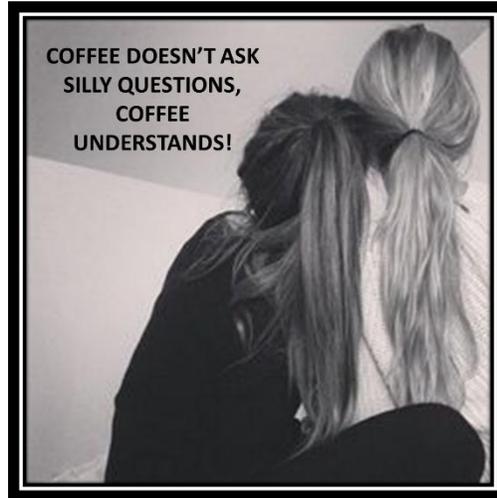


CHAPTER FOURTEEN

(Part 2)

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



Saturday, December 20th, 2014

12:30 P.M.

JeJu Island – ‘Toscana Hotel’ – Outside at the Festival

FULL of righteous indignation with no one to vent it on Saffron threaded her fingers together, stretching them out in front of her. Itching to tell JJ and Junsu to jump off the nearest cliff, she cranked her head watching them leave, tails between their legs like beaten dogs. Being swallowed up by the crowd, Junsu took off one way, JJ heading in the opposite direction. “Pfff, chickens . . . can’t take on one, fierce, five-foot-six redhead.”



The day had started out interestingly enough. Thanking the heavens above that her love triangle only involved one flesh and blood man . . . that being said, even ‘it’ was proving to be more than she could handle at times. Still, she wouldn’t trade her man troubles with her sister for anything in the world.

Already putting Saffire’s man-problems behind her, she hugged herself searching the path ahead for her ‘Seung Jo’, giving in instead to the memory of the lack of attire he’d worn to bed, remembering she had woken up this morning with freaking chocolate abs in her face, close

enough to lick. It was sad, Saffire had shown up when she did, ruining the morning bed sport with her very own, ‘Spirit of the forest’.

However, she’d still coerced him into indulging her ‘Playful Kiss’ obsession by letting her channel ‘Oh Ha Ni’, (with the promise from him to become ‘Baek Seung Jo’). Their plan . . . travel to all the places from the drama that the couple had visited on their Jeju Island honeymoon. And, no one (not even long lost sister), was going to ruin this day.

“Well . . . well if it isn’t the streetwalker. Looking for Taemin? SHINee stage isn’t until 4:00 P.M.” Chung A stood hand on her hip, clicking her nails, aware that Saffron was one of those girls she always hated. Even in the dining room last night the guys at her table had spoken about how classy she was in that ridiculous dress from the fifties.

Observing her now, jealousy seized her gut. They were right. The bitch could pass for a rich CEO’s wife, in her short, one-piece, white jumpsuit, with a man’s suit jacket because it was chilly. Babo bitch, didn’t she know it was December for God’s sake? Sneering, Chung A bet she came from money. After all, she’d seen her slink into the fancy VIP dining room yesterday behind her sister and Junsu. Working the café didn’t mean she hadn’t grown up with a silver spoon in her mouth. Probably never got her hands dirty or had to do hard day’s work to save her soul.

There stood baby mama waving a disgusting unlit cigarette (between tobacco-stained fingers) directly in Saffron’s face. She could only guess by the statement, she’d been privy to the drunken escapades in the VIP lounge.

“Well, thanks for the information. Joong and I will be sure to check them out.” Donning her sunglasses, once again she wasn’t wanting to make a scene at a festival that catered to families. But, despite that, she knew eventually this confrontation would materialize.

Desperation ran through Chung A at the influence the redhead had over Joong. Last night when they met she’d been sure he was on her side and everything was right on schedule. Breathing a sigh of relief at the promise of support, this morning however, he was stone-faced and distant. She had to assume that the bitch in the white ‘Converse’ high-tops had a lot to do with that.

“You know Joong’s just using you to get to me . . . you’re not even his type.”

Leaning closer, Saffron lowered her voice, “Really! I figured his heart must have been shattered and that he fucked the first female he saw. Lucky for you, age and looks didn’t matter at the time, Ahjumma.” Side-stepping around her, she bit her tongue deciding to be the mature adult.

