

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## (Part 3)

“Caution! Things are about to get serious . . .”



Sunday, December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014

12:30 P.M.

Gangnam, S. Korea – Kim JaeJoong’s House

**T**HE snow was relentless. Following a pan of Raman, a few beers and shots of Soju, Kim JaeJoong, squatted solemnly, hands pressed to the cold window overlooking the city lights. His scattered thoughts zeroing in on Saffire, it was a fact, no matter how hard he tried or apologized, she probably wasn’t going to get back to him tonight. He could almost ‘feel’ her slipping away from him.

Studying the wet flakes disintegrating into watery streams against the plate glass he burped lightly. “It’s still snowing hyung. Seems like that’s all it does here lately.”



Turning to Hyun Joong sprawled out in the middle of the black leather couch, he'd tried not to drink himself into an alcoholic haze alone (grateful his hyung had rang the bell earlier, seeking solace and company).

"It's December, what do ya expect?" Barely glancing at the frosty window, Joong lifted the video controller in the air acknowledging his slightly tipsy friend mumbling, "De, it's a mess out there, I'll probably just crash here."

"Arasseo."

An awkward silence hung in the air between the two, both lost in their own rendition of the 'weekend from hell'. As the sound of the furnace kicking in overpowered the quiet beeping of the video game, Hyun Joong dropped the controller in disgust rolling off the cushion and onto the floor headed to the liquor fridge for his third beer. As long as he wasn't driving home, there was no need to hold back.

"Me too!" JJ knew he might as well give in to the inevitable. For some reason, Uncle Ryu's fatherly advice to keep his drinking to a minimum didn't seem to apply right now.

Standing he closed the blinds against the draft, stepping back and nearly tripping over the cat lounging at his feet, as he plopped his empty bottle on the coffee table.



"Damn Jiji . . . watch out. Trying to give 'She-Devil' a run for her money?"

Reminded of the black stray who frequented the café, he replaced Joong's spot on the couch, dropping face first into the cushion, head buried in his arms waiting for another dose of liquid medication to help ease the pain.

Hyun Joong stuck one hand into the fridge enclosure, tugging out two more beers, clinking them mindlessly, meandering back to the comfort of the couch. Handing one off to an impatient JJ he sighed, "So, I've been here like thirty minutes. You gonna stop stressing and talk or what? Has she called yet?" The two of them hadn't had a chance to talk since leaving the 'Toscana' hours earlier. JJ had left on the next plane out after Saffire, and he had stayed on, leaving when Saffron did.

“Ani.” Shrugging his shoulders JJ balked, trying to act nonchalant (despite his own apprehension). “What’s there to talk about?”

If he couldn’t get a hold of her now, he’d try again later. Tomorrow was another day. So, tonight of all nights, what did it matter how much he stressed or indulged? He was safe at home with no one to impress but, Hyun Joong. Rising slowly, both eyes, closed, he barely flinched, guzzling the beer straight down, allowing his tongue to wind circles around the inside rim, searching for the final drop.

“Don’t know, you tell me.” With no response forthcoming, exhausted from the weekend himself, following suit, a still sober Hyun Joong, (slouched over his knees), twisted the bottle cap of his own cold drink, tipping it eagerly to his awaiting lips. “That’s your problem hyung. You let yourself get all caught up in shit like this, then don’t know when to quit. We’ve talked about this before. I’m seeing shades of the ‘Han’ here.” Referring to his friends ‘accidental’ plunge to the bottom of the Han River, (over ex-lover SooMin), he found himself shivering uncontrollably. “I don’t wanna see you go there again, yah?”

JJ stood to his feet steadying himself before picking up the languid grey cat, nuzzling her soft furry neck. Towering over Hyun Joong, the frustration shone evident in his dark glassy eyes.



