

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

(Part 2)

“May your coffee kick in before reality does . . .”



Friday, December 19th, 2014

11:00 P.M.

JeJu Island – ‘Toscana’ VIP Lounge Club

KIM JaeJoong maneuvered his way to the bar of the still semi-crowded club, greeting friends along the way. After his awkward encounter with Saffire, he couldn’t believe he’d neglected to ask her to attend this weekend. She had to be around here somewhere. But, where? And what in the world had brought her here? Or more importantly . . . who? Was it Junsu? Surely not, he was always more than pre-occupied when events centered around the hotel. There couldn’t possibly have been time for a one-on-one with Saffire.

No . . . it had to be because of Saffron. Chances were the sisters had come together, possibly at Hyun Joong’s request. *Maybe that was it!*

The young bartender who had been privy to all the evening's drama, spotted JJ long before he had a chance to speak. He had been the object of conversation with the tall busty blonde. It was only fitting that the popular KPOP Idol would finally meander in alone.

“JaeJoong. Welcome.”

“Annyeong.” Arms on the bar, JJ greeted the toothy young man, studying the other Idols and guests up and down either side, chattering away about Junsu ordering a round of drinks for the house.

So, he had already been here. But, where was he now? Back in his suite or wandering the hotel networking? But, no . . . if Junsu had any inkling Saffire was here, they would be together, he was sure of it.

Desperately wanting a drink to smooth over the wounded look she'd given him earlier, it was more imperative to find her immediately and explain. She needed to understand that he'd frozen at the unexpected sight of her. Misunderstanding his silence, she was annoyed (and rightly so). The scores of unanswered text messages on his phone proved it.

Then as if someone was on his side, he spotted them. A pair of silver stiletto heels resembling the ones peeking out from under her dress at the elevator, parked underneath a large round table, littered with empty shot glasses and beer bottles. The inhabitants . . . Ilhoon, Eunkwang, Taemin and Onew . . .

As the music died down in the background, their conversation drifted over making it easy to pick up on the events of the night, with Taemin's loud boasting wafting up, demanding his undivided attention.

“Arasseo. Oettoeke? (WHAT TO DO?) She was all over me. Wouldn't you have done the same?”

The entire table of men nodded agreeably, Ilhoon being the first to pipe up a quick response. “Yeah man, EXACTLY what you did. Damn. I LOVE American girls. Too bad they weren't triplets!”

Slapping the table in frustration, rattling the bottles precariously, the youngest ‘SHINee’ member scoffed. “Yahhh, wish it had turned out differently. Babo, (STUPID) Hyun Joong and damn his ‘Baek Seung Jo’. I could've done that. I can switch on ‘Danger’ Tae in a freaking

heartbeat. She didn't even give me the chance. He just hauled her off like he owned her. Shit, don't know why I'm surprised, he's good at that."

"So what about the other one? They were drinking everyone under the table, that's for sure." Eunkwang's sheepish curiosity was getting the better of him. "I saw her snuggling up to just about every guy on the dance floor, especially Heechul, lucky bastard."

Ilhoon shrugged his shoulders. "Dunno, couple of wild ones, those two. Looked like they were up for just about anything. Good thing Junsu showed up when he did, put a stop to the madness. Buying that round for the house was sweet. I was about to head out."

"Aigoo, it was like one minute she was here, the next minute . . . Poof! Gone . . ." With drunken, twinkling eyes, Eunkwang's hands re-enacted the rendition of a disappearing magic act, as he took another slurp of Soju.

Finally noticing JaeJoong peering at them all, a queer look of disbelief running rampant across his face he called out, "Annyeonghaeseyo, JJ hyung! What's up? You missed the best. Come join us anyway, have a shot."

Mouthing a firm "No", JJ stepped forward, just as a slightly tipsy Onew rose, shaking his head wearily, excusing himself from the dwindling gathering.

"We gotta go guys, we're up first for practice tomorrow. Come on Tae." Grabbing Taemin by the scruff of the neck he tugged him off the chair encouraging him to follow mumbling, "You've said enough. Make sure you get something in your stomach when we get back to the room." Waving the rest of them away he made a quick exit before something started between JJ and Taemin, (who had too much history for him to deal with tonight).

