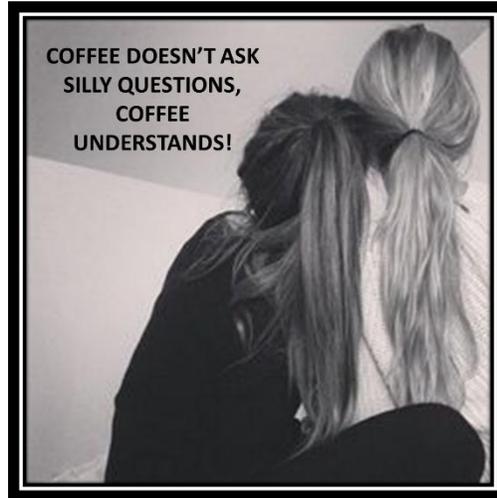


CHAPTER FOURTEEN

(Part 1)

“Coffee doesn’t ask silly questions, coffee understands!”



Saturday, December 20th, 2014

5:30 A.M.

JeJu Island – ‘Toscana’ Hotel – Kim Hyun Joong’s Room

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THE knock at the door was quiet but firm. Hyun Joong, slipped off the side of the bed, scratching his crotch lazily meandering around the end, to the sound of running water in the tiny bathroom, and the smell of coffee in the background. If not for the fact that a sexy redhead was washing up half-naked at the sink, it would’ve seemed like any other early morning, waking up in a hotel on the road.

The Ryu sisters seemed to throw everything out of sync. With sister number one pre-occupied, now here came sister number two. Was he ready for the fireworks? Stopping momentarily, he contemplated jeans or not? Yeahhh, probably so. The second knock wasn’t so quiet, leaning more toward a distressed rapping. He could only imagine what he would find when he got there.

“Hold on. I’m coming.” Hollering over the flushing of the toilet, and sound of the hairdryer, he wondered was this what married life was like? Zipping up his pants, he shook off the random

thought flinging open the heavy door, only to see the shrunken figure of Saffire, leaning on the door jamb, looking much like the popular saying, “she’d been rode hard and put up wet.” Still in her dress from last night, hair everywhere, raccoon eyes, darkened by smudged eyeliner, she looked and reeked of sex.

“SO. Junsu kick you out already?” Turing angrily, his demeanor stand-offish and judgmental, clearly it would only be a matter of time before JJ found out.

“Fuck you,” was her more than haughty reply. “If you don’t have a plane to get me the hell out of here then we don’t need to be talking right now.” Shoving him off to one side, she stopped short of the bathroom, hearing the hair dryer shut off. “I need Saffron. Not you.”

“Well, have at it then PRINCESS. I’m outta here.” Snatching his ‘T’ off the bathroom doorknob, he rapped loudly with the back of his hand. “Saffron. Her HIGHNESS is here. Coffee’s ready to go. I’ll be back when the dust settles. Call me.” And, he was gone.

Saffire jumped as the door slammed behind him, certain she had just managed to make things worse before ever laying eyes on her sister. Saffron’s startled questioning from the confines of the bathroom only confirmed her fears.

“What the hell happened to you? And, why are you still in that dress?”

Hands on her hips she perused the tawdry looking female in front of her closely. *Damn, she knew they’d partied but, she looked God awful! Had Heechul gotten a hold her of afterhours? Or maybe even someone else? Probably best not to ask who.*



Easing out into the room, Saffire dropped spread-eagled across the end of the king-sized bed. “It’s a long story. But, go ahead whatever you’re gonna say, say it now and get it over with. I probably deserve it.” Waiting, she squeezed her eyes shut, bracing herself for the inevitable.

“Forget the dress, start from the beginning. Guess we’ll need coffee for this.” Scooting around Saffire’s dirty bare feet, Saffron was beginning to think things must not have gone the way sister had hoped, and now (after the fact) probably wasn’t the time to dig the knife any deeper.

“I think I slept with Junsu last night.”