“Fuck, give me a little credit, de? Mianhae Jiji, didn’t mean to cuss in your ear.” His tone mildly harsh, he could feel the last guzzled beer rush to his head staggering as the room spun underneath him, unable to believe Joong would bring up one of the worst days of his life, comparing it to his somewhat short-lived relationship with Saffire.

“Shit hyung, calm down. And, SIT down before you fall over and break the damn cat’s neck.” Pulling him back beside him on the couch, Hyun Joong lifted the purring feline from his arms, scratching her head, before shooing her off to the other room. “You have to know what you’re up against.” Wrapping one arm around his neck, Hyun Joong ruffled his already scruffy blonde hair.

“In a few months you’ll be in the army. Hell, we both will. If you don’t get this worked out you’re gonna be gone. Sort of leaves the door open don’tcha think?” He hated being that blunt but, the facts were the facts.

Junsu was playing for keeps and JJ seemed to be doing his usual . . . being cocky and confident, certain he could rip her out from under someone else despite their history. Just another reason he was sure SooMin was still an integral part of his life. ‘She’ had been his history and he had lost her. Joong knew he was empty and lonely without her, running on fumes in the relationship arena. And, when he really thought about it . . . Why was it, this amazing, likeable brother in front of him could never find a woman who wasn’t already attached at the hip to another man anyway? The poor guy had put up with fighting someone else for the right to fall in love for years. It didn’t seem fair.

He’d tried his best. How many times (after SooMin) had he encouraged him to hook up with a lovesick fan, get her registered, knock her up, and whisk her safely away to the country where they could live happily ever after with lots and lots of babies. Hell, maybe he should’ve taken his own advice and done that too. So much less drama.

“Whose side are you on anyway?” Rearing back, JJ peered over seeing his friend cross his arms. Joong appeared somewhat defeated too, and had been through a weekend much like his own. In truth, he knew the man had come knocking late at night requesting a drinking buddy to relax with because of his own issues with Saffron. They usually ran on the same wavelength. So possibly this line of questioning came with a catch to it.

“That was a dumb question.” Trying not to take offense, Hyun Joong looked at him piercingly. “Yours of course.”

“Could’ve fooled me. If that’s the case, how come you didn’t let me know sooner Saffire left the club with Junsu? I had my cell. It wasn’t like I couldn’t have made it there in time.” He’d been mulling the question over and over in his mind but, the reality was she had seen him at the elevator. His silence there may well have been the catalyst that pushed her over the edge. Annoyed with himself more than Joong, he expected what followed.

“Cause I had my own drama to deal with. I can’t be your babysitter 24-7. Besides, you’ve gone head-to-head with Junsu before. No matter what, he’s not gonna hold back.”

“Arasseo. I know.” Hating to admit his weekend defeat, JJ had to agree.

Still pressed firmly into the sofa, a pensive Hyun Joong thought about how the weekend would’ve gone differently if they had both broken down and asked the girls to attend. He

wouldn't have felt obligated to Junsu, and Jae would've spent the night in Saffire's arms like it should've been.

"I half expected you to hit them both up after I DID tell you she was there. What happened?" Now the elephant in the room was about to be fed. It couldn't go without addressing.

"Dunno. Something just stopped me." Hands laced behind his head, JaeJoong stared blankly at the dimly lit ceiling studying the shadowy patterns of the twinkling Christmas tree lights adding quietly, "Must've been Uncle Ryu. He told me she loved me."

"Uncle? Young Jae?" Skirting toward the far side of the sofa, Hyun Joong felt an eerie chill course up and down his spine. *Young Jae was talking to JJ about Saffire? Holy shit. Maybe he shouldn't have another beer.* "You're shittin' me right? Young Jae told you Saffire was in love with you?"

Prodding JJ further, Hyun Joong was curious to find out if he had actually seen the ghostly apparition? "Did he like . . . appear . . . in the flesh?" If he hadn't been so spooked, it would've been funny but, considering his own encounter with Uncle, he was learning (and quickly) to never question the supernatural.