Having heard enough, JJ wasn't remotely interested in joining the drunken conversation either. Obviously, Hyun Joong had rescued Saffron from a hands-on, Taemin and Saffire had disappeared off the dance floor in a puff of smoke when drinks were free. So what had been her fate from there? Had she gone back to a room? Was she shopping? At one of the other bars? Or with her sister and his hyung, Joong?

Ilhoon tapped Eunkwang's shoulder joking outwardly about Saffire's sudden flight. "Yahhh, poor blonde didn't even make it out of here with her shoes. Reminded me of Cinderella at

midnight. That's them under there." Pointing at the silver heels under the table he chuckled, "Maybe I should go get her room number and make a 'special delivery', huh?"

JJ continued to stand in silence. *What should he say? Or do?* For the most part these were people in the business he knew. And, in his wildest dreams he couldn't have imagined the events of the night (on the eve of the annual December festival) turning out like this.

FUCK. He should have told her he was here. Invited her to come. Said something . . . anything, in the hallway. For all his 'confessing' under the stars in Uncle Ryu's dining room, a few nights ago, once again he had royally screwed things up between them.

Staring a drunken Ilhoon square in the face, he reached down, snatching the shoes from under the table, and cradling them between his fingers muttered, "I'll take these. Make sure she gets them. She's a friend."

Before anyone could respond, he was gone. His heart racing as fast as his legs would go he headed to the front desk in hopes of finding out what room she and Saffron were staying in.

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'Toscana' Hotel – Second Floor

THE longer JJ stood paralyzed against the wall outside Saffire's room, hand to his chest still clutching her silver shoes, the longer he regretted his previous actions, whispering "What are you up to my 'Cotton Candy Princess'? You're not in your room. Damn why aren't you answering your phone?"

Bent over his knees breathing heavily, sadly, his spirit felt broken as the quiet voice in his head tried in vain to calm him down from panic to mild concern. Despite what she thought she saw, he reminded himself sternly he'd already confessed to her how he felt, so she couldn't possibly be with Junsu. Or could she? Fishing for his cell, he stared fixated into the darkened screen. Who else might know where she'd disappeared to after the VIP Lounge? Hyun Joong, of course.

Checking the time, it was certainly not too late for a quick text message to find out.

Joong, were u at the VIP lounge? Have u seen the girls? I'm looking 4 Saffire.

Waiting for a response, (without being aware of the future) how could he convince himself that Saffire would ultimately make the right decision? All he could do was continue encouraging himself not to get too wrapped up in his head and overanalyze her reactions or emotions. There was so much more at stake.

When the phone buzzed in his hand he jumped, jolted from his wayward thoughts.

She's with Junsu, Hyung

Like a punch to the gut, JJ gaped blindly into the words on the screen. Seeing and registering them, but unable to wrap his head around the inevitable, he typed a quick 'Thanks' sniffing nervously, his thoughts flying in a million different directions.

Maybe she was just confused. Being at the hotel, with them both here, spotting 'him' like she had. He knew women, he had sisters . . . scores of them. And Saffire was complicated.

Sucking in a deep cleansing breath he sized up the deserted hallway remembering keenly how drastically his life and heart had changed since meeting the sassy little blonde from America, not more than a few days ago. Already he couldn't imagine his life without her.

Picking at the strap of one fancy shoe, he quietly attempted to talk himself down. "Come on, Jae, you already said you wouldn't give up. So, don't second-guess yourself and go back on your word. There IS such a thing as love at first sight. You've already proved it. She isn't sexy Noona. She comes from a totally different place."

Certain he was hearing something, he squinted into the bright overhead lights. *Was it the thunder? The soft singing of Christmas carols overhead? Or the quiet urging's of Young Jae Ryu? Like before, in the café, on the road outside the drinking tent, and now . . . feeling him slipping, was he giving him advice again?*

"Uncle?" Arms out, still clutching Saffire's silver shoes, he swiped the air in a circular motion around him. Nothing. And then a rumble of thunder and HIS voice . . .

"You told her once you would show her what you've already told me, that you're all in, and you want to fight. Don't let that just be words son. Words fade . . . actions live on forever."