“What did you call me, Whitey?” Hissing angrily, Chung A gripped Saffron’s arm, checking her stride.

Shaking off the tight hold, Saffron obviously hadn’t bitten her tongue hard enough, remembering all the times Chung A had come between her and Joong . . . *Dammit she was weary of taking this bitch’s abuse. After all, she was a Ryu!*

“Pffft . . . that all you got, I’ve heard better insults from third-graders. I believe I called you, Ahjumma, I’m sure the pronunciation was correct. I do speak fluent Korean.” Raking the aging dancer from her worn flats to the messy bun on her tiny head, Saffron was aware that a couple of people had paused, glancing their way.

Shoving a finger into Saffron’s shoulder, Chung A’s face contorted into an ugly, unpleasant expression. “Look you pasty, freckle-faced foreigner, you need to leave my man alone. If you haven’t noticed I’m having his baby, and he’s proved he’s not going anywhere.”

As her scratchy voice rose the altercation escalating, a small curious crowd began to gather. Hissing, “My ass you’re pregnant, you’re lying out your crooked yellow teeth.” Saffron knew she needed to leave, before she lost control and re-arranged her arrogant, sanctimonious face.

“Oh don’t worry, I have proof. He’s already seen it.” Smirking, Chung A flipped her middle finger casually, mouthing . . . “Fuck you.”

Balking for a second, a confused Saffron couldn’t believe that was true. No . . . the bitch in her face had to be lying. Searching her bloodshot eyes she tried gauging the truth behind the words. Even in business, Ian had told her she had an uncanny sixth sense when it came to reading people, always heeding her advice before he considered starting a new business deal.

Knocking the cigarette out of her hand Saffron ground it into the packed black dirt with the ball of her foot, wishing it was her face instead. “Whatever, I’m not playing this game bitch . . . now get the fuck out of my way.” Marching around the ex, hearing ‘Super Junior’ singing ‘Sorry Sorry’ in the back ground . . . she realized, ‘oh hell no . . . she wasn’t sorry one bit’.

Standing by heatedly, shooting fire out her eyes, Chung A watched, as Saffron ruined her last cigarette, dismissing her with a snobbish attitude, (as if she was no better than the dirt under her feet).

That was the last fucking straw. No woman was going to screw with her well thought out plans and get away with it. Unable to hold back any longer, yelling like a warrior on the front lines of

battle, “I’m not done with you bitch . . . you stole my man,” she grabbed a fistful of long red hair, snapping Saffron’s head back toward her unexpectedly. Too bad it wasn’t broken.

“UGGGHHH, DAMN YOU . . . I didn’t have to steal him, he threw your ugly ass away.”

Saffire was privy to the fact that not many people could beat Saffron in a verbal fight, but when it came to the physical, the American was lacking. However, if Chung A thought she couldn’t get down and dirty, she had another thing coming. Having grown up on the north side of Chicago, there had been plenty of opportunities to tussle with girls like her from the south side.

Acting purely on instinct, she spun in her direction, seizing one wrist, twisting and pushing hard, smirking when the older woman landed flat on her skinny, ass in the dirt, feet in the air, gasping for breath.

“Don’t fuck with me, it’s already been an eventful morning.” Digging in her heels, Saffron crouched down in what she hoped was a fighting position she’d seen on the Internet before.

With chants of ‘girl fight’ ringing in her ears, Chung A jumped to both feet, rushing at her headlong, screaming, “NOOOO, YOU SHOULD HAVE KEPT YOUR SKANKY ASS AWAY FROM HIM.” Catching the lapel of her jacket, she jerked the annoying redhead around lividly, suddenly realizing the coat she wore was Joong’s favorite.

Laughing out loud in satisfaction at the dark-haired ‘warrior’ from the wrong side of the tracks, (wanting only to cause a scene), Saffron stepped back, regaining her balance. She’d gotten nothing but air. “Had enough? You crazy sleezebag.”

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SLIDING on sunglasses Hyun Joong caught up with YooChun heading for the door. “Have you seen Saffron? She was supposed to meet me ten minutes ago, and she’s not answering her phone.”