Silence. JJ closed his eyes whispering, "Ani," recalling the unusual presence he'd felt in the café, at the drinking tent, and especially alone in the hallway of the 'Toscana'. *Oh Uncle Ryu had been talking to him alright. For days now. And, each time it was the same.*

"But, that doesn't matter. He told me not to give up, 'cause she loves me. So, I waited. Figured she'd come to me."

Feeling anxious, his breathing labored, alcohol induced tears pricked the corners of JJ's heavy eyelids. Every aspect of Uncle Ryu's silent counsel meant more to him than anything. For some unknown reason his ghostly presence had been empowering the idol to seek her out from the moment he'd initially laid eyes on her, running through the crowded room at the memorial service.

Trembling uneasily, Joong itched to spout out his encounter as well but, the more he thought about it, he wasn't sure why Uncle would encourage both of them to pursue the unpredictable

foreign Ryu sisters. Because they were his nieces, and he and Jae were friends? Clearly, JJ had already had his fill of impulsive women, most recently being Jang SooMin.

“Hyung. Snap out of it.” Clapping his hands above JJ’s brooding face, he frowned. “It’s only been like a couple weeks. You’re playing ‘Russian Roulette’ with your own damn feelings.” Hesitating, in order to cover his personal discomfort, he barked out, “Hell, it’s a fact, we both fell hard and fast this time. Don’t get me wrong, we’ve talked about this shit before. But, life is life and people are people . . . Uncle Ryu or not, you have to know fate is what you make of it, and doesn’t always have all the answers.”

His voice fading, he knew he probably shouldn’t go there, but felt compelled to tell it like it was anyway, especially now while the alcohol was flowing, and JJ was pliable. These were the moments when clearing the air was the easiest. There had been a lot of prior discussions (drunk and sober) over the years involving fate, the Red String, fortune tellers and the cosmic unknowns.

“That’s the problem hyung. You don’t know when to quit when it comes to women. Let’s not jump on the Jang train again arasseo?”

“Wha? SooMin? Aishhh. You’re f’ng delusional. This isn’t about her. Never was.”

Curling his feet underneath him, JJ tried refocusing on the small blinking Christmas tree lights, unable to understand where this was coming from all of a sudden. Agitated that Joong would continue bringing up the one girl who’d ripped his heart to shreds and cut him up relentlessly night-after-night when he slept. For some reason, his friend felt the need to give out advice tonight.

“Bullshit, you know who you’re talking to? She and Saffire are a lot alike. Don’t think I don’t see it. All your women are sort of the same.”

Chin still to his knees, Hyun Joong tossed the vision of a chilly; sensual; dark-haired; blue-eyed beauty named HyeSu from his own memory banks, replacing it with the spicy; doe-eyed; red-headed Saffron.

“Your point?”

Trying to shut him down, JJ didn't really want to have the conversation. Especially not now on the heels of this weekend, where he'd done everything wrong but, still expected everything to turn out right.

“Fuck Jae, my point is I don't think you're over her. Humph, probably never freaking will be. Face it, you thought she was your soul mate.”

His voice dwindling, there was no way he was going to let JJ off the hook so easily this time around. Blinking, he finished out strong, anxious for a shot to accompany his beer, so the liquor would take over and he could go to bed.

The deadpan expression on 'Prince' JaeJoong's face said it all. Hit between the eyes with the undeniable truth, the usually cheerful idol was desperately trying to ignore it. How could he answer that? Staring off into space, he let his already indecisive heart answer the question for him while Joong kept rattling in his ear. Even trudging through alcohol, the man was making perfect sense.

Out of nowhere, Hyun Joong bounced unexpectedly from the sofa, lunging for JJ's cell, shouting, “Gimme that!” Reaching it only seconds before he could be stopped.

As the two scuffled roughly, grappling for possession, he lifted it in the air above his head victoriously, scrolling through the contacts until it appeared, clear as day. ‘SEXY NOONA’, right along with it, all her personal info, including a recent photo.

