

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

“You can’t make everyone happy, you’re not coffee.”



Tuesday - February 24th, 2015

9:30 P.M.

Gangnam, S. Korea – Cup of Hotness Cafe

“A **NOTHER** message from the texting Prince? We’re not going to get anything done if you don’t get off your damn phone.” Snickering, Saffron stopped sweeping behind Saffire’s back peeking over her shoulder curiously. “Is he naked?”

“Get the ‘F’ away from me . . . of course he isn’t naked! He doesn’t sit around without his clothes on just waiting to sext me. Get your mind out of the gutter, and worry about your own boyfriend, please!” Frustrated that ‘again’ all she was getting was a message and not a personal appearance or call, Saffire brushed the phone down between her legs to hide her response.

It had been two long months since the Christmas confession and JJ had gone from being the soul mate extraordinaire to the absentee boyfriend. She’d expected him to be gone some of the time

but, certainly not this much. Oh his texts were like clockwork, loving and apologetic laced with rows and rows of emoji hearts. But, DAMN . . . they didn't make up for his kissable lips or feel of his warm body pushed up against her in bed.

Exasperated and sweaty, (convinced her sister was struggling in exactly the same way), she shoved the still blinking phone in her jeans pocket, hopping butt first onto the table in front of her.

“Tell me you and ‘Seung Jo’, are doing any better? This whole military thing has me burning from the inside out. I KNOW you're pissed off, it's just easier for you to hold it in than it is me,” she barked at Saffron defiantly.

“So what if I am?” Leaning into Saffire's lap, Saffron tweaked the frayed hairs at the bottom of her twin's blonde ponytail. “Like we said over Christmas, stressing isn't going to solve anything. Anyway, can't back out now. We knew this was a possibility when we jumped into these relationships right?”

“Yup. Guess so.” Swinging her crossed legs back and forth, Saffire pursed her lips thoughtfully. Not only were their Oppa's AWOL before enlistment, it wouldn't be long and they would be gone for good. There were times over the last few months, it seemed like all she'd managed to do was elicit JJ for a round of one-night stands, accompanied by gifts and sweet talk.

Saffron was more than aware of the situation as well. Joong was leaving along with JJ, and she could count on one hand how many times they'd actually seen each other or gone anywhere together. Between the wrapping of the movie, fan meets, one last upcoming concert and photo shoots he was as busy as the infamous Prince Jae. Sure, she'd agreed to take a back seat to his career, but not all the way to the trunk! Time away from him was only making the initial heat of their union cool considerably.

Not to mention, every day since Christmas had been a whirlwind of activity in every other area 'but' their love lives. Mother had produced the key to Young Jae's safe deposit box and tucked securely away they'd discovered the lost deeds to his two remaining properties . . . naming them the owners. From that moment on, the decision to leave the small cramped apartment over the café had been an easy one.

In the midst of packing, reorganizing, moving and ultimately making some concrete long term plans to renovate the aging café, the time for their Idol boyfriends military enlistment was fast approaching.

“I feel like all I’ve done lately is pack, move, work and wait . . . SUCKS!” Saffron’s announcement and subsequent response said it all. It did suck. Up one side and down the other. Eyes fixated on what was still left to do before they locked up, the newly aggravated twin, began sauntering away from the table. “Did you manage to squeeze in that symphony practice yesterday? I told you stopping to get picture frames for the wall could wait.” Pausing in front of Uncle’s photo she folded her arms around the broom handle examining it pensively wondering what he would think of their plans for renovating.

“Yeahhh . . . I was only like ten minutes late. Takes that long for them to tune up and get in their seats.” Skimming off the table top Saffire’s feet hit the floor hard, dancing a circle around Saffron’s frame adding, “Sooo, you probably don’t really care but, Junsu asked me to lunch tomorrow.”

“Is that right? And, why wouldn’t I care? You’re not going are you?” Eyebrows raised in concern, her sister’s lighthearted attitude to dine with the jilted friend only seemed to make Saffron more apprehensive.

Flipping back around, Saffire nodded grinning, “Sure why not? He wants to go over an OST musical score with me. You know what that means. Extra cash. I can’t afford to pass that up, especially now, since I’m paying all my own bills.”