“No, but I did see Chung A high tailing it out of here a few minutes ago. You have a hot date with Miss Redhead?” Chuckling until he saw the look of concern on his friend’s face, he dropped his phone into his jacket pocket.

“De . . . damn, Chung A was acting pretty strange this morning, sure hope they don’t run into each other.” Picking up his pace, Joong remembered leaving Saffron talking to an older woman who’d joined she and Saffire while he’d still been performing on stage.

“You guys got big plans? Where you going?”



“Around the Island. Gonna hit up the landmarks featured in ‘Playful Kiss’,” Hyun Joong groaned, hating the thought of being the ‘other man’ today. “I wouldn’t be indulging her fantasies but, I made the mistake of promising we’d do whatever she wanted before she went home. De, call me crazy. Aishhh.”

Leaving the building, the roar of a small gathering up ahead reached their ears. Looking at each other fearfully, it was beginning to look (and sound) like, the nightmare of the ‘girlfriends’ meeting could be a reality.

Joong reached the edge of the crowd first, grunting as Yoochun ran into the back of him in his rush to see what was happening. Cussing under his breath at the sight of the women clutching each other, screaming, tugging fists full of hair to and fro, it was obvious there were too many people around for either Idol to jump in and break up the fight.

“Oh fuck, now what?” Gripping Joong’s shoulders, Yoochun watched in horror as Chung A threw Saffron to the dirt, kicking her foot out but missing, fighting in typical girl fashion. “We have to act like we don’t know them. There’s cameras and press everywhere today. Holy shit. This is gonna end up on every social media site from here to the States and back. Why us?”

Pressing forward to get a better view, the Idols attempted to fade in behind the now cheering crowd. This was no drama. It was real life and Yoochun was right, the back-lash would be far-reaching. Not to mention they were standing smack dab in the middle of a family-based Festival, in front of Kim Junsu’s hotel. It didn’t get any worse than this.

* * * * *

Hearing the cheering crowd behind her, satisfied she was winning, Saffron sprung up, nails bared, catching Chung A at the side of the neck. Scraping down, gouging out three red scratches she continued dragging her blouse off one shoulder, leaving the crowd gasping at her exposed bra strap.

Smirking across their heads, surprised herself at the damage she’d been able to render, her confidence level was high, until she spotted a pissed off Hyun Joong, mouth set in disgust, languishing in the growing mass of people. Then without warning, a crack cut through the uproar of the gathering, the whole right side of her face burned as if on fire.

“Ughhh . . .”

Not taking her eyes from him, tears of pain flooded across her face as she lifted a hand to her cheek in shock. Busting through the onlookers, Yoochun tried desperately to hold him back. Immediately losing her anger, Saffron kicked herself for letting this stupid ignorant woman egg her into something as unseemly and ridiculous as a catfight.

With her back to Hyun Joong, blinded by hate, Chung A laughed, shaking her hand in pain, sure she had won. “Had enough bitch?”

Not daring to risk a scandal by involving Yoochun and Joong, Saffron held her head high, drawing on all her courage, the intensity of her blue eyes shooting at the older woman.

“Don’t think you’ve won.”

Straightening her clothes, she spun away hearing the taunting laughter behind her. Her only option was a hasty retreat, so in her best corporate cold-hearted façade, ignoring the mutterings and clicking of cell phones, she moved through the crowd, parting for her like the Red Sea.

Seeing her turn and stroll away (as if bored with the whole situation) Joong halted, breathing a sigh of relief. Throwing Chung A a side-long glance he passed, following way behind his debutante (hoping she was headed for his room).

Waving off Yoochun, he called his manager, quietly informing him of the situation, asking to have both he and Saffron booked on the last flight leaving the Island. He planned to strip her naked, check for wounds and then bestow the sweetest punishment he could think of for her behavior. He would deal with the fallout later.

Tracking his every move as he crossed in front of her, Chung A flinched at the contempt in his eyes. Lifting her chin, daring him to chaste her for what happened, she finally realized he was lost to her. No matter the outcome of the pregnancy he would never marry her. Fuck! It was all the redheaded slut’s fault. She wouldn’t stray from the original plan, just paint it a different ending . . . She could forget marrying Joong, now it was all about the money.

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Saturday, December 20th, 2014

12:30 P.M.