Nearly dropping the coffee cup straight out of the machine, Saffron blurted out shocked, “Think? Either you did or you didn’t . . . What do you mean?”

“That’s just it . . . I don’t know. I can’t remember . . .” Rolling over on one side, the stench of the white sweaty dress that had cursed her like a witch’s wand, wafted up and into Saffire’s sensitive nose. “Oh God, that is me. I stink. Got something I can change into?”

Wowww. Saffron scurried to wipe up the hot coffee before it trickled down the side of the cabinet and onto the carpet. Couldn’t remember . . . that might’ve been her and someone named Taemin in the same situation last night. Well, despite the circumstances, the poor haggard looking girl certainly didn’t need judgement or a lecture. At least it wasn’t Heechul or worse . . .

“Yeah. Go get a shower. I’ll bring you coffee and some clothes. We’ll talk when you get out.” Watching curiously as Saffire scooted off the foot of the bed, scuffling toward the bathroom door, Saffron raised the mug in the air, attempting to sound off-handed, while murmuring under her breath, “And, don’t be in there all morning. Hyun Joong has to come back and shower at some point.”

“I heard that, he hates me too . . . huh?” Were her sister’s last words before the door shut, and the shower water could be heard.

“Now what was that supposed to mean? He too . . . Hyun Joong?” Stirring creamer into the large mug, Saffron glanced over at her cell phone, the light flashing over and over again. “Ooops, sorry Joong. What? What? What?” Grabbing it off the counter the text was all in shouty capitals. Not like Joong to be upset over text message. He preferred to call.

FORWARDING THESE MSG’S. I’M NOT ANSWERING THESE TWO! YOU DEAL WITH THIS, SHE’S YOUR SISTER!

And along with that, two simultaneous messages, one right after the other from . . . Junsu . . . and JJ, saying pretty much the same.

HAVE YOU SEEN SAFFIRE?

Now, Saffron wasn’t one to lie, but sometimes a little white lie covered a multitude of sins. And Saffire was sitting in the middle of a ‘multitude’. So lie she did.

NOPE AND NOPE

* * * * *

Saturday, December 20th, 2014

11:00 A.M.

JeJu Island – December Festival – Hyun Joong’s Concert

LAST night’s storm had given way to a glorious sunshiny morning, cool, crisp and invigorating. The December Festival was already in full swing, by the time a reluctant Saffire, hand-in-hand with an equally as determined Saffron made their way through the burgeoning crowd toward the front row seats at Hyun Joong’s stage.

“Oh my God, I thought for sure we were going to be late.” Dropping into the white folding chair, Saffron squeezed Saffire’s hand reassuringly. “It’ll be fine. Promise. There’s a zillion fans and people here. What are the chances they’ll find you? They have to be practicing.”

“Yeah, let’s hope.” Saffire frowned, scooching down as low as possible, hoping her blonde hair wasn’t attracting any attention in the sea of black-headed Koreans. “I feel like a neon sign going off right now.” Chuckling, her hands opened and shut mimicking lights flashing on and off on an outdoor sign. “Blinky, blinky, blinky. Damn, I knew I should’ve bought a hat on the way out here.”

“Don’t be silly. Just lay low and enjoy the show. As soon as it’s over we’ll bust outta here and you can go do some shopping or something. These guys are tied up all day. They won’t come looking until everything’s said and done. Bet.”

For all her convincing, Saffron wasn’t so sure her words of wisdom were just that. There would be breaks, lunch, and who knows what else? Plenty of time for both JYJ members to find their way around the crowd and ultimately to Saffire. JJ especially would be nosing up into Hyun Joong territory as soon as he was able. But, she would try her best to have her out of the area by the time that happened. Right now . . . she was there for him. And her indecisive sister would just have to hang tight and deal.

With the overwhelming urge to jump up, squeal, scream and sing along with every other crazy fangirl in the audience, Saffire was finding it difficult at best to maintain a low profile. She was

hands down an obsessive KPOP fan, and putting herself at the risk of being seen was fast becoming a possibility the longer the musical set lasted.

