



Perfect Martinis (Sweet Cocktails #12)

Author: *S.L. Sinclair*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: One dream lost. One dream realized. But both may turn out to be nightmares

When Moriah gets an unexpected inheritance from her great-uncle, she decides to fulfill a longtime dream: open her own franchise of Sweet Cock-Tails bar in her favorite city, Seoul.

She just didn't know the money she spent was tainted with blood.

Jeong-ki is a former idol turned detective on the verge of breaking the biggest case of his career. Single-minded, he focuses entirely on work.

Until he lays eyes on the beautiful bar owner at Sweet Cock-Tails.

But when Moriah's family skeletons tumble out of the closet and into Jeong-Ki's lap, could it spell disaster for them both?

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:55 am

Moriah

I drop to my knees before the mafia enforcer in the backroom of my best friend's shitty little bar in the middle of nowhere, Illinois.

It's an old routine by now, ever since the pandemic ended and inflation happened thanks to corporate American greed. Phil has debts, and if I don't voluntarily help him pay them, the Chicago chapter of the kkangpae will force me to "help". Doing this by choice saves me a lot of trouble — and trauma.

Who am I kidding? I don't have a choice. I just pretend I do.

It would help, though, if these men were any good at fucking. At least this guy is one of the easier ones to please. I can ensure he doesn't last three minutes and never has to get inside me.

I usually get the easier end of the stick than Phil, so I don't complain to him. They've accidentally-on-purpose put him in the hospital twice in the past two years.

When I graduated from Seoul National University with a Masters in business, I didn't think I'd wind up like this.

I close my eyes while he ineptly thrusts into my mouth, thinking how it's easy to tell why these men do what they do. Clearly no one would deal with this by choice.

It will be over soon, I chant in my mind. Soon, soon, soon.

Then the door bursts open and another guy comes in.

He practically rips me off Asshole #1's dick and lays me over the back of a rickety chair, lifting my skirt above my waist and tearing my panties off.

"What's your problem?" the first guy asks in Korean.

"You take too long," the second guy replies.

Three minutes is too long?

I don't have more time to think before a large cock penetrates me; I just squeeze my eyes shut and pretend I'm enjoying it. I don't need to make this worse on myself. I just need to survive another day, saving tips until we get enough where Phil can pay off his debts.

Just a little longer.

When it's over, the first guy miraculously lost his erection and they both left, tapping me on the bare ass first.

"See you next week."

"Next..." They only show up monthly!

One of them chuckles. I don't know which and I am not turning around to face them to check.

"He's clearly not paying up fast enough," the other says. "More frequent visits will be required."

The door to the back room shuts and I sink to the floor, my body aching, and start to cry.

* * *

“What the Hell?” I say to Phil at the end of the night, after all the meager patrons have gone home. It’s nearly three am and I have been seething for hours.

He looks at me with pleading dark brown eyes, his lithe frame dusted with bruises clothes can’t hide unless he wears a long-sleeved turtleneck.

“Don’t be mad at me,” he whines, eyes reddening. “I don’t get off any easier than you do.”

I know this. I know he’s as much a victim as I am. But I’m still pissed off and knowledge can’t change emotions.

“I can’t do this once a week,” I say, wiping my eyes. “I fucking can’t. You need to figure something out!”

He throws his arms in the air in defeat. “Like what? Give up my shitty studio apartment so that money can go to the debt every month? Are you willing to make me your roommate? Or sell my car and be fucked to go home because public transportation stops? What do you want me to do, Moriah?”

And at that, he breaks down. “I’ve done all I can.” He slumps down to the sticky floor we still have to clean up and hides his head in his hands as he cries silently.

I’m such a bitch. Unlike him, I chose to stay and help.

Kneeling down, I put my hand on his arm. “I’m sorry. I’m just in pain and scared and

pissed off. I know there's nothing more you can do."

He looks up at me with red, tear-filled eyes. "I can't do this alone, Mori."

"You don't have to. I promise."

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Moriah

The door to Phil's bar bangs open before we are officially ready for business and three of the gang members stand there, grinning.

"You were informed we'd be arriving again this week," one reminds us.

Phil nods, not blinking and also not seeming as intimidated as I knew he actually was. "We know."