JeJu Island – ‘Toscana Hotel’ – Junsu’s Suite

THERE was no getting around the fact that Junsu was put off by Saffron’s words. Perched at the side of the swimming pool, his feet dangling in the heated water he continued re-hearing her cutting warning to keep Saffire at bay. Eyes closed, in the midst of the whirring pump, and festival activities close by, he barely heard his cell go off.

I’M AT THE DOOR, CAN U LET ME IN?

Finally, she was back. Scrambling to get inside, his heart leapt as quickly as his feet. Flinging the door open he met her blank, glazed over eyes, certain Saffron’s assessment had been true. Standing back allowing her entrance, his greeting was whispered and timid, “Anneyong.”

Covered from head to toe in a dark blue cardigan, and acid-washed jeans, her booted feet stepped gingerly inside, and stopped. Not at all playful or giddy, like last night, when leaning into his back she’d declared him “Knight Junsu”, blowing breathy kisses from the now deserted hallway.

“Hi. I came for my stuff. Hope I’m not interrupting.” Trying desperately not to meet his (less than excited) gaze, she wrung her hands tensely.

“Ani, sure. Come on in then. I’ll get it. I’ve been texting you all morning. How’d you know I’d be here?”

Still low-key, a massive weight bearing down on his chest made it almost impossible to breathe. This was the woman he was in love with. They should be kissing right now, giddy and looking forward to the rest of the weekend together. Why was she acting so cold? Was that showing her love?

“Ummm, I don’t know, just thought I’d try here first.” Shrugging both shoulders her eyes scooted from one side of the room to the other, remembering seeing her white dress crumpled in a heap on the floor, the sight of the pool reminding her how the tips of her toes had touched the warm water. *Why in the hell did her memories of the night stop there and then immediately disappear?*

Guiding her into the living area, Junsu forced out a weak smile, shaking his head when she began removing her boots. “No need. I, was ahhh . . . worried maybe you’d gone home without telling me. Seeing you’re already dressed, I guess everything’s okay, yah? Have you eaten? I’m headed back for the concert in a little bit. You coming?” She looked anxious and tired. As much as he wanted that, he couldn’t help but notice her tired anxious eyes skirting the room like a skittish rabbit (ready to turn tail and run at the slightest sound).

Cracking her knuckles mindlessly she glanced down at her clothes. “Yes . . . I found her. Umm, yes, ate with Mother and ani, not going to the concert.” Cracking her knuckles without thinking, she hesitated, mentally smacking the side of her head numerous times, reliving her descent into shame after creeping (like a thief in the night) out of his bed in the wee hours of the morning. “Mianhae (SORRY).”

She was so stupid. This was Junsu standing in front of her. He knew her as well as she knew herself. Even the sound of her knuckles reverberating around the quiet room didn’t change his expression. He had heard it all before.

Noticing the small baby grand piano in the corner she wondered, where was mother’s damned violin when she needed it? A peace offering of sorts. Conversation breaker. They could hug, make things right. Go to the piano, play together. But, that wouldn’t solve anything either.

Tugging her suitcase out of the closet disappointedly, Junsu rolled it over in front of her, handle in the air.

“Well then . . . I’m sorry too. Especially about doing this. It was unfair of me. I should’ve asked you first. I can get you into another suite. All your own.” Waiting patiently for some sort of hint that she was still the same girl he’d accompanied to dinner, he watched her grab the handle, preparing to leave. “Have you had a good time so far? That’s really all I wanted.”

Staring into his eyes, a reluctant Saffire realized she had to tell him . . . not leave him thinking her memories of last night were clear, with the afternoon going on as normal. They didn’t keep secrets between them. Never had.

“Dinner with the family? Not really. Afterward . . . I guess so. I really don’t remember. Too much alcohol.” He had to know she was wasted. He brought her here. It seemed like such a redundant question.

“Hmmm. I see.” Pausing, he backed away, sucking down his disappointment, an expressionless, award-winning look crossing his face. This was what he’d been afraid of. For all his guts and glory, ‘Knight Junsu’ was basically back at square one.