Finally, throwing caution to the wind, she bounced up out of her chair, arms in the air, blonde hair flying, giving in to the beat and songs she knew best. Saffron snickering at her enthusiasm hoped with Hyun Joong's concert nearly over they could move out quietly, and she could get on with the day.



And just when it seemed all was going as planned . . .

“OH! SAFFIRE . . . SAFFRON. There you are. Mother's been looking all over for the two of you.”

One hand waving in the air, she arrived, shoving apologetically through the crowd, nodding politely and moving to the next row, until her excited round eyes found themselves directly beside her unsuspecting daughters.

Saffire, unsure if the woman coming toward her was indeed Sandra Kroes stepped aside cautiously, fearing she was being mistaken for someone else. The ruddy-cheeked woman, wearing a white turtleneck sweater and faded jeans with her long sandy-colored hair flowing in waves down around her shoulders, looked more like a reflection of herself than the snippy, straight-laced, socialite she'd left sitting in the VIP dining room the night before. *What the hell was she up to now?*

“Mother?” Looking around to make sure they weren't being punked, even Saffron was taken aback by not only her looks but her laid-back and casual demeanor.

“Why of course it's me girls. Who else would be calling your names? I know. I know. Startling transformation huh?” Hugging Saffire's neck amiably, she nodded toward Hyun Joong in the middle of the stage above them. “Who's that one? He's adorable. Belong to one of you? You ARE in the first row.”

Okay . . . only here five seconds, and this is enough! Saffron cocked her head at Saffire motioning her closer, hissing, “Who IS this woman disguised as mother? Do we know her?”

Shrugging guardedly, Saffire could only wonder the same. Somewhere between last night and this morning, Sandra Kroes had managed to do a complete one-eighty, throwing them both for a gigantic loop.

Coughing slightly, the red-headed 'Oh Ha Ni', pulled her mother out of the crowd, with a curious Saffire following close behind. "We know him. What are you doing mother? And what's with the get-up?"

Sandra hesitated, one hand gracing her daughter's anxious, flushed face. "Finally getting wise my dear. And nothing's UP. Ummm . . . I drank a little too much last night is all." Remembering the cold sand on her backside, and the concerned face of Young Jae hovering over her she smiled.

"It's time for a change. Don't you think? How about you Saffire? Like the look? So comfortable. Don't know what I was thinking all these years. Buns, and tight skirts." Whispering girlishly in Saffire's ear she giggled. "Pshhh. I'm not even wearing a bra."

"MOTHER!" Saffire swung back away from her, eyes wide. "Where's father? Does he know you're out here like this?"

"Him? Hell no. And what does it matter? Like I said. Time for a change. He's probably already on the plane back to Seoul with Ian. I'm here to spend some time with my girls . . . and have some fun. SO?"

Standing between them, palms in the air, her hair blowing in the brisk wind, she was frantic to start over with them. Now was as good a time as any. And this place, full of joy and laughter seemed the perfect place to do it in.

"I can't. I have plans. Sorry." Saffron, hesitant to give in to another one of Mother's 'shows' wasn't willing to give up the remaining part of her day with Hyun Joong.

"Okay then, what about you Saffire? Or are you tied up as well? I DID have something I wanted to share with you this weekend. Just the two of us." Lowering her head, she scuffed the ground beneath one tennis-shoed foot coming off like a nervous child.

"I . . . donnn'ttt knowww." Saffire scanned the diminishing crowd around them, wondering if maybe this wouldn't be her chance to make a break for it, and stay out of the limelight for the remainder of the afternoon. "Sure. Why not."

"OH! GREAT!" Clapping her hands excitedly, Sandra hugged Saffron quickly, not caring that her stiff-armed response was less than warming. "Then I guess we'll see you later sweetie."

Umm, maybe dinner? Well, whatever. I'll text you." Turning to Saffire, one looped about her waist she nearly drug her away from the commotion.