Before anyone could say anything else, a harried-looking man in an expensive suit walks in.

"Hello, is one of you Moriah Romano?" he asks. I'm the only woman here, but he seems unsure now that he's walked into a tension-filled room. He's probably hoping I will say no so he can leave.

"Sir, we're not open yet," Phil says, eyes darting to the gang members.

"I'm not here to drink. I need Miss Romano," he insists, opening his briefcase and pulling out a manila envelope. "Would that be you?"

"Yes, but we are in the middle of—"

"My name is Greg Jones, I'm the lawyer for the Sorrento family," he barrels on. "Your mother's side of the family."

Okay, now I'm interested. My mom's parents disowned that side of the family when Mom was a baby.

"Perhaps we should speak privately?" I suggest. I glance at the men. "Let me take care of this."

I'm not surprised when they all nod. Clearly they don't want a lawyer hanging around while they extort us.

I lead Mr. Jones into the backroom, which is just a store room for extra alcohol, along with the table and chairs where I'm usually violated. "Sit, please. If you don't mind, I prefer to stand."

Sitting in this room is the last thing I want to do.

Instead of sitting, he places the file on the table and says, "Your uncle, your late mother's brother, passed away. He left her a small inheritance in his will. Not much, just two million, but since records show she passed away, his executor stated next of kin should receive it."

I think I'm hallucinating. Clearly the medicinal weed gummy I took was way too strong this morning.

"I'm sorry, I think I misheard you. Was that two million ..."

"Dollars. US dollars. It would be a bit under that in euros, which is the currency your uncle used," Jones explains.

"You called it a small inheritance," I comment, my voice wooden.

"Well, compared with what your cousin received, two million may as well be two

pennies,” Jones admits. “Inside there is all the paperwork. If you want a lawyer to ensure this is legitimate, I and the executor in Europe understand. Especially before you fill out the paperwork with your banking information.”

I can’t hold back a bark of laughter. “If you wanted to steal from me, you’d be better off playing the lottery. You have a higher chance of a payout then.”

I take the envelope and pull out the contents, reading them twice.

Two. Million. Dollars.

“Miss Romano?”

“How fast can I receive this?” I ask.

“Fill that out and it will be to you by three pm today.”

I thank him and escort him out.

Poor Phil looks like he’s a stray cat cornered by hungry coyotes as I walk by.

Once I shut the door behind Jones, I turn to the kkangpae.

In Korean, to be better understood and have no margin of error, I say, “I want to make a deal with you gentlemen.”

The leader arches an eyebrow. “Are you insane?”

“Come back after three. I know that’s four hours, but if I don’t have something that’s entirely worth your while ... you can have me for the whole day. Your whole gang. Whatever.”

Phil makes a noise between a gasp and a cough. He probably thinks I'm nuts.

If I didn't know what I know, I'd think the same thing.

They all glance at each other, speaking without words. Then the leader nods. "After three. Oh, tonight is going to be fun as Hell."

When they leave, Phil grabs me by the shirt and says, "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"Calm down!" I scold, moving away from him. "I need you to get proof of what you owe them, then I can explain everything."

A few minutes later, Phil has the shady paperwork for the loan in front of me, as well as what interest is owed. And he sits, downing a few shots of whiskey, as I explain to him what Mr. Jones wanted.

"What if you're wrong?" he asks, eyes watery.

I shrug. "Then I go through more Hell. But the paperwork looked real. I have to believe I finally got a lucky break."

He scoffs. "Luck isn't for people like us."

* * *

"You're related to the Sorrentos?"

Never in a million years would I have guessed the kkangpae's local leader would look like he was ready to soil his jeans at the mention of my dead uncle.

“I am.”

He seems more interested in that than he does the money I’m willing to wire him to pay off Phil’s debt. Interesting.

“How did this not make its way to us?” he asks Phil, eyes hard.

“Don’t blame him,” I defend. “My mom’s side of the family was estranged from the Sorrentos. I had no idea who anyone was beyond seeing the name on old documents I went through when Mom passed. I didn’t feel the need to ever mention it.

“Why? Who was this Mr. Sorrento?” My mom’s older half-brother, apparently.