OH SHIT! Suddenly determined, JaeJoong stood up, his back straight, resolving there was no way he would let Junsu have this woman. Hyung or not . . . he had sacrificed and given up one love in his life that nearly killed him. If he had listened to his heart and jumped sooner with her, she wouldn't have slipped through his fingers and into the arms of another man either. Now, the piece of his heart still clinging to her needed to be severed to make room for Saffire.

That only meant this time around, he had to fight and fight hard, despite the fallout. He couldn't make the same mistake twice. He would have to 'show' Saffire. Telling her just wasn't enough. But, he thought he 'had' showed her. The romantic evening in Uncle's dining room, the bear and loving note. What else was there? A commitment? A baby? A proposal? All of the above? With his military service right around the corner, maybe Uncle was telling him it was time. He knew it. Obviously, Saffire needed to know it too.

Placing her shoes gently by the door, he dug through his pockets, searching for something he could leave with them, alerting her to the fact that he'd been there. Finding only a pack of gum and a pen he tugged it out, scribbling "*Call me! J*", with a smiley face across the side. Dropping it down into one shoe, he hoped that when she returned later, she would call him. No matter what time. There was so much he wanted to say.

Rearing up, satisfied he was doing the right thing, he pivoted toward the elevator, blurting out softly into the empty hallway. "Don't give up on me yet Princess. I need you. We were meant to be together and I'll show you how much. I promise. Right Uncle?"

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‘Toscana’ Hotel – Kim Hyun Joong’s Room

4:30 A.M.

HYUN JOONG sat up in the bed raking his hair back trying to digest what Saffron had told him about the narcissist bastard, Ian. The liquor finally catching up with her, hands tucked under her cheeks, she drifted off recalling the details of how he had broken up with her publicly over social media. Cursing under his breath, he figured it was a good thing he didn’t know where to find the asshole or he might have been tempted to practice Tae Kwon Do on his face for what he had done to his Saffron.

Lightening flashed through the dark room, illuminating Saffron’s sleeping face, her mouth gaped slightly, long red lashes rested on rosy cheeks that matched the rope of hair lying across her neck. He scooped up the braid, wondering how she could have moved in and taken up residence inside his heart after only a few weeks.

“Saffron . . .”

He loved saying her name. It was unique, like her honesty. He couldn’t think of any woman honest enough to give him odds on sleeping with someone. Yawning, his lids heavy, he remembered asking her if Mr. Big was here for the conference or to take her back to America. He’d grinned drowsily when she blurted out, ‘Pfff . . . What makes you think I’m important enough to come over 6000 miles for?’

That was one thing he and Mr. Big did agree on. She was worth traveling over the ocean for. Damn he was getting in too deep. Closing his eyes, he sniffed her braid, expecting the scent of coconuts . . . instead Saffron’s hair smelled of flowers, butter, and the spice she was named after. Hoping she wouldn’t break his heart with her notions of independence, willfulness, and fidelity.

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‘Toscana’ Hotel – Kim Junsu’s Room

4:30 A.M.

STARTLED awake by the crash of thunder outside the window, Saffire rose up in bed, to a crackle of lightening streaking across the sky through the sheer curtained window followed by another loud boom. Where was she? Home? It only stormed like this in L.A. Trying to gauge her bearings, adjusting heavy lidded eyes to the sudden darkness, her feet hit the warm carpeted floor just about the time a quiet snoring could be heard at her naked backside.

Fuck! There was a man in her bed. Which meant, it definitely ‘wasn’t’ her bedroom, and most assuredly ‘wasn’t’ California. Think Saffire . . . think. You’re naked. Oh my GOD! Did you screw someone last night? No! No! I couldn’t have done that. OH FUCK!

Her head splitting, as if fractured in two with a sledge hammer, she was petrified to lean over and find out ‘who’ was actually sharing bed space with her at 4:30 A.M. Opting out instead, cussing inaudibly, she spit the hair from the corners of her dry, cottony mouth.

“Shit, shit, shit. Don’t wanna know. Just wanna get my crap and get the hell out. Thirsty . . . Drink, I need a freaking drink. Clothes . . . where the hell are my clothes?” Whispering at the lifeless snoring form beside her, she announced, “Don’t wake up before I bust out of here, whoever you are or I’m in some deep shit.”

Groping through the shadows for a drink, she found the handle of a coffee cup perched on the bedside table, grabbing it instinctively, desperate for some form of liquid sustenance.