"Later . . . I guess . . ." One hand in the air Saffire watched as Hyun Joong jumped from the stage moving toward Saffron a purposeful smirk on his face. They were obviously 'now' an item. And, her . . . a date with mother. *Oh joy.*

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11:00 A.M.

JeJu Island – December Festival – JYJ after Practice

THE perfect day for a concert, it was exhilarating practicing in the cool December wind with the sun warming the stage. JaeJoong high-fived each of his 'JYJ' members at the close of the final song, satisfied they'd done their best yet again. Scores of receptive, appreciative fans, young and old, crowded against the stage for a closer look, autograph or hand-shake making it difficult to end on anything but a high note.

Taking their final bow, grinning from ear-to-ear the 'brothers' jostled, joked and clung to each other as they exited to the tent anxious to freshen up and grab a bite to eat. But . . . reaching side-by-side for a water bottle, the comradery between hyung's JJ and Junsu, waned immediately, replaced by an awkward silence.

Trying not to stare, JJ guzzled his water markedly, wiping the sweat from his face with a towel. *Did his hyung 'look' different? Smug even? Like maybe he was keeping a secret? Naaahhh, it couldn't be that obvious. Then, why the sudden silent treatment?*

Gripping Junsu's shoulder, he pulled him to one side gently, mumbling, "Hyung. I heard Saffire's here this weekend." Obviously he knew she was. Even that she'd been in his room last night . . . would he admit to it?

"Maybe."

Forcing himself to remain level-headed and cool, Junsu tensed immediately, his eyes taking on a satisfied glint in the crowded, chaotic atmosphere. He'd hoped all morning to steer clear of a conversation about Saffire. But, he knew his friend better. She had seen him last night, and . . . just as expected, he was playing the innocent. There would be no avoiding it.

“Who invited her? You?” Their heads nearly touching, JJ pressed his palm into Junsu’s chest patting him lightly. He wasn’t interested in playing games right now. He was after the truth.

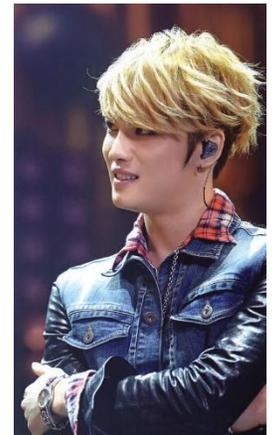
“Of course I did. Saffron too.” Lifting JJ’s hand away from him Junsu turned scowling. This ‘friend’ was not going to rain on his parade only hours after leaving his bed with the beautiful American blonde he now considered ‘taken’.

“Just back off Jae. There’s no point. She accepted the invitation, she’s here. And she’s not interested anymore. That’s all you need to know. Checkmate.” Now grinning, he re-staged JJ’s pat to his chest a tad more dramatically, almost shoving JJ against the table, whispering . . . “Move on. What’s it been? Two weeks.”

Before JJ could get a word in edgewise, the bomb had been dropped and Junsu was gone, across the tent huddled over the food table, one arm curled around Yoochun’s neck, obviously already engaged in conversation.

“Well shit. We’ll just see about how ‘interested’ she is now won’t we?” Smiling artificially into the face of a grip, rushing to grab his towel and empty water bottle, JJ thought about his plea to ‘call’ (left in her heels the night before), disturbed that she’d never responded.

Laughter and scuffling outside the tent lured him out, with the intention of taking his break and scanning the festival grounds for the elusive blonde. Unless she was holed up in a room somewhere, surely she would be with Saffron taking in the games, or possibly a concert.



Unable to break away from the surrounding fans and gathering of festival workers, he finally managed to snag a body guard and head toward an open food tent. Satisfied that he might spot her along the way, seconds before he lifted his hand to pay for a bowl of kimchi, Junsu appeared beside him still smiling.