“The Sorrentos are the biggest mafia family in the world. Not just Sicily, or here in Chicago. Everywhere. They even have their hands in Seoul and Busan,” the leader explains. Suddenly, he’s treating me with respect. As if he didn’t assault me a few days ago.

Oh. Well.

That’s news to me.

“Clearly, I had no idea.”

The leader nods. “That’s obvious. The question now is, what are you going to do?”

“I want to pay off Phil’s debt. I want to leave this city and move back to Seoul, where I went to university. And last, I want to open my own bar. I always dreamed of owning a bar in Gangnam,” I admit.

The leader pauses, appearing to think. “Nearly a million dollars to us, the rest to start

the business. You're sure?"

I nod. "I want my friend out of debt and protected. And I want to live my dream. I don't need anything else."

The leader glances at Phil as I speak.

"All right. On one condition. You allow the kkangpae there in Seoul to use the bar for trades and occasional gambling events. It's illegal there, and we always appreciate the places that protect us," the leader says.

I bristle at "trades". "Not people."

"What?"

"Trades. I won't be part of human trafficking."

The leader laughs as if I'm a sideshow act. "No, sweetheart. Trades as in inanimate products. Not humans. Now, do we have a deal?"

He holds his hand out and I tentatively take it.

"Deal."

* * *

Phil was put out by my leaving, but I couldn't stay in Chicago anymore. Not only did I always intend on moving back to Seoul, I had more reasons to now: to get away from the awful memories at his bar.

Despite being a chain, all Sweet Cock-Tails bars are independently operated, we just

have to pay a licensing fee to use the name. Since that's what Phil's was, it seems right to make mine a Sweet Cock-Tails, too. The first and only in Seoul.

Smoothing over the volatile rift between the Sicilians and the kkangpae won't happen overnight, but my distant family has no qualms with me bridging a gap and working with the kkangpae, but I was given a warning.

"Whatever you do," my cousin Isabella Sorrento tells me over the phone, "if it backfires, it backfires on you and you only. We won't be getting in the middle of it."

"You won't have to," I promise.

She scoffs. "You better hope so. It's your funeral ... literally."

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Jeong-Ki

I must be cursed with shitty bosses.

My new one here at the Special Forces headquarters is as much of a dick as my old manager used to be, and that's saying something.

An employee, be it an officer or an idol, should be given a modicum of respect, right? Not called stupid and lazy and good for nothing every time they turn around.

At least, unlike my old manager and label, I know this one isn't entrenched in drug money. You can't get anywhere in power and not be into shady shit, but this guy managed, and that's why I don't transfer out.

"Lazy fuck, stop daydreaming and get into my office," he barks at me, making me jump.

"Yes, Sergeant Kim-ssi," I mutter. I wasn't daydreaming. I was merely lamenting to myself how I have the worst luck in the world. What's that Sicilian curse? Malocchio? I think someone put it on me, because no matter how well I do and how hard I try, nothing is ever good enough.

I am never good enough.

Yet the media used to call me perfect.

Inside the office, he glares at me before my phone beeps.

“Sent you your next assignment. The last thing we need are the Italians coming here and getting buddy-buddy with the kkangpae. They give us enough trouble.

“If you can’t get proof of the drugs, then find a way to prove the gambling I know goes on there. By any means necessary.”

When the Sergeant says that, I know he means it.

And I will. No matter if it’s learning hard choreography in a day or catching a drug runner, I always give it my all.

And I always succeed.

I go to my computer and look at the file on the owner of Sweet Cock-Tails. A woman two years older than me, from America, of Sicilian descent, who recently came into an inheritance from a mafia kingpin.

Her record is clean. She studied at SNU, went back home, and now came here once she got her money.

How did she wind up entrenched with the kkangpae? They don’t randomly go after people, especially not foreign business owners.

Well, it doesn’t matter the why or how. All that matters is I stake out the bar, maybe talk to the owner or other employees, and give them all just enough rope to hang themselves.

I’m kind, charismatic, and I was an idol. I know I’m handsome. Those things combined have helped me more in my police career than they did when I actually was an idol.

Plus, I'm going to get paid to have a drink (just one, so I don't stand out). Can't complain.

Sweet Cock-Tails is located in Gangnam, the trendiest area of Seoul. Currently, one of the biggest pop stars in the world is having a huge exhibition in the area, so every bar and restaurant is packed, and this one is no exception.