Dropping the broom on the floor at her feet Saffron cringed, grabbing Saffire by the shoulders as the wily girl attempted to twirl past her toward the back hallway.

“Hold it right there PRINCESS. I hardly think you’re heeding the advice I gave when this whole thing started. It worries me that you’re spending this kind of time with him. All I see is a massive train wreck in the making.”

Wriggling in her grasp, Saffire studied her twin’s somber face. “Need I remind you? One’s a friend . . . the other is NOT. And, we both know the one that’s NOT is also NOT available at the moment.” Crossing her arms her voice mellowed convincingly. “Tell me you wouldn’t take the opportunity to let one of Joong’s friends wine and dine you if it benefited you in some way? For God’s sake you lived in the corporate world, you know what it’s like. The music business isn’t

any different. It's a jungle out there. I need all the help I can get. Especially here in Korea. I don't have lofty 'café' plans like you do."

Lips pursed (the usually level-headed) Saffron shook her red braid adamantly. "Here we go again. That's different and you know it! And, stop using me as a scapegoat for your bad decisions. You know well and good what that means. Going to a studio, alone . . . one-on-one. To me anyway, that suggests a private lunch, not at a restaurant. Stop being so gullible. He's holding out until JJ leaves and then he's gonna make his move. Dummy." Thumping the top of Saffire's head soundly, she frowned continuing to scold, making sure she got in the last word.

"It's no secret he's still in love with you. We ALL know it. You're barely settled into this relationship with JJ and look who comes running. Yeah, don't answer that. Sometimes I think the three of you deserve each other. Pffft, that tryout he offered you was for his sake not yours. Jesus, wake up and smell the roses Saffire. I really want to slap some damned sense into you sometimes."

Stepping away Saffire's bottom lip quivered momentarily. *After all this time, why the hell was Saffron dogging her about a small lunch meeting? On top of that she was systematically attacking her ability to have gotten the prestigious tryout without Junsu's help.*

Thinking back to the look on his face Christmas night when he'd unexpectedly proposed, her eyes misted over. She'd given in and told Saffron the whole truth. Now, after the fact, maybe she shouldn't have. To date, JJ hadn't mentioned his friend's involvement with her even once since they'd gathered together to celebrate New Year's Eve. Even then, all he'd done was propose a toast, hoping they could all put the past weeks behind them and move on into 2015 and a new beginning.

Without answering the question or responding to the suggestiveness of the meeting Saffire turned on her heel headed to the ladies room. *What had happened to the fun evening they had started together? Closing up for the night, playing loud music while they danced around cleaning, chattering about the renovations getting underway, reminiscing about their first crazy night in the café with Hyun Joong and JJ?*

"DAMN. SAFFIRE WAIT . . . I'M SORRY. Come back in here. I shouldn't have said that. My big mouth. You know it always gets me in trouble. I'M PMS'ING . . ."

Racing after her, realizing what she'd implied, Saffron stuck one foot out toward the rickety wooden door, stopping it from closing just as Saffire (throwing water in her flushed, tearful face)

bent over the sink. In one fell swoop, retaliation in mind, the indignant sister, cupped her palm flinging the icy, wet handful of liquid straight down the neckline of Saffron's plain white cotton work shirt.

“OHHH . . . SHIT . . . THAT’S COLD! Why you little witch. Why the hell would you do that? I told you I didn’t mean it.” Lashing out, Saffron grabbed the back of Saffire’s swinging ponytail, stuffing her nose first into the sink, turning the water spigot on high.

Tussling like a couple of amateur wrestlers they bounced around squealing playfully, their laughter bouncing off the walls of the tiny one stall restroom.

Gasping for breath Saffire kicked open the doorway, slipping between the crack, and slamming the door, before Saffron could maneuver herself off the wet floor where she’d slipped and fallen, butt first.

“You’re in trouble now Saffire Ryu! Just wait till I get out of here.” Pounding, pulling and laughing at the closed door, Saffron’s threats were met with her twin’s hysterical giggling from the other side, back against the wall feet to the door. Having successfully trapped the ‘Queen of Sass’ she was the victor at last!