“Mmmm, looks good. I’ll take one of those. That sandwich wasn’t near enough. Worked up an appetite.” Acting as if nothing was wrong between them, he watched JJ complacently. Where in the hell ‘was’ Saffire anyway? It was going to be increasingly difficult to stave off this shark in front of him if she didn’t surface soon. “So hyung. I’ve got some new lyrics written down for

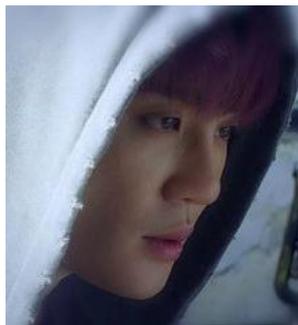
that tune you were struggling with last week. In my suite. Come look. Need a quiet, sit-down break anyway. We can eat there. Too crazy out here. We can come play some games later, yah?”

Motioning JaeJoong to follow, the two stepped away from the tent, nodding politely to patrons, on their way toward the opposite side of the hotel grounds. When out of nowhere, rushed a red-headed bombshell by the name of Saffron.

“Saffron! Heyyy, fancy meeting you here . . .” Nearly crashing headlong into her forbidding form, JJ jumped at the chance to get some immediate information out of her about Saffire. “So, where’s your sister? Off shopping or something? I haven’t had time to say hi. Thought the two of you’d be whooping it up out here together. Beautiful day de?”

Speechless, Junsu stood quietly by, allowing him to ramble and hopefully hang himself. Not only that, he’d just been told to back off, and clearly by his questioning, he had no intentions of doing so.

“You wanna know where she is? Well, clearly she ISN’T with me!” Standing haughtily before the two Idols Saffron was immediately reminded of her corporate days, taking authority, giving direction, and basically not taking any shit. Were these two any different than an overbearing millionaire mogul, whining to get his own way with a billion dollar deal? No.



“We can see that.” Junsu lowered his eyes respectfully, now hoping JJ wasn’t going to press the matter further. If he could just get him back to the room, they could talk man-to-man and straighten this out without an audience, (even of one).

“If she wanted anyone to know where she was, she would’ve said so. She DOES have a mind of her own. Didn’t you get my text earlier?” Hands on her hips, squinting into the blinding late morning sunlight, Saffron was beginning to seem like a force to be reckoned with.

Looking sheepish and guilty, both Idols nodded agreeably.

“Then leave her alone. Dinner last night was rough. And, afterward wasn’t much better. She’s hungover and confused. And, it’s no wonder. Look at the two of you. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. Both of you. Like she doesn’t have enough on her plate. Breaking up with Antonio, Uncle Ryu passing, leaving the U.S., taking over the café, having to deal with

me.” Sucking in a deep breath, rattling on, she half-thought the pep-talk wasn’t just about Saffire, but herself as well. “She doesn’t need ‘Dumb and Dumber’ knocking at her door, 24-7, thinking she’s some sort of blonde ‘Barbie’ doll plaything, to show off to your Korean friends.”

Startled at her ‘take no prisoners’ attitude, Junsu’s chest poked out in arrogant denial. “I’m not doing that.” He had literally scraped her off the floor of the men’s restroom last night, saving her from God only knew what only to find her missing from his bed this morning. Was it wrong to be concerned about her whereabouts?

“Like hell. You are. You too JJ. Come on. Dates, flowers, bears, texts, phone calls. She doesn’t need protection or saving by either one of you. If you would give her half a chance to breathe you might find out she can stand on her own two feet. Let her do HER for a little while, she needs to figure out who Saffire really is.”

Now JJ seemed confused. She herself had been the one in pursuit of him. So, why was Saffron protecting her so fiercely? He’d been under the assumption that he was the favorite in this whole triangle of emotions. Clearly . . . that was not the case.

Disregarding the stares of tourists and onlookers around them, arms flying in the air, breathless and spent, Saffron dealt the final blow. “Uncle would be furious . . . at BOTH of you.”