Sniffing righteously, he tossed it carelessly back into JJ's lap. But, had proving it eased his own mind any? He wasn't sure. He himself, didn't have another love interest to contend with, and even without closure he was fairly certain his real feelings for HyeSu were long gone.

This was his self-proclaimed brother sitting in front of him. Should he let him go down this road without saying anything? Did he want him ending up with another SooMin in his life? Or worse yet, a Chung A? Hell no. It was no secret . . . hands down she was the worst thing either of them could possibly imagine. Cautioning him where a decision of his heart was concerned could only be that . . . a warning.

The can of worms open and wiggling JJ was itching to be rid of the gaping hole in his heart. He knew he'd jumped on the band wagon with several women over the past year after SooMin but, no matter what Hyun Joong said . . . Saffire was different. He could feel it. See it in her eyes

when they were together. Even without Young Jae's interference he would've fallen for her. And, just like he did. Fast and hard. His choices were few. Either confront Junsu point blank, or make a commitment he wasn't sure he was ready for. It was a fact. Time was running out.

"Mianhae." Patting JJ's shoulder Joong back-peddled, trying to console him for overstepping his bounds and taking liberties with his already raw feelings. Maybe he could blame it on the alcohol. "Probably should stop drinking, yah?"

"De." Agreeing that the booze wasn't lending itself to the situation like it normally did, JJ rose, rolling his shirt over his sweaty back staggering slightly toward the open door jamb. "Can't change the past but, I CAN change what's going on with Saffire. Starting now."

Bolting up beside him, Hyun Joong tried not to act smug. "So why are you sitting here drinking with me then? What's that changing? I got a plan. You got a plan? If you and Young Jae really think she's the one, then I say you need to go big or go home."

Twisting to face him, tongue in cheek, JJ's eyes smoldered curiously. "What's that mean? Thought I did have a plan."

A finger pointed directly at his stunned face, Hyun Joong was attempting to show this self-proclaimed 'romantic' that he usually flew by the seat of his pants, and the fall-out wasn't always in his favor.

"You did? Then why didn't you ask her to spend the weekend with you? And, why isn't she returning your calls? You're gonna have to do better than just being the, 'Cotton Candy Prince'. Young Jae can't pursue her for you."

"I dunno. Probably for the same reason you didn't ask Saffron. Distractions, too many to handle. And, I don't know why she isn't returning my calls. She's still pissed off I guess. You gotta know every little detail?"

Now on the defensive, his demeanor changing, JJ clung to the door jamb, kicking both feet out, his heels meeting with Hyun Joong's midsection, shoving him backward harshly. Hanging on like a mad monkey he squinted, noticing Joong grab his stomach in discomfort as he righted himself.

“Arasseo, if you really need to know . . . she saw me with MingSang. We were just being friendly, you know cozy like it always is with her. And, I . . . well dammit, I didn’t do the right thing. I let her get in the elevator without saying anything.”

JJ knew, hearing himself say the words admitting he’d blown it all by himself, was making the realization of her absence that much harder to swallow.

Whistling low, Hyun Joong was finally beginning to grasp why a drunken Saffire had ended up with Heechul in the Club ‘and’ why she’d given in to letting Junsu take her back to his room. Thankfully, this time ‘he’d’ been the lucky one and come out on top. But, JJ had Uncle Ryu in his corner, so whether he knew it or not, he still had the upper hand. Tipping up into his forlorn face the idol smiled. “You’ve made mistakes before Jae. She’ll come around, Junsu or not. If Uncle says she’s the one, then by God . . . for your sake, I hope she is.”

Knowing Joong’s sense of humor, JJ plopped both hands on his broad shoulders returning his smile appreciatively, “Don’t strain yourself hyung. That was so profound.”