Hearing the disruption of the café phone ringing from the open office she sighed disconcertedly. Alas, playtime was over.

“Okayyy . . . Truce. Come on out. I have to answer the phone. Probably Maude wondering if we’re finished yet.” Listing to one side her feet dropped down as she stood, tugging the ponytail holder from the top of her head.

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Outside the Café

“**D**O you think they’re open?” Peeking in the side window of the café, Lee JongSuk reached over, pushing the front door open slowly, Seo InGuk following close behind. “I hear music. It’s not a bar is it? All I need is coffee, can’t deal with a hangover. I’ve got schedules early tomorrow.”

Relishing the warmth of the dimly lit hallway, smelling sweetly of chocolate, cupcakes and coffee, they stepped gingerly inside. The music blaring louder from the empty lunch area alerted them to the fact that indeed the establishment was open.

“Ever heard of this place? Cup of Hotness Café?” Unzipping his parka, Seo InGuk shook the light dusting of snow out of his dark, tousled hair.



“Yeah. I have a few friends who’ve volunteered here over the years.” Now inside, the sounds of women’s laughter could be heard over the steady beat of dance music. “Used to be owned by Young Jae Ryu but, he’s since passed away. Surprised you don’t know the name. Been in the business awhile. Old Trot singer. I think his nieces run the place now. Bet that’s them in there.” Curiosity getting the best of him JonSuk leaned against the hall pillar, hands in his pocket. “Damn Gukkie, take a look. Those two are daebak!”

“De. But, don’t you think we should say something?” Seo InGuk whispered, “I’ve scared girls before . . . usually ends badly.” Planting both feet firmly behind his friend, fingers poised at his lips, he prepared to whistle through his teeth announcing their arrival.

One hand on his friend’s chest to stop him, JongSuk’s smiling eyes twinkled merrily as he hushed him quietly, “Shhh, ani . . . let’s watch for a sec.”

The familiar KPOP tune pounded around them, as the two actors leaned unashamedly against the partition drinking in the out of control dancing going on in their line of vision. The tall blonde, perched against the far wall, pretended the handle of the mop she clung to was the recipient of some version of a sexy dance . . . while the freckle-faced red head attempted to mimic a strip tease artist, rubbing her backside with both ends of a white dishcloth, parading in and out between the (pushed back) rows of tables.

The song drawing to a close brought them together, out of breath and laughing, blowing kisses and love shots to the few photos lining a wall entitled, “Hotness Wall.”

Shaking his head in disbelief, JongSuk slowly began to clap, first quietly then louder as Seo InGuk joined in. Coffee had never looked so good.

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“**W**HAT the . . .” Hearing clapping from the front vestibule Saffron dropped the towel to her side, muttering, “Saffire, stop . . . customers,” embarrassed they had been found out. Whoever the hell the two were they were drop dead, gorgeous, looking like bookends at a ‘COSMO’ winter photo shoot. Bowing apologetically she rushed forward flipping the volume button down on the radio as she went. “Oh my gosh! Sorry. Hello, can we help you? We’re about to close.”

About to close? “NOOO, Saffron. We can stay open forever,” Saffire squealed inwardly. Didn’t she know who she was dealing with? Overwhelmed, eyes bulging, she tried not to stare. Streaked with sweat, she dabbed her lids with the back of one hand shoving Saffron aside as she careened by.

“Anneyonghaeseyo. Hi . . . hi. Ummm, it’s fine if you need coffee or something. I know it’s cold outside.” Shooting a glance at Saffire, at least SHE knew these two . . . Actors, Seo InGuk and Lee JongSuk, who were well known for their ‘hotness’ factor both on and off the screen. *But, what in God’s name were they doing in the hallway of their establishment only five minutes before closing?*

Bowing, (reassured they hadn’t arrived too late), the young men smiled, JonSuk politely returning the greeting.

“Anneyonghaeseyo ladies. You sure it’s okay? You aren’t closed for karaoke practice now that its past 10:00 are you?” Curving his lips into an engagingly, sexy smile he chuckled, “We could use a shot of caffeine before we head home. A little too much Soju if you know what I mean.”