Uncle Ryu. Of course. The enigma behind the fury. JJ recalled his voice as recent as a few hours ago, urging him to fight for the love of his life. Now, Saffron was spinning it entirely differently. What the hell had happened since yesterday morning to cause such dissention among the ranks? After his initial outburst Junsu was taking the verbal beating like a child with his hand caught in the cookie jar. Neither, agreeing nor disagreeing, it was unusual that this highly opinionated friend of his suddenly ‘didn’t’ have an opinion. What choice did he have with these kind of odds stacked against him?

“I agree. Gamshabnida Saffron.” Bowing low, JJ’s soft response took the embittered Saffron totally by surprise. “I’ll touch base with her when she’s ready to talk. She’ll text me. Junsu hyung. Let’s do that song later, de? I’ve got some other things to take care of before we head back for the concert.”

Cut your losses and run. Wasn’t that the motto? Turning on his heel he nodded to those around him, sauntering away toward the tent, dumping his bowl of unfinished kimchi in the nearest

trash can. *This was NOT going to be the end of anything. Not by a long shot. Junsu and Saffron could be sure of that.*

“Me too.” Following suit, (his bodyguard in tow) Junsu strode off in the direction of the lobby doors intent on maintaining his dignity. *She would be back, he was certain of it. Maybe even by the time he got to his room. It didn't matter.*

“Humph.” Now alone in the midst of the festivities, a satisfied and sassy Saffron slapped her hands in resounding clarification. “’Bout time someone took charge here.”

* * * * *

11:30 A.M.

JeJu Island – ‘Toscana Hotel’ – Sandra Kroe’s Suite

“IT’S beautiful in here mother.” Allowing one fingernail to meander casually across the back of the plush hotel room sofa, Saffire wondered what her room would’ve looked like, if there had been one, and why Junsu felt the need to take responsibility for not only her things but ‘her’ as well. It was a little disconcerting to say the least.

“I would have to agree my dear. Your Mr. Junsu owns a glorious establishment doesn’t he?” Dropping down into the fine leather sofa (not waiting for a response) Sandra urged a cautious Saffire down beside her, grasping her hands. Zeroing in on her daughter’s fresh, windblown face, her bluish-green eyes misted over with heartfelt tears.

“Saffire . . . honey . . . I’m so very sorry. About, everything. I don’t know what else to say, or even quite how to say it. Our lives over the years have been . . . well . . . unconventional to say the least. We’ve . . . let me rephrase that . . . I’VE made so many mistakes.”

Certain Young Jae would approve of her rekindling her rocky relationship with Saffire starting with an apology, Sandra smiled convincingly, the wrinkles of middle-age prominent around her forehead. “I know you’re wary. I can see it in your eyes. I would be too.”

“Mother . . .”

Not only wary, Saffire was also confused. This was the woman who never had time, was always critical, and basically dismissed her as if she were nothing more than a speck of dust settling into a sea of dirt.

“I know . . . I know . . .” Trying to avoid the unavoidable, Sandra’s hands rose in understanding. “I’m certain I’ve been the worst mother . . . biggest bitch . . . and harshest critic you’ve ever had in your life. An apology won’t change that overnight. I get it.”

Sighing heavily, Saffire stared past her into the open patio doors leading to the glistening blue pool. How much more could her heart take? Caught between two loves, mourning the death of her beloved Uncle, hating herself for not wanting the life everyone else did . . . now this. How in the world did she think a new outfit, without a bra and a topknot was going to suddenly turn her into mother of the year?

“I don’t know what to say.” Her admission coming forth softly, her long slender fingers curled, in her lap, already playing the imaginary violin that helped her cope.

Noticing her fingers, Sandra patted her leg accommodatingly, wondering if she’d developed a nervous twitch over the years.

“Don’t say anything. Let me do all the talking. Then how about lunch? My treat. I’ll order in. Anything you want. Pizza? Wraps? Dessert? You name it.”

