordeal they had already endured since arriving.

As for herself? Well . . . she had Heechul still tickling up her ribs, and a satisfied Taemin continuing to squirm under the pressure of her legs across his lower belly.

“Cinderella, I want to dance!” she barked loudly, not caring who she took with her, throwing one hand out to the pre-occupied Saffron, motioning toward the crowded dance floor.

Ignoring her request, and refusing to accept the challenge, Saffron nestled deeper into her tight trio of Idols, kissing cheeks back and forth between them, unaware of who was watching or what they thought. She couldn't help but think, this might end up being her night after all, wondering who did she want to grace her presence with later, when the night finally wound down?

Donghae . . . noooo . . . he's already in the friend-zone. Mmmm, dark and sexy, Chansung? Don't think so. Pretty sure I wouldn't come away from him unscathed!

So, closing her eyes against the bodies encasing her, she stretched one manicured finger out, circling it round and round the crowd of Idols, as if playing an imaginary game of 'spin the bottle' in her head. When they opened, she was pointing directly at 'SHINee's' maknae, Lee Taemin.

Smiling, he raised one eyebrow along with his full bottle of Soju, not quite sure why she had singled him out, but willing to take the chance and find out.

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Toscana Hotel Jewelry Store

THE new sparkly high carat diamonds nestled among other various pieces of expensive jewelry captured Sandra's attention immediately. Hand to her throat she peered through the counter glass fascinated at the intricate gold and silver inlays.

"Isn't this one gorgeous?" came the soft soothing question, as a slender brightly painted pink fingernail gently touched the one she had been focusing on.

"Oh my yes." Unable to catch her breath it was so exquisite, Sandra's eyes followed the fingernail up the arm to the accommodating face hovering above her. "May I try it on?" she asked softly.

"Of course. It suits you."

Slipping it out of the velvet holder, the pretty young Asian woman studied Sandra as she placed it gently in the palm of her hand. The glaringly gaudy wedding ring on her ring finger was all the proof she needed that money was not an issue. She had been in the business long enough to spot a real diamond when she saw one. Time to get busy and make a sale.

Weaving slightly from one too many martini's Sandra coughed, cursing under her breath at her choice of high heels, and slender pencil skirt. Wishing now that the evening was winding down she could be comfortable in slacks and flats like the young sales woman beckoning her to invest in yet another large diamond ring. It was tempting. Every piece of jewelry snuggled up and down the brightly lit case was tempting. Like a kid in a candy store she was (as usual) in her element.

Slipping off her wedding ring, Sandra's eyes rested on a simple gold band, with one lone birthstone nestled lovingly in the center. Clamping her jaw tightly to keep from gasping, she blinked unconsciously pushing down a vision, insistent on forcing its way to the surface of her memories.

Young Jae's tender touch, careening down her wrist, and across the knuckles of her hand, before his lips settled on her left finger, easing a slender gold birthstone ring over it, whispering the words she'd waited to hear for months. "Saranghae, I love you Sandy. We'll be together forever."

Licking her dry lips, the large diamond ring poised between her fingers clattered precariously onto the glass counter top.

"Oh shit! I'm so sorry," she apologized, fumbling for it hastily attempting to keep the startled sales lady from being shaken at her clumsiness.

In the seconds that passed, her mind jerked her emotions one way and then the next, the desire for the large diamond flinging away from her as quickly as it had come. What was she doing? How had she managed to get like this? She wondered, shoving the piece of jewelry back into the woman's hand mindlessly. She had grown up a simple girl. Never one for glitz and glamour. All she had ever needed or wanted was 'him'.

* * * * *

AS the lights of the jewelry store dissipated behind her so did the need for wealth, ambition and status. Not sure where to go next, disoriented and melancholy she fought the crowds milling about the entrance (for any chance of seeing an Idol), and bolted out into the cool, windy night.

The life she wanted so desperately in the beginning had evolved over the years into a mundane nightmare of an existence. The result being this . . . Who was she? This shell of a woman that everyone feared and despised? If he could see her now . . . Dear God what would he think?

The crashing of distant waves on the shoreline called out, tempting her to find solace on the beach. A place she remembered well as a younger woman. She had taken her anger and sadness to the edge of the raging surf often . . . screaming into the shattering waters as they rolled about her feet and legs, urging her to lay down and give up. Maybe tonight, was the night!

“I CAN’T DO THIS ANYMORE!” she screamed, attempting to be heard over the crashing of the waves.

With a storm brewing on the horizon, the beach was nearly deserted, the misty spray flinging droplets of sea water up into the air along the coast line. A lone jogger, nearing the property line of the Toscana, spotted the shadowy figure of a woman, darting barefoot through the haze, long hair blowing precariously about her face. Slowing his pace he watched curiously, expecting her to pull up short as the frigid waves splashed against her feet, but instead she barreled on into the frothy water arms extended, struggling to maintain her balance against the tug of the undercurrent.

“HOLY FUCK! STOP! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” he squealed, taking off at breakneck speed to reach her before she was totally submerged.

“I can’t. I can’t.” Sandra muttered, succumbing to the freezing December Ocean enveloping her ankles and calves, working a numbness up into her thighs.

She heard the sounds of a voice, faint against the crashing surf. Who was yelling? Was it Young Jae? But, why? She was doing what needed to be done. Why would he stop her? Being with him was all that mattered now.

Wet and frozen, her hair flinging from side to side as she began tumbling to her knees, the strong steady arms of the middle-aged jogger began gliding her to the safety of the beach.

Laying her in the sand, he threw off his sweatshirt, wrapping her shivering body and hugging her close against his wet chest.

Young Jae curled down beside her, his transparent hand shaking as he caressed the wet strands of hair away from her pale panic-stricken face, knowing without the intervention of the man in her arms . . . she would have given up for good. Why would she think this was the answer? She needed to live. To find herself, and renew her soul. She needed to be a mother, and even a wife. Loving her didn't mean taking her from those She loved. There was so much left for her to do.

Her eyelids fluttering open, Sandra peered past the head of her rescuer . . . into the gaze of the man she loved with all her heart whispering, "I'm sorry Young Jae. I'm sooo sorry."

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