“OH FUCK!” Choking, she spewed the cold sweet coffee from between her lips, attempting not to gag on the aftertaste. Water, she needed water, not coffee.

Headed for the nearest door, she hoped was the bathroom, the heavy pounding of rain could be heard across the patio and pool. The pool. Stopping dead in her tracks the fleeting vision of a pink cloud of balloons fluttering up into the sky over the swimming pool flashed before her.

Pressing two fingers into her temples, she scolded herself as severely as she could muster, (considering the circumstances). “You’re an idiot Saffire. Who is that over there? Comon you idiot. JJ was at the elevator, and the pool, wasn’t he?”

JJ? Am I in your room? Did I just hop out of bed naked, and leave you Prince J? AGHHHH. I would remember having sex with you, wouldn’t I? Dammit, I don’t think I’ve ever been this hungover in my whole life. And I’ve NEVER slept with someone and blacked out. This is bad. This is really bad.

Panicked a new, folding both arms around herself to stave off the chill of the air-conditioner, her bleary eyes dropped to the floor just in time to stop herself from stepping on the slippery underside of a balled up white crinoline evening gown. Tripping around it soundlessly, she peered past the open bathroom door, wondering if she could manage to pee quietly enough NOT to wake the sleeping giant in the bed.

“Oh my God, oh my God . . .” Whimpering, her memories of last night were hazy at best.

Then there was the dress. Leering down at it, she snatched it up and flung herself into the dark bathroom not bothering to flip on the light. As it hung limp between her fingers, she strained to bring the events of the previous night into focus. But, nothing came except balloons, the feel of a white cotton shirt, and the residuals of a dream about Idols, lots of them, lined up end-to-end blowing air kisses and confessing their undying love. WTF!

As the rain continued to batter the building around her, the need to flee became uppermost in her mind. She could ask questions and get answers later. Right now, the safety on the opposite side of the main door was her primary concern.

So, giving up on peeing, and struggling into the damp dress, she crept back into the room, scanning it quickly for a purse, phone, or shoes, anything to help her in her flight to freedom.

“AH! There you are.”

Spotting a small silver purse on the hall table, its chain dangling precariously over the side, she grabbed it gratefully, scrounging inside for her phone or a room card. Elated at finding both, her room number was 201. Glancing at the table top, another card glimmered in the lightening still periodically shooting off outside. THIS was room #110. Not her room.

And shoes? For some reason the shoes had eluded her, and she wasn't about to return to the bed, crawling underneath and all around in search of them. If barefoot, she came . . . then barefoot, she would go.

“Goodbye whoever you are.” Exhaling nervously, she pivoted, blowing a wayward kiss at the sleeping body. “If it's not you JJ, I'm fucked.” And unable to handle the alternative, the door clicked behind her.

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OUT in the deserted hotel hallway, Saffire hiked up the long annoyingly clingy dress, bolting for the elevator doors.

“201. If I can just get there, and call . . . ohhh . . . Saffron! That’s right. I was with Saffron and aghhh, the parents, last night.”

Finally remembering, she waved her cell in one hand, room card in the other, wanting desperately to dip into the hall restroom on the way, but deciding her own room would keep her from bumping into anyone else up in the wee hours of the morning. What had she done? She wasn’t a skank. Never had been.

Moments later, skidding up to the hotel door, out of breath from running, she slipped the card in, impatiently waiting for the light to beep on. With the sounds of the storm drowning out the interludes of Christmas music playing overhead, she shoved it in again . . . Once . . . Twice . . . Three times.

Why wasn’t this working? Whose room is this anyway? And where was Saffron? Why weren’t they in the same room? Oh God, she was so confused.

Hadn’t she received the card on the way into the dining room from Junsu himself? Or had she dreamt that too? Now the entire last twenty-four hours seemed vague and distorted. Jiggling the handle in frustration, and dropping her purse on the floor she let her slick satiny-gowned behind glide precariously down beside it with a thud. It was then, (with her head still pounding to the sounds of thunder overhead), she spotted the silver stilettos.

“What the hell, who left my shoes here? They are MY shoes, right? And what’s this? A note? Okay, that’s just freaking weird.” Picking it gently from down inside the toe scribbled in familiar handwriting was, *“Call me, J”*.