“Ha, karaoke practice. That was good. Of course we have coffee. Follow me.” Trying to sound glib, Saffire blushed, rushing past Saffron hissing on her way by, “Do you KNOW who they are?”

“No. Should I?” Nodding and bowing a second time, Saffron ducked around Saffire’s other side attempting to examine every aspect of their glowing presence in the dimly lit hallway. Whoever they were, they were magnificent! Both of them . . .

Motioning them to sit, Saffire grabbed her clueless sister by the hand whisking her behind the counter toward the coffee machine her voice hushed. “Just two of the MOST POPULAR actors in the business right now, shithead.” Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she stopped to smooth a few stray hairs from Saffron’s face. “Just be nice, and don’t go all corporate on me . . . Please.”

“Okay, okay, damn.” Stepping up, Saffron pointed to the blackboard menu behind her, grinning engagingly, her voice like liquid syrup. “What can I get you?”

Dear God, what would Joong say if he could see her anxious beating heart right now? He’d be jealous and pissed, that’s what. Humph. Good. Maybe this was her chance for a little harmless revenge to make herself feel better.

Poised as if she were about to do a business deal, it was difficult to relax considering the awkwardness of the atmosphere. *And, why was ‘she’ suddenly the one making coffee? Where was Saffire?* On the other side of the bar, nestled between the two strangers one arm around each shoulder (as if they were childhood friends). *What the hell?*

“Seo InGuk,” she purred her nose only inches from his enticingly creamy cheek. “I understand you like your coffee strong and black. And, JonSuk . . . aishhh, a man after my own heart. Lots of cream and sugar. Flavors if possible . . . arasseo?”

Nodding in agreement, JonSuk leaned into her ear, unable to resist the fresh scent of an ocean breeze emanating from her neck. “De.”

“Agh-hem.” Coughing to get their attention, Saffron squinted at her sister in frustration, fisting her hands at both sides. *She was such a flirt, and she was going to be able to handle lunch with Junsu? Doubt it.*

InGuk, leaned forward away from the clingy Saffire, zeroing in on Saffron’s flushed face, whispering, “Honestly, I’ll take a little SUGAR, in my coffee this time if you don’t mind.”

That was all it took. Focused on his suggestive expression, Saffron gulped, suddenly unable to get a blinding vision of him stripped half naked, hovering around her (already spoken for) body. *Joong . . . Joong . . . where are you when I need you most?*

“Coffee . . . Saffire . . . Come help me.” Eyebrows raised like a mother hen she smiled accommodatingly, returning her gaze to InGuk’s wide grin. *It was so hot in here!* “SAFFIRE.” Insisting again that the little blonde hussy join her behind the counter, to get her hands off the merchandise, her voice rose considerably.

“I don’t DO coffee well sister.” Saffire hissed back, certain that at any moment Saffron was going to come unglued and bolt across the table at her neck. “How about a sweet bun gentlemen? On the house. They’re my sister’s specialty.” *Maybe that would get the suddenly naggy twin off her back.*



“Mmmm, sure.” Nodding in compliance, Seo InGuk studied the rigid stance of the red-head in front of him. Americanized to a fault, he loved the way her long glistening hair swooped over one blue eye, tantalizing him to dig deeper. *Boyfriend? Shittt . . . for some strange reason she looked wonton and needy.*



Feeling the blonde careen away from his side, skipping toward the end of the bar like a satisfied child he smiled. JongSuk liked the laid-back, easy going types. Him . . . he wanted mystery . . . passion . . . seduction. Little red riding hood looked to be JUST his type.

“I like my coffee sweet, and my bun HOT,” he muttered, his eyes continuously burning a hole through Saffron’s heaving chest as he talked.

One hand on the coffee jar, she stopped dead in her tracks. *Shit’s getting deep. I can’t believe I’m falling for this line . . . I’m no better than Saffire.* “Ummm, sure . . . yeah . . . right away.” Locked up again, she was caught between the desire to let loose and fear of the consequences if she did.

“My sister tells me the two of you are actors,” she blurted out, her voice and hands shaky, nearly spilling the coffee grounds all over the counter before ever starting the machine.