“Yah, sometimes it just comes out.” Chuckling, Hyun Joong wished Young Jae had stepped in sooner on ‘his’ behalf and introduced him to Saffron when there had been other numerous opportunities over the years. Even so, now (after the fact) he would continue encouraging his friend, even though he found himself sitting on the fence in his own complex situation. His response gave credence to the fact that Uncle had visited him for much different reasons than JaeJoong’s. “At least he thinks you’re cool and is on your side. I think he’s pissed off at me right now. The whole freakin’ thing’s complicated.”

Squaring off, the two young idols stared at each other, trying to figure out, how in the course of the last ten years or so, they had both managed to meet and fall in love with not only one set of sisters . . . but, now two. Uncle Ryu had been privy to the first set, keeping himself low key, letting them make their own mistakes. However, for some unknown reason, he was kicking things up this time around, making his presence (and his wishes) known.

Arms up a second time, swaying between the open entryway by both hands, JJ attempted a few unsteady chin-ups, satisfied the alcohol hadn’t rendered him completely helpless. “He talks to you too? You know for sure he’s pissed? Or just assuming?”

“Oh, I know. Trust me, and de, we’ve ‘talked’.” Jumping out of the way as JJ’s lean form slung out in front of him Hyun Joong knew he was about to have to spill his own set of ‘complicated’ issues.

“Aishhh, Go ahead. I’m listening.” Confident in his friend’s unconditional love and support JJ knew through years of happiness, heartbreak, and confusion . . . the two of them had stuck it out together. This would be no different.

“Aishhh is right.” Mumbling under his breath, Hyun Joong motioned him back into the kitchen for more snacks, starting at the beginning with Uncle Young Jae Ryu and ‘the dream’.

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Sunday, December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014

2:30 A.M.

**B**ENT over the piano, JJ tinkered up and down the keyboard humming a melody that had been stuck in his head for days. Hitting a final chord a little too loudly, a snoring Hyun Joong flew up from his fetal position on the floor, slapping the rug growling, “Dammit Jae. Gotta be so loud? You ruined it, I was about to screw her.”

Swiveling on the slick bench, JJ laughed out loud, touching his bare toes to the balls of Joong’s feet. “TMI hyung. But, at least you DID . . . you know . . . screw.”

“Yeah, and it’s not the best way to start a real relationship. You know that.” Adjusting a rising hard-on he ruffled one hand through his long bangs lumbering in the direction of the bathroom, grumbling about the interrupted dream of a naked (now disintegrated) red-haired Saffron, throwing over his shoulder as he went, “So . . . did you and Miss ‘Cotton Candy Princess’ have a go at it yet?” Pausing, he chuckled despite himself. “Aishhh, dumb question. Ani, yah? Can’t keep anything to yourself when it comes to that shit.”



They knew each other too well, and shared everything. Joong was aware JJ was (if nothing else) proud of his sexual prowess with women, and extremely verbal. If it had happened . . . he would’ve definitely shouted it from the rooftops, and a drunken Saffire wouldn’t have ended up in Junsu’s arms at any time over the weekend.

Following him down the hall, JJ spun into the bedroom alone, flattening himself across the cool rumpled sheets hollering, “Ani. Timing’s been off. Maybe another reason I didn’t ask her this weekend. Really didn’t think Junsu would jump on an invite like a rabid dog. Guess I misjudged him. Anyway, I told you. She’s different.”

Having sobered up some in the last few hours, the vision of Saffire’s naked body entangled around his, sent him heaving back to a sitting position on the bed, stretching for a water bottle perched on the side table. *Of course it was on his mind. Every waking minute, or so it seemed. Even had his eye on the prize, the night they spent in the upstairs dining room.* Looking back, regardless of Saffron’s intervention, he was positive Saffire hadn’t been ready to go all the way. Now, only a short time later . . . there were complications. BIG complications . . . Junsu complications.

Speaking of Junsu. Looking around him as he waited for Hyun Joong, the telltale signs of his other ‘JYJ’ member began to haunt him from all corners of the bedroom. Awards; photos; trinkets; framed mementos. The presence of his friend around the apartment was lending itself to a strange type of annoying resentment.