“You don’t even know . . . what I like? Do you?” Rolling her eyes back toward her mother’s anxious face, the question came out before she realized she’d even said it. Maybe it was cruel, maybe not. But right now . . . for all the years between them, she was sitting next to a literal stranger.

Coughing nervously, Sandra rose, hands clasped behind her back. “No, I don’t. So, why don’t you tell me? That might be a good place to start.” Swinging back around, her hair followed as she turned, gently blowing in the breeze from the open patio door.

It was bad. Worse than she’d originally thought. She was the mother of a daughter in her twenties, she knew virtually nothing about. Only that she lived at the beach, was a good student, played the violin and dressed like a hippie straight out of the seventies. How were they ever going to find common ground?



“Is all this really worth it Mother?” Rising as well, Saffire smoothed down the jeans Saffron had loaned her to wear to the festival. “You know you won’t remember. And I know you probably ‘really’ don’t care. How about this? How about I send you my Face Book Bio, and text you a list of all my good and bad qualities and after you’ve sufficiently memorized them . . . we can reconvene.”

Feeling incredibly used, like a pawn in a chess game, Saffire could only surmise it had something to do with last night’s dinner fiasco. Having not gotten her way in getting either she or Saffron to agree to come back to the States, Mother was doing what Mother did best. Morphing into “Mommy Dearest”, in an attempt to throw them off-guard. Underhanded and sneaky . . . that was the way of the wealthy (who, lived in a world all their own). And, she was the best at it.

Staring into Saffire's angry, determined face, Sandra licked her lips. This was the daughter most like her. She would've kicked ass on Wall Street, had she chosen that path, but none-the-less, her gentle, artistic side made the transformation a much harder pill to swallow.

"I deserve that."

"What's going on mother? Just tell me. You've spent twenty-four long years incognito, appearing only long enough to tell me I'm basically ugly and worthless, didn't bother to let me in on the biggest secret of the century, I have a twin sister . . . and now you want to play dress-up and be best friends? Should I break out the champagne, make a nail appointment . . . what? I don't get it."

Nodding sadly, Sandra had to agree, she was on point yet again. "I deserve that too."

"Then fucking tell me, 'cause I've already had the night from hell, and have a massive hangover. In about one point one seconds I'm headed to the door, and I doubt I'll be waving 'Tootles' on my way out. Lunch or no lunch, apology or not . . . what I need are concrete answers."

"Okay, okay. Let's cut the bullshit then, and get down to the real reason I asked you here." Leaning against the patio door, Sandra knew it was best to keep her distance from her suddenly outspoken Bohemian daughter, whose temper was obviously fueled by much more than her request for a lunch favorite.

"Please. For once." Agreeing wholeheartedly, the now exhausted Saffire curled back up in the sofa, impatiently waiting for yet another bomb to drop.

"No condemnation, no judgements . . . promise?" Hating to beg, Sandra hoped Saffire would be less vindictive in the process than she'd ever been.

"I'll try. No promises."

The truth was important now, but even at that, Sandra wasn't able to reveal everything needed to gain absolution and free her burdened heart and soul. Taking baby steps, she attempted to choose her words carefully, (one at a time) not fully understanding herself how she'd managed to separate her two amazing daughters from each other all these years.

“Okay. Well . . . first of all . . . I know you think I deserted you when you were a baby . . . but that’s seriously not true. I always loved you. From the moment you were born. You were beautiful and amazing, but your dad and I, well . . .” Hesitating, now that she’d started she wasn’t sure how much to tell one daughter without the other present. “We didn’t see eye-to-eye on much of anything back then. So, when we split, we agreed to raise you separately. You had already been living with him in California, you were settled, etc. etc., and I had Saffron with me in New York. We hadn’t intended it to be that way, that’s just how it turned out.”

Saffire scoffed, wondering how sappy she was going to get before the ‘real’ truth came out. “Okay. You made a bad choice. I understand. What about not telling us about each other? How can you even begin to justify that?”