Forced back to a standing position, panicked and scrambling nervously for her phone, those three little words weighed heavily on her hungover psyche. The note could mean only one thing . . . the occupant of room #110 could not have been JaeJoong. *So who did she leave snoring beside her?*

Who exactly had she partied with last night? Heechul? Donghae? SHINee? Once again they floated through her head like random clouds on a windy day. No one but Heechul stood out.

Clearing her dry scratchy throat her fingers tapped mindlessly against one thigh as she tried to desperately piece together the puzzle of last evening's escapades. Dinner . . . check . . . Ian . . . check . . . parents . . . check . . . bar, cheesy fries and a cute bartender . . . check . . . Heechul . . . check . . . and that's where things began to spiral out of focus.

There was loud music, dancing, laughter, and lots of alcohol. That was sketchy at best. In the long list of Idols she could conjure up spending any time with, that left only two. Heechul or Junsu. And Heechul didn't have the pull to snag himself a suite on the first floor with a pool. *OH SHIT! I'm fucked. It looks like I spent the night with Junsu.*

Shaking from head to toe, the overhead lights blared in her bloodshot eyes, as she pulled up Saffron's number, texting her a frantic message. But, halfway through, (forgetting it was only 4:45 A.M.) her cell read only 2% power. Despondent she would have to try later, she began to wonder if Saffron hadn't taken the opportunity to shack up with Hyun Joong. *Of course. And knocking on his door at the crack of dawn wouldn't cause a ruckus, would it?*

So what were her other options? Was there no one else? Nibbling one nail, she contemplated the alternatives. She'd die before seeking out either one of her parents, (or subjecting herself to their questioning when she was caught banging on the door to be let in). Mother had never been a possibility, and after last night . . . not father either.

Junsu's handsome, smiling face at dinner bounced around her splitting head. *What about him? No, now that she'd left, to creep back in, tail between her legs would be potential relational suicide.*

It seemed as if (temporarily at least), she was on her own. Distraught at the revelation of what she might've done, exhaustion began to overtake her need to find anyone. The pit rising in her empty stomach wasn't helping either. Cracking her knuckles in distress, tears of injustice began welling up in her large blue eyes.

JJ would never forgive her if he found out, and how in God's name could she prevent that? But, wait . . . hadn't he been with someone else as well? So why the shoes? And the note? Was he playing her? And where was the proof she had actually made love to Junsu? A bed, and a naked body didn't necessarily mean sex. He had always been nothing but a gentleman to her.

He wouldn't take advantage of her like that . . . would he? She'd been drunk. Really drunk. Surely he'd plucked her from the dance floor, and taken her to his room to sober up. Of course!

The dress on the floor, and cup of cold coffee by the bed when she left. That was it. He was protecting her from herself. Letting her sleep it off until morning. There was nothing to tell.

So, why was she still so worried?

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‘Toscana’ Hotel Lobby Restroom

SETTLING into a comfortable easy chair inside the main lobby restroom, Saffire curled her legs up scooching as far back as possible. Now that she thought about it Saffron rarely (if ever) kept her phone on her anyway.

Wishing she was able to ditch the glaringly obvious white Disney princess dress she knew when the breakfast hour rolled around, so would random patrons . . . roaming in and out of the Ladies Room. With nowhere else to go, she was doomed.

Dozing off, the holiday music droning quietly overhead, she barely heard the door open, until the loud garish voices of two women permeated the small waiting area.

“That’s her Cynthia.” Helen grabbed her friend by the arm, hugging her tightly. “The girl I told you about. The actress in the white dress, Ice Princess . . . Dear Lord. Do you think she’s been in here all night? She’s still dressed poor thing . . .” Leaning over Saffire, she tapped her knee lightly. “Honey. Wake up. Are you alright? Can we help? Did your assistant desert you? Humpf, not surprised, little hussy!”

Saffire’s eyes blinked open to a rotund green-eyed, grey-haired woman, dressed in a purple jogging suit, clutching a large handbag, wearing a nametag reading . . . ‘Helen’. Beside her, a petite, middle-aged lady, who was obviously, ‘Cynthia’ studied her curiously.

Ice Princess? Assistant? Hussy? What the hell is she talking about? And who in God’s name gets up at this hour on a Saturday morning in a freaking hotel to ‘work out’? Clearly, Helen and Cynthia did.