Adding salt to the wound, Hyun Joong’s voice pierced the silence of the darkness, asking the question JJ had asked ‘himself’ numerous times since finding out Saffire had spent the night in Junsu’s room.

“Hyung, you think Junsu would’ve tried something? I saw her this morning. She was pretty hung over.”

True enough, he’d been the first one to greet her at the front door, still wearing the dress she’d worn to the Club, looking and reeking of sex. He wasn’t sure why he felt the need to even bring it up. After talking about SooMin, Young Jae, and reasons for everything . . . clearly mentioning it now, was only going to make JJ mad. However, in his sobriety he only knew that mad or not, his friend was being a little naïve where Saffire was concerned. He wanted them to work out, he really did. But, reality was reality. And, Junsu was a guy who wasn’t about to take a back seat.

Almost choking on his gulp of water, JJ hesitated before answering nonchalantly, “Course not.” *God knows he’d be killing a brother and hanging him, (balls first) over the Han River bridge if he had.*

“Have you even asked her?” Shrugging his shoulders, Hyun Joong bit his upper lip wanting to get up and punch some sense into his idiot of a friend.

“Ani.”

“JAE. Seriously. Are you blind, stupid AND minchin (CRAZY)? You can’t tell me it didn’t cross your mind, even once? Aigooo, and I think I got problems.”

Looking straight into Joong’s eyes, JJ sobered considerably, his voice serious. “What if it did? Is it any of your freakin’ business? And, if you didn’t want an answer you shouldn’t have asked. Pretty sure, she wouldn’t do that to me. I trust her.” Scratching the back of his neck nervously, JJ knew if he believed anything else, he wouldn’t be able to face either her or Junsu in the future. He just couldn’t let himself go there.

“Yah, just like I TRUST Chung A, when she asks me for money for the baby.”

Moving toward the opposite side of the room, Hyun Joong flipped on the T.V. positioning himself in the chair beside the bed, legs over the arm, chip bag in hand. Now that ‘baby mama’ and Saffron were splashed all over the Internet, JJ needed to know what was going down before he got sober enough to start checking social media.

“Not to change the subject but, guess I should tell ya. Saffron and Chung A had it out earlier today. A knock-down, drag-out. Right in the middle of the lawn of the hotel. Probably all over the Internet already. Surprised you haven’t seen it yet.” Clearing his throat before he choked on a dry chip he studied the figures on the T.V. screen. “So . . . I’m gonna pay the bitch off to leave me alone. No other way out. I’ve got a rep to consider and I have to protect Saffron.”

Pausing at the word ‘pay’, JJ bunched up the pillows behind his head. *Changing the subject was right. What the fuck? The guy was even more desperate than he’d originally thought.* Not sure how to respond, he tossed a throw pillow at Joong’s serious face.

“Hyung. Let’s talk about who’s blind, stupid and minchin, (CRAZY) and who’s not. That’s the freaking dumbest idea I’ve heard yet. Might as well stick your bare ass in the air and say ‘fuck me’.”

Dodging the pillow easily, Joong watched it drop to the floor at his feet. “Gamza (THANKS) hyung. I see where we stand now. No support from the ‘Cotton Candy Prince’?” Slurping down

the last of his water bottle, he crumpled it loudly in one hand, tossing it over into the trash can at the foot of the bed. “Three pointer. De, I still got it!”

Ignoring his usual gaming skills, JJ’s eyebrows rose. “Yahhh, shitttt . . . You have to know she’s after your money. So you give in, everybody wins, huh?” Stuffing another bed pillow under the sheet next to him, he positioned it at his midsection, rubbing the ‘fake’ pregnant belly, grinning broadly. “How about me? I could use a couple more million won.”

Mouthing, “Fuck you.” Joong stuck his middle finger in the air as he rose to leave, announcing unemotionally, “Go to bed, asshole.”

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