“Arasseo. You can call me Gukkie. And you?” Reaching across the bar, he stuck out his hand, liking her looks and American accent.

“Saffron . . . Ryu.” Taking it gingerly she tried to ignore the shiver racing through her insides at the feel of flesh on flesh. *Was this the reason Korean men bowed instead of shaking hands? Too much skin. Too much of everything.*

Attempting to come off as calm and cool as Saffire, she lowered her eyes as his fingers slipped away, accidentally snagging the tallest flower in the small white vase at his side. In a matter of seconds she heard it crash against the tile countertop, the water and flowers careening over the bar in a race to the lap of the actor’s khaki pants.

“OH SHIT.” Jumping off the bar stool, he snatched napkins up in an undignified attempt to stop the flow of water to his crotch. But, alas . . . he was too late.

Unable to keep from laughing, JongSuk, (hand over his mouth) leaned back, elbow against the wooden bar waiting out the inevitable. *Whoever this girl was, she was clumsy as a rock. A perfect match for his hyung, who tripped over his own big feet at every turn.*

“Help.” Frustration rising in his voice, InGuk patted his crotch area down with what few remaining napkins he could salvage from the counter, gazing helplessly at the massive wet patch growing between his legs. If he’d been tipsy upon arrival, now (even without coffee) he was relatively sober.

“Oh God. I’m sooo sorry.” Where did she begin? It was Hyun Joong, a cat and a hot cup of coffee all over again. Thankfully, this time she was on the opposite side of the recipient, unable to attempt a clean-up, only further embarrassing herself.

“Just a towel and the restroom. It’s okay.” One hand up in an attempt to ease her mind, he beamed. “You’re welcome to join me if you think it would help.”

From around the corner of the bar, Saffire skidded to a stop at his back, towel in hand eyes blazing as she guided him in the direction of the back hallway. “It’s this way . . . over here.” Head cocked back at Saffron she clucked her tongue in annoyance at the sister who hands down, could clear a room in seconds.

Why was it that ever since they’d come to the café she and Saffron had encountered more hot guys than they had in their entire lives? Was it because of Uncle? Was he worried that they would never marry if he didn’t parade a host of potential suitors in front of them every few weeks? This place was his idea after all. Maybe he’d put some sort of a weird spell over it before he died.

Back at the front her eyes skirted the room. The same unusual creepy feeling was beginning to overtake her that she'd felt Christmas day all alone. Even knowing she had a new residence to go back to after-hours didn't change anything. This place was a hot bed of sexual energy. JJ, Hyun Joong, Junsu, Heechul and Donghae, even G-Dragon had all succumbed to its spell. Now, it seemed Seo InGuk and Lee JongSuk would follow suit. Subsequently . . . there was nowhere to hide.



Standing in the light of the hallway she gulped, sensing a change in JongSuk's demeanor as he raked his eyes up and down her slender body.

Why was he looking at her like she'd just stepped naked from the shower? She was a mess. Dirty hair hanging limp around her neck, her white button down shirt dotted with spots from the day, jeans torn at the knees. Even her fingernails were scraggly and unpolished. What was he seeing that she was not?



“He'll be fine.” His low voice broke through the thoughts circling about her subconscious like vultures zeroing in on fresh meat. “He's done worse to himself, more than once. Think you can handle my cup of coffee and sweet bun now? No accidents?”

Ignoring Saffron hell bent on figuring out how much damage control she could do before Seo InGuk returned from the rest room, the tall languid actor smiled his thousand watt smile, sending Saffire into a quivering pile of Jello, her knees threatening to give out and throw her to the floor at his feet.

“Of course. I'll try.” One finger to her teeth she bit down on her fingernail anxiously. “Lots of cream and sugar right? What flavor?”

“What's YOUR favorite?” Now he was toying with her, flipping his long bangs from out of his eyes casually, hoping she would take the bait.

“Ahhh, I . . . I like cinnamon.” Embarrassed at the way he eased off the stool to stand beside her, she allowed his fingertips to glide down the full length of her arm.

“Then that's what I'll have. Please.”

Could she move? Did she want to? It was only a mere fifteen minutes ago she and Saffron had been dancing merrily about the empty café reliving memories of their first night with JJ and Hyun Joong and now this . . .