“I’m fine.” Wrapping her dress around both feet, Saffire attempted to cover the fact she was shoeless. “Ahhh, just locked out of my room. Didn’t want to bother the front desk. I’m about to call someone.”

“OH! Of course. Red . . . bet she took some man to your room, huh? I know the drill. I wasn’t born yesterday.” Helen was extremely distraught, her face taking on a blush of pink, her grey head shaking in disbelief at the woman’s assistant doing her wrong like that. That man she and Jeff had seen her in the elevator with no doubt. The scathingly handsome dark-headed one with the glasses. He didn’t look trustworthy on any level.

“Red?” Squinting at the gregarious woman, Saffire looked from one to the other as Cynthia agreed wholeheartedly, her ponytail bobbing about her concerned face. “Red who? I don’t know anyone named Red.”

“Your assistant. Short skirt, long red braid. Gets around. Bet you didn’t think she was here for THAT now did you?” Trying not to seem catty Helen’s voice rose.

“Really?” Now Saffire was beginning to figure out just who she was referring to. It was Saffron, and for some reason ‘Helen’ thought she was ‘hooking’, of all things. If she wasn’t so hungover, distressed and tired it would’ve been hilarious, but all she could do was eke out a sigh, a weak smile forming at the sides of her parched mouth, her answer dry.

“That’s my sister, and she isn’t a hooker, or a hussy. And she didn’t lock me out either. My room key doesn’t match my room number for some reason, and I don’t want to be seen wandering the lobby, looking like this. I . . . ahhhh, I’m sort of acquainted with the owner.”

Lowering her head, she hoped these two meddling women weren’t about to run to the downstairs desk and announce that Junsu’s ‘lady’ friend was holed up in the rest room, looking like she had just had sex with every Idol in the place.

“Ohhhh, my goodness. I’m so sorry.” Apologizing profusely, Helen was happy that ‘Red’ wasn’t a lady of the evening, and the two beautiful girls, were merely sisters. “I saw you with Mr. Junsu, last night.” Bending at the waist, she patted Saffire’s knee solicitously. “Such a handsome man. And wealthyyy . . . Lucky girl!”

Cynthia nodded in agreement again, crossing her arms patiently, waiting to hear how her new-found friend was going to talk her way out of this one.

“Lucky?” Saffire’s eyes shot up, blazing despite her blossoming headache. “I only said I knew him. Nothing more.” She was aware it was a lie but she didn’t know these women. They could be undercover reporters, out for a story that could ruin Junsu’s reputation. *Didn’t she have enough trouble ahead of her? She should never have mentioned him.*

“Welllll . . . Tsk, tsk, tsk. My dear, he was certainly ‘enamored’ of you at dinner. I was there.”

“Okay. That’s enough.” Bolting from the chair, Saffire snatched her purse, heading for the door. “I don’t have to stay here and listen to this. Not sure what you THOUGHT you saw last night, but I was having dinner with my SISTER and my PARENTS. By invitation. That’s it. Anything else you’ve conjured up in that crazy head of yours is pure bullshit,” Shouting she slammed through the doors and back out into the deserted hallway.

But, truer to the facts than she wanted to admit. Shivering as she stomped toward the lobby, a tiny voice began to dig at her incessantly forcing her to cover her ears, shoes in one hand, purse in the other. Her sister Saffron, reminding her not to get in the middle of two best friends . . . one or both of them would get hurt. *What had she done now? She needed answers, giving her no choice, BUT to find her way to Saffron.*

Watching the door swing shut, Helen rotated toward Cynthia shaking her head, “Those actresses, so high-strung . . .”

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‘Toscana’ Hotel Lobby

5:15 A.M.

BY the time 5:15 rolled around Saffire found herself in the midst of a flurry of early risers headed down to the restaurant for breakfast. Stopping outside the elevator doors, shoes in hand, one bare foot tapping against the cold tile, she waited impatiently beside a large Christmas tree, hoping the hotel that was coming to life would do it without noticing her. For some reason she doubted that was possible.

Outside the storm raged on, lightening periodically illuminating the large plate glass lobby windows followed by the intense booms of rolling thunder. Staring out into the pelting rain, she leaned anxiously into a white pillar, it was time to text Saffron and definitely time to go.