Recalling the determination that had gotten him to this point yesterday, why was he lying down the gauntlet now? The day was still young, and by tonight . . . he would be free. They could relax and enjoy the time they missed out on. If she wasn’t attending the concert he didn’t have to worry about JJ. Besides, clearly there was more between them now than she and Jae would ever have.

Saffron’s advice be damned. Leave her alone? She wasn’t confused, she was smitten. And, that’s what Jae did to his women. Bewitched them with his charm . . . poetic confessions . . . engaging boyish personality. He’d grown up watching the process, knew it by heart. This time . . . he refused to let it happen. He’d made a commitment and was going to move forward and do something about it.

“Well sweetie, you didn’t drown chasing balloons out to the pool, didn’t burn your tongue on the hottest, strongest coffee on the planet, and definitely didn’t sleep through the storm. Now did you?”

“I guess not.” Agreeing, to at least a few of the things she ‘did’ remember in a night of unknowns Saffire paused momentarily, hand already on the latch, before turning to face him head on. “Junsu?”

“Huh?” Eyebrows quirked, if he was going to reverse the situation, he knew he had to do it now . . . right now.

And then, like an arrow to the heart, she shot him.

“Did we . . . ahhh, you know? Have sex?” Embarrassed to even say the word Saffire hoped to God the answer would be “No”.

Reeling from the weight of the question (he was positive he could never answer appropriately), Junsu gulped nervously. *Of all things. He knew she was drunk, but so much so she didn’t even remember sleeping with him! This wasn’t the way today was supposed to go. He was excited . . . on cloud nine, that she’d chosen him.* Choosing him now seemed more like a pity fuck, a drunken afterthought. Still, how could he be mad? He had let it happen. He’d laid there and let

it happen. He was just as much to blame. There would be no lying his way out of this one. They had always told each other the truth.

He was beginning to think Saffron was indeed wise beyond her years. For barely knowing her she had read her sister much better than he had. He'd barreled blindly into hopes of an intimate relationship with her when clearly, true to Saffron's words, she was rebounding from Antonio, and Uncle Ryu's death, not knowing whether she was coming or going most of the time. Now he too felt confused. What else could he possibly do to make it right other than tell the truth and hope for the best?

Gathering her into his arms he felt her sigh against him, as if relieved he hadn't spoken yet. Then, before letting her go, whispered in her ear . . . "Yes. But, you have to know I love you yeobeso (HONEY). You said you loved me too. I thought it was . . . mutual." He knew he was grasping at straws. But, how else could he make her understand how desperate he was feeling?

Mutual? Stiffening through his embrace, the weight of his answer brought all sorts of emotions to Saffire's already burdened heart. Random snapshots rolled through her subconscious of kissing him, giggling and sweaty, the muscles of his legs tense and flexed beneath her. What had they done?

Her fears officially confirmed, she backed out the door feeling nauseous, suitcase in front of her blocking him from coming any closer, muttering, "That . . . was just . . . wrong."

If she had even entertained the thought of staying before knocking on his door, now her only option was to walk away. How could she face the day with him knowing he'd seen the most intimate side of her, and she barely remembered? The man she thought she knew . . . was someone she didn't know at all.

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LIKE a knife to the gut, Saffire's cutting words reverberated in Junsu's ear along with the resounding click of the front door. It 'was' wrong what he'd done. He knew it in the moment and he knew it now. He had never hurt her like this. This was an Antonio move. He couldn't let her leave thinking he was as bad as the married man who had 'used' her for



three long years. There was still time to talk, explain and work things out between them.

“SAFFIRE WAIT!”

Forcing back disappointed tears, Saffire trudged down the hallway, mouth set in determination to a backdrop of ‘Jingle Bells’. She should be happy. It was almost Christmas Eve. She was in S. Korea with a sister she was beginning to love, an apologetic mother, and the possibility of an amazing future in the café business. So why was she crying?

Wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand, hiking up the borrowed (one-size too big) jeans, she stopped dead in her tracks, hearing Junsu holler, “Wait”. *Why should she wait? What more could he possibly say to make things any better?*

Feeling a rush of wind as he skidded up behind her Junsu scooted the small suitcase out of his way capturing her in an all-consuming back hug. With no one else milling about the hall he waited out the squirming until finally she relaxed against him.