Wishing she could split herself into two people, (take one home and let the other stay) she forced her feet one in front of the other until she had managed to put at least an arms-length between them.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

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SAFFRON dumped the wet napkins into the trash can at the side of the back door, keeping her eyes open for Gukkie’s re-appearance from the men’s room. *What was taking him so long? Did it matter? For God’s sake, he was probably attempting to dry his pants under the hand dryer on the wall.* Giggling at the thought of him standing impatiently in his underwear, pants in hand she overlooked the fact that she’d forgotten to lock the back door.

Hearing the restroom door creak open, she swung around tugging the trash bag from the can attempting to look busy. In seconds he was at her side lifting it for her, unconcerned that she had destroyed his pants along with his picture perfect image. “Let me help.”

How could she refuse? And, why was she acting like such a ninny? Saffire was still visible in the bar area now suddenly acting like she was an expert barrister, after feigning stupidity only moments ago. What were they a couple of damned teenagers? This was their café. It was known for its clientele . . . Idols . . . Actors . . . Entertainers of all kinds. Coming and going at all hours of the day and night.

And, then . . .

As if anticipating the inevitable . . . the back door flew open, the blustery winter wind, blowing in the missing boyfriends . . . Kim Hyun Joong, and JaeJoong.

“Do you think they’ll be surprised?” Hyun Joong’s strong voice bellowed out into the darkened hallway. Met by the sound of laughter coming from the coffee bar and two sets of startled eyes near the end of the hallway, his hand (clutching a small paper bird) rose questionably. “Saffron? Is that you?”



In the dim light her bright red hair glistened as she swiveled to the rush of cold air from the door. Beside her Seo InGuk, trash bag between his fingers, lifted it in the air grinning as he bowed.

“Anneyeonghaesayo. Kim Hyun Joong SSI. OH . . . and JaeJoong. So nice.”

JJ sped forward around his friend Joong nearly knocking him down in his haste to get through to the front of the café. If Saffron was entertaining the likes of Seo InGuk, what the hell was Saffire doing? Nodding to the ‘garbage’ couple on his way by, his pace slowed as his eyes came in contact with his ‘woman’. Smelling the sweet aroma of cinnamon coffee and sweet buns, he caught her backside, waltzing into the lunchroom, tray in hand.

“PRINCESS!” He hollered loudly enough to be heard next door. Beginning to set the tray down, she rotated at the sound of his voice, one hand on the shoulder of another man.

“OH MY GOD. JJ you startled me!” *JJ? What was he doing here? Nearly dropping the contents on the table fear gripped her heart. How long had he been standing there? Had he seen anything? Whatever it was, she was innocent.*

JongSuk rose, the sound of the tray scratching against the table beside him, as her fingers instantly slide away from him. Kim JaeJoong was at his back, calling this blonde beauty “Princess”. That could mean only one thing. They were close. Possibly even in a relationship. It was an endearment saved only for little girls or loved ones. Shit. She had slipped out of his grasp before he’d ever had a chance to pursue her.

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15 Minutes later

SITTING uncomfortably around the table, the six young adults sipped coffee and nibbled on buns. The music had given way to silence, lights dimmed, doors locked to any further interruptions, everything closed up for the night.

The white paper bird perched beside Saffron’s nearly empty cup had been the only one privy to the entire male dominated conversation before the girls had the guts to leave the safety of the kitchen to join. It could’ve gone either way. Laced with innuendos making it extremely clear who the boyfriends were. By the time Saffron and Saffire sat down, Seo InGuk and Lee JonSuk had gotten the hint, savoring their last sip of coffee, preparing themselves to leave.

Standing at the door, JonSuk smirked personably at the blonde he was about to walk away from. With luck, maybe one day they would meet again. The café wasn't going anywhere, and neither was he. InGuk who had mastered his unassuming little boy wave years ago, released it with abandon, satisfied that Saffron couldn't help giggling . . . even as the door closed behind him.

“Sooo, You all seem pretty close.” JJ announced abruptly in the gap of silence that followed. “Are they regulars?”