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Toscana Hotel – Kim Hyun Joong’s Room

5:15 A.M.

“You know the red hair comes from her mother’s aunt.”

Gasping for air Hyun Joong woke with a start, his ears perked to the sound of a voice he knew so well, trusting he was dreaming. For sitting not six feet from him and the sleeping Saffron was the ghostly figure of a man he had also called Uncle.

Pinching himself to make sure he was awake, he could make out the desk across the room visible through the familiar shadow. Squinting his eyes closed, he flung them open again. *Damn he was still there.* A smile playing about the older man’s mouth, he surveyed Saffron.

“Oh shit,” he groaned.

At hearing him, Uncle Ryu’s sunken eyes widened in surprise that Hyun Joong could recognize him. Why? Because the boy was dreaming? Or was he learning how to appear in front of the ones he loved? It didn’t matter, he had a message for him . . . a sense of urgency had been clipping at his misty heels all night. Time was running out and Hyun Joong was his last stop . . .

“She was named after her Great Aunt Saffron.” A wraithlike hand reached out for her slender leg, stretching down the bed . . . only to stop midway and draw back. “I remember the day she was born, paler than Saffire with a full head of carrot red hair, screaming for attention.”

Chuckling he continued, giving Hyun Joong one of his prized memories of the girls that had become his life.

“Sandra was beside herself, convinced that God was punishing her by giving her a child that resembled the eccentric aunt she didn’t like. I met her once, Saffron is the spitting image of the woman, but Saffire embodies her personality. Aunt Saffron was a unique and independent woman, who lived by her own rules and never married.”

Slapping his leg, left unaware that it dissipated into a cloud of mist, then reshaped itself (as if drawn by a magnet) Young Jae continued, “But, enough about that . . . I’m here because of you son. Seems you’ve come full circle . . . still impulsive.” His deep-set steely eyes snapped to the young man he wasn’t sure was right for Saffron. Even with what happened earlier tonight it was apparent that (at least for the moment) Saffron wanted him and he was a hundred percent better than the American.

“Sad to say you haven’t taken my advice over the years. You’re still repeating the same mistakes, falling too hard, too fast. So what do you have to say for yourself?” Frowning his wispy eyebrows as Hyun Joong pressed into the wall, sitting up straighter Uncle Ryu grew silent.

Was he seriously going to have a conversation with a dead man? Coughing unconsciously, Joong gripped the bedsheet beside him, his knuckles whitening as he whispered hoarsely, “Uncle, I’m sincere. Don’t question me. I care for her, I do.” Swallowing the lump in his throat, clearly he had no desire to anger the spirit of Uncle Ryu.

“Oh son, I understand you do . . . that’s the problem. Weren’t you listening? You need to back off, she needs time,” Sighing he was sorry he had failed her when he was alive, now thankful the heavens were giving him a second chance to be both of the girl’s champion. His purpose seemed clearer now . . . to help alter the course this ship was sailing on. No one had done it for him. This would be his chance to make a difference in all their lives. Everything from this day forward would mean he was one step closer to peace, and sweet unencumbered rest.

“I’m not sure I can,” Ruffling his hair at what fate was throwing at him all at once Joong had to admit the inevitable. “Time is one thing I don’t have a lot of Uncle. If only I’d met Saffron before, things might’ve been different.” Now it irritated him remembering the time wasted on another woman who had turned away from him to a younger man.

Uncle Ryu was sympathetic “If I had been aware . . .” His ghostly form shrunk in despair at the mess his dying had created. Everything would have been easier if he had set his plan in motion when he’d gotten the news of the cancer. I’ve never been able to read the future. I can’t say for sure if you are the best choice. One thing I do know . . . She needs to find herself before she can love you unconditionally.

“But, Uncle. . .” Bzzz, bzzz.

Flying to a sitting position Hyun Joong swung a hand in front of his face, frightened that the mosquito was ready to land and suck his precious blood. Intent on searching out the creature and destroying the threat, he heard the buzzing again, sighing that it was only Saffron’s phone on the other side of the bed.

Gazing at the clock reading 5:15 A.M., he muttered, “Who in the hell is texting her at this hour?” hoping it was the bastard Ian, loving the idea of getting in his face this early. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes he reached over Saffron, grabbing the phone only to see it was from Saffire, asking what room she was in.