Wanting only to make sense of his feelings she closed her eyes moaning inwardly, *“Don’t do this to me Junsu. Don’t drama-hug me like I’m the pathetic love-sick heroine.”*

What had her best friend Cassie always told her, through the bullying, absence of parental love in her life, and scores of unrequited loves? “You’re better than that. Hold your head high sister. And . . . NEVER let them see you sweat.” So, why was she letting both these men, see her sweat?

As the warmth of Junsu’s breath against her neck began to singe down through her soul, the light bulb went on, and the walls came crashing down. Were he and JJ using her? Playing a dangerous game, for their own competitive means? And, if so, she was a willing pawn. Captivated by JJ, dependent on the stability of Junsu she’d jumped on the game board, rushing from one side to the other allowing them the opportunity to move her whenever they pleased. Fueled by need, jealousy and little self-esteem she had allowed this miserable ‘love triangle’ to materialize and thrive.

“Can we talk for a minute?” Heart beating out of his chest, hands clasped about the dark sweater she wore, Junsu was praying she wouldn’t turn him away again.

“There’s nothing left to say.” Twisting free from his grasp, hating the way she was feeling, Saffire continued walking, until turning the corner toward the busy lobby she disappeared out of sight.

Contemplating his choices, Junsu slapped the wall in frustration. “DAMMIT!” Should he follow her? What kind of a scene would it create in the lobby if he did? She was leaving for good, he just knew it. He could sense it in the finality of her voice, and tenseness of her shoulders when she’d stepped away from him. How in the hell could one drunken night’s mistake cause this much trouble? Making love to her should have never been a mistake. Why was he thinking so?

Determined to try once more before allowing her the opportunity to walk away and go home, he bounded after her, running smack into JJ, right outside the first floor elevator, nearly knocking him down in the process. He certainly didn’t have time for this! Stepping around him, rushing to reach Saffire’s retreating back he barked, “What are you doing here Jae? Don’t follow me right now. I’m busy.”

Responding matter-of-factly, JJ met Junsu stride-for-stride through the semi-crowded lobby. “I’m not . . . I just spotted Saffire, and we need to talk, can’t wait . . . it’s important.” Breaking into a trot, he pulled ahead, reaching her just before she passed the massive ornate Christmas tree.



Tugging her off to one side, breathy with uncertainty, his brown eyes glistened, begging for the time he needed to explain himself. For not inviting her, the other girl, the note in her shoe . . . But, spurred on by the silent, encouraging words of an absentee best friend, a bone-weary Saffire wasn’t taking the bait.

And, by the time the third point to the love triangle arrived, darting around curious onlookers, and fans, JJ stood paralyzed in the reality of Saffire’s previous decision.

As the ‘brothers’ took a moment to grapple with their bearings, she turned away . . . head held high, (one hand in the air) dismissing them both, marching out the massive glass doors, and into the crowded entryway.

* * * * *

“**W**HAT the hell did you say to her?” Half expecting the vision of Uncle Ryu (holding the ominous black cat from the café) to materialize before his very eyes, JJ was certain something had happened in Junsu’s room earlier to make her flee.

“Keep your damned voice down. And, I didn’t say anything to her. Not that it’s any of your business. I thought you were too busy to go over music? Busy doing what? Looking for her? You don’t listen very well do you?” Frowning, Junsu hated that now they were back at square one. In the days gone by, neither had gained any ground.

Dodging the questioning eyes before him, JJ lowered his tone, his voice gritty, “I shouldn’t HAVE to leave her alone. She asked ME out remember? She was interested first.”

For the second time that weekend, Junsu felt as if he were about to give in to his violent side. JaeJoong could be so clueless sometimes when it came to women. Poking one finger into his friend’s chest pointedly he growled, “Then you fucking should’ve said NO! You put her in this position. Not me. Get outta my way.”

Leaving the merriness of Christmas behind he leapt out of range of JJ’s cutting words, jogging through the door hoping he might still be able to make a difference in Saffire’s decision. But, as fate would have it, as he skidded into the round open driveway, she was already slipping into a cab fingers hovered over her cell phone, texting Saffron.

I’M HEADED TO THE AIRPORT TO WAIT FOR THE NEXT FLIGHT BACK TO SEOUL. SEE YOU AT HOME.

Game over . . .

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