Looking at each other questionably, the sisters stalled Saffire finally spitting out, “No, no . . . of course not.”

“Mmmm, arasseo.” Why wasn't he convinced? It seemed a little strange to come calling after hours only to find her and Saffron seemingly ‘entertaining’ two of the most well-known actors in the field of K-Drama's. And, they were alone, why hadn't they locked the doors? Was it intentional? Cringing at the thought, he turned his attention to Hyun Joong.

“Hyung, feeling a little deja vu? Wasn't this ‘us’ not too long ago? Only this time the girls are sober.” His tone was joking, but his eyes were steely, encompassing both girls sitting side-by-side at the table.

“De.” Joong coughed lightly his eyes boring a hole through Saffron's in-attentive profile. “Did he end up with coffee in his crotch?” *Had she succumbed to those puppy dog eyes, and little boy smile? Guk was the consummate chameleon, drawing women in with his innocence. The end result? He didn't want to subject his thoughts to that.*

The muscles in her neck strained, Saffron flinched uncontrollably, trying desperately not to give herself away. Could she possibly get by with it by telling a bunch of half-truths? It was a random business encounter, it was water not coffee, and she didn't attempt to ‘fix’ it in any way. Starting to open her mouth to speak, she hesitated her hands finding their way instead to Hyun Joong's leg under the table.

Stroking him clear to his balls, she smiled coyly. “Babe. They just came in for coffee. We were still open, it wasn't quite 10:00. Saffire and I were cleaning up. Weren't we?” Turning to Saffire she cocked her head waiting for back up. “The music was loud, we didn't hear them.”

Cringing at her touch Joong gripped her fingers before she went any further, waiting for confirmation from the silent Saffire staring at them, like a deer caught in headlights. The swift

kick to her shin under the table, roused the nervous twin from her own thoughts of discovery. “Huh? Oh . . . yeah, cleaning up. Loud music. Nope, didn’t hear anything.”

His face tightening, Joong’s voice was suddenly stern. “Didn’t we talk about this you two? You seem pretty nonchalant about the whole thing. You’re probably lucky it WAS someone like JongSuk and InGuk. I don’t care how good this neighborhood is, it’s dangerous for you to be here alone late at night. Where’s the cook? I thought he usually stayed to make sure you weren’t by yourselves.”

“I sent him home early. His wife is pregnant and about to have her baby. I didn’t want him here when he should’ve been home with her.” The excuse seemed good enough, but the reprimand was a fair one. For once he was right.

Sighing, his chest heaved at the answer. *How could he argue with that? It was hard to blame her when she was doing something nice. Dammit.*

“Okay, point made. We’ll be good.” Saffire piped up, happy to move on to another subject before the tension in the room got any thicker.

Smiling, Saffron held up one hand in agreement, “Yes. Promise.”

“Can we talk about something else now?” Relieved, Saffire leaned on one hand, remembering her romantic Christmas dinner with JJ at the same table . . . their first ‘real’ night together. The guys were finally here, and the four of them were alone. Why were they wasting precious time?

Then, out of nowhere the sound of hissing and squealing broke through the silence, the furry backside of She-Devil traveling at the speed of light skidding under the table, entangling herself around the legs of the occupants.

“HOLY SHIT!” At the feel of fur against her ankles, Saffron jumped up, nearly knocking the chair over in her haste. “I thought you took that damn thing to your place Saffire!”

“Saffron! She’s harmless. Honest. I tried to get her last week, but every time I get the carrier ready she bolts and is gone for days. I think with the renovations underway upstairs she’s spooked and uncomfortable. Purring quietly, the feisty cat huddled at Saffire’s feet, finally feeling at home. “Come here precious. Auntie Saffron won’t hurt you.”

Scooping the feline up in her arms she cooed against the silken black fur, leaning in toward JJ. “She’s all alone here, she needs a companion. Maybe we can get her and GiGi together before you leave.”

“Oh my God. Get that filthy thing away from the table. Has she EVER even had a bath? You’re disgusting.” Now incensed at Saffire’s fawning over the alley cat she abhorred, Saffron tugged Hyun Joong up by his arm to follow her from the table.

“I’m taking Joong upstairs to see the reno.”

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