Dropping her head shamefully, Sandra knew it was coming. It was a fair question. No wonder Young Jae left the café to the girls, finally bringing them together after he died. In only a few short weeks he had accomplished something in death, she’d been unable to do in twenty-three years of life.

“I can’t. There is none. We all just went our separate ways getting further and further apart. You and Saffron were raised differently, knew different people, had different interests. We figured it was best for everyone. Obviously, it wasn’t.”

Saffire wanted to slap her. It was a weak, cop-out of an answer. Slap her for putting all this on her now. This weekend had started out to be fun, a chance to relax, enjoy the Christmas holiday festival. (Even be with Junsu, Saffron, and the other idols.) The silence grew between them as the sounds of music, cheering fans, and blowing wind permeated the air inside the vast suite.

Rising from the sofa, not expecting mother to meet her halfway, Saffire blurted out, “Saffron needs to hear this too, I can’t tell her by myself. It wouldn’t be right.”

Grabbing her wrists gently, the older woman’s face was drawn and pale, having carried the burden of her lies virtually her entire adult life.

“No. Please don’t. You need to be told first. You’re the sensitive one, you’re the heartbeat of your father.” *Oh shit, why did I say that?* Biting her tongue before she said something incriminating, she darted off toward the bedroom, hastily wiping fresh tears from her tired eyes.

“What?” Starting to follow, now Saffire was more confused than ever. *Heartbeat of her father? Good God he barely knew she existed, much like the strange woman rushing away from her right now, babbling gibberish about relationships.*

Stopping in the doorway, she took a step back seeing Sandra pull a violin case from the small closet. *Where had she gotten that? Had father brought her violin after all? If so, why did mother have it?* Curiosity overtaking her, she floated in quietly peering over Sandra’s shoulder watching as she flipped open the burnished case gingerly lifting the worn, antique violin from its resting place among the silken liner. *It wasn’t hers. Then whose?* Her uncontrollable reaction burst forth as unexpectedly as the sight of the instrument had been.

“Ohhhhh, its beautiful mother. But, where did you get it? Whose is it? Tell me?” Suddenly, taking center stage, the sight of her tangible ‘one’ true love’ . . . the violin, began to shove the conversation about mother’s mistakes, father and the past, into a hazy background.

She had suffered weeks without her violin or music. And, like cool rain in a parched, dry desert, the very sight of it brought her back to life again.

“Can I see it? Please?” Cooing lovingly, arms extended, (anxious to touch it) she skipped up and down impatiently like an eager child.

Carefully positioning it into Saffire’s anxious hands, tears streamed down Sandra’s face, seeing the vision of her own mother laying it in ‘her’ small palms for the very first time, at the tender age of six.

“Of course you can. It was mine sweetheart, I played until I met your father. I’ll never play again. So, I want you to have it.” Turning away, choked on her emotions she searched for a tissue muttering, “Silly me. I never cry. Don’t know what came over me.”

Bringing it with her had been a ruse. A prop, a way to coerce this free-spirited daughter into leaving her Korean roots and returning to the confines of a previous unsupportive, mundane life. Now, after nearly losing her own soul to the devil, it had become the wings on which that same daughter would fly once again . . . seeking out the answers she needed most. And when the time was right . . . they would all make peace together, she was sure of it.

All of a sudden behind her, came the sweetest, most beautifully lilting sounds she had ever heard. She had come home, at the hands of the daughter she'd abandoned years ago. This had to be the open door they needed to find common ground.

Playing seemed to put Saffire's (out of kilter) life back in perspective. The notes filling the room, releasing the tension and sadness of the last few days and weeks. Filling her spirit with hope that tomorrow would bring her to a newer and better place, she closed her eyes letting herself go in abandon.

Was she forgiving of Mother and her 'feigned' apologies? Mother who never attended even one concert, or talked about one lesson in the course of her musical life. Mother who 'herself' shared the love of the violin and knew the magic it created the moment the bow glided across the strings. Could she accept this gift and forgive her all in the same breath? She didn't know.

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