Texting back the room number he wondered why she would be showing up so early. Maybe things hadn’t gone so well with Junsu after all. Tossing it back across the table, cursing the fact that he would have little time with Saffron, he sank down into the bed gathering the sleeping woman in his arms. Deciding how to wake her up, unexpectedly the dream began playing like a motion picture thru his mind. Bolting up, he peered down toward the end of the bed half expecting Uncle Ryu to still be floating there, waving good morning to him.

“Oh hell, I’m going crazy,” Scanning the room to ease his mind that the ghost wasn’t lurking around in a corner somewhere he wondered what would the repercussions be if he were to try explaining Uncle Ryu’s presence at his bedside to Saffron? Would she feel pressured to give him up? Or by not telling her would he seem controlling? No better than Ian?

* * * * *

‘Toscana’ Hotel Lobby

5:16 A.M.

FINALLY. Saffire’s cell buzzed in a message reading . . . ‘I’M IN #316’. A place to land. Dashing back in front of the elevator, she needed answers.

It was complicated. Why was her life always so complicated? Coming to Korea was supposed to be her escape, her reason to start over . . . and now . . . all she was getting was more of what she’d left behind. Drama and confusion . . .

“F’ng thing,” Cussing out loud, her palm slammed against the button, frantic to get back upstairs before anyone else saw or recognized her, ragged and barefooted hanging out in the swanky hotel lobby.

Of all times, both sides were up on the fourth floor, slowing working their way down. She didn’t have the time or the patience for waiting. “Aghhh, get on with it!” Slapping the slick, hard steel, she cringed at the flickering overhead lights, worried the hotel might succumb to the storm outside and lose power at any moment.

A tad claustrophobic, she’d never been a fan of elevators even growing up, fearful that one day while in transit, one would grind to a halt, leaving her stranded between floors, petrified of plunging to an untimely death. Like in the movies, she worried she’d suffocate as the oxygen levels dropped, or have to climb through an opening the size of a peanut, and straddle a snake-like cable dangling half a mile in mid-air.

No . . . elevators were not her transportation of choice, especially right this minute in the middle of a lightening shower, with the possibility of a power outage looming over her.

Her stomach tied in anxious knots, she bolted inside the second the doors opened enough to slip between. As they began to ease shut, familiar humming could be heard getting nearer, as the jaunty figure of JJ, donned in workout clothes with earbuds in, strode by on his way to the gym.

* * * * *

SQUIRMING uncomfortably she flattened herself against the mirrored wall, embarrassed, and anxious hoping he hadn’t seen her. *Why wasn’t the freaking thing moving yet? She*

needed to get to the third floor quickly!

In the middle of her panic, the doors whooshed open again, exposing her a second time to the now deserted lobby. Unaware of the sound of her high heels hitting the tile floor as she dropped them, Saffire hated that JJ would always remind her of sweet cotton candy. Only this time she couldn't indulge.

Fueled by selfishness and self-pity in the course of only a week, she alone had started a relationship with him, nursed it, and tried to end it all by herself, with barely a thought to his feelings. She was surely a 'cotton candy bitch'. Now she would have to keep he 'and' Junsu at arms-length until she could talk to Saffron and sort out the events of the previous night.

* * * * *

DESPERATE for a shower, clean clothes and a massive cup of coffee, she skidded to a stop in front of room #316. One fist on the door, hesitating before knocking she bit her lip sadly. *Saffron was happy. What would she even say?* Maybe she was barking up the wrong tree.

Just like maybe last night had been one big nightmare. Not unlike the one where Antonio had been on the receiving end of a pistol. Right now, she wished to be anywhere but here. Even dead alongside Uncle Ryu would've been a better alternative. Wailing inwardly, her heart ached for the man she'd claimed to love so desperately, yet ended up mourning so superficially, sorry she hadn't been there for him in his final days.

"I need help Uncle . . ."

Flashbacks of Saffron, the unusual memorial service, mysterious black cat, and unlocked freezer, sailed in and out of her memory . . . was he trying to tell her something she just wasn't paying attention to? But, what?

The wooden door in her face only served to remind her she had done this to herself. Saffron had been right. Her world was crumbling beneath her. It was time to go back to Seoul before things got worse. Quite possibly even California.

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