It will be difficult to spot any bad behavior tonight, but good for me not to be noticed. I can check the employees out from afar, map out the bar, check for back rooms and hidden exits.

The bar is tastefully done in black and blue tones, with splashes of silver. Very much my style. Minimalist but makes an impression.

I manage to grab a seat at the bar, figuring it will be a while, so I turn my back to it to scan the place.

"Annyeonghasayeo," a soft voice says, making me jump and turn back around. I didn't expect a bartender to approach so fast.

For the first time in years, I'm tongue-tied at the woman standing before me.

Her skin is moonlight-pale, her long dark hair done up in a bun, and her dark eyes sparkle in the low lighting. Every dip and curve of her body that I can see is being hugged within a skintight black dress.

I shake myself and return her greeting.

"What can I get you this evening?" she asks, her eyes not leaving mine.

"Perfect martini," I say in English. An old joke, based on my old self: "Perfect

Junggi”, my stage name.

Her pink-painted lips turn up in a smirk. “Perfect martini it is.”

When she returns, I pay instead of starting a tab.

“I hope you’ll return,” she says when she sees I won’t be staying long.

Giving her my best “fansign” smile, I reply, “Oh, you’ll be seeing a lot of me.”

* * *

I return twice a week for the next two weeks, not wanting to seem conspicuous. Each time, the beautiful bartender serves me and I try to talk to her, but they are always busy enough where she can’t stay for a chat.

I use the time to see where people seem to vanish to a back room, likely the gambling setup, unless she holds it here in the main room when they claim to be closed.

But most Sweet Cock-Tails bars have hidden rooms. For gambling, drugs, sex ... could be anything. Each owner has their own enjoyment.

Apparently, third week is the charm as I enter the bar at my usual time to find it half empty.

“JK,” the bartender greets me. I did manage to give her my name last time, though I am shocked she remembers it.

“Forgive me, I never got your name,” I tell her as I sit at the bar.

“Moriah.”

Moriah. That's the owner. Shit, she's the owner?

Well.

My job just got a Hell of a lot more interesting.

"Is this your bar?" I ask, and she nods. "Why Seoul? Sorry, I don't mean to be rude. I just ... am curious about a lot of things."

She smiles at me and brings me my perfect martini before pouring herself a shot of plum soju. "I studied here at university and fell in love with the city. And K-dramas." Her cheeks tint pink, matching her lips now, and I wonder if her nipples are the same shade.

Focus, you twit, I scold myself.

We talk a little about Seoul, she tells me about Chicago, where I was twice on tour. I do love the pizza, and she says she can make it at home.

"Really? Is that an offer?" I ask, arching an eyebrow.

"Do you want it to be?" she retorts.

I wonder if she's a good actress, or if she doesn't recognize me from my idol days. She lived here while my group was still active.

"I'd like it, yeah," I reply.

She grins. "We close at two."

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Moriah

Am I totally insane to be flirting with this guy who looks like a model? Seriously, I don't do this. Ever. And I thought I swore off men after the shit I went through in Chicago, but it seems like my libido is speaking over my common sense.

I mean, he's stunning! Any woman would want him to be interested in them. Any man, too, or any gender in between. He's got this gorgeous chiseled jaw, deep black eyes, styled black hair, and the sweetest smile I have ever seen. A Roman profile, which you don't see often here in Korea, and I admit I checked out his ass one day as he walked away.

Man knows his way around a squat machine.

I can bet money he's an ex-idol or ex-trainee. I don't really go for K-pop, but even I can appreciate beauty when I see it.

When he returns as we close down, I ensure my staff can handle cleanup, triple check no one is in the gambling room, and then I approach him.

"I'm glad you came back."

His smile is sweet, sincere. His eyes, however, are shrewd and full of mischief. "Oh, I still have to come, jagi. And so do you."

That should have been a cheap, stupid line, but said in his low, sweet voice? Yeah. My whole body shivers. He looks like a man who knows how to please his partners,

and I am more than ready to find out.

“Then let’s go. My place or yours?” he asks.

“I live upstairs,” I admit.

“Well, then, we’re in luck. Lead the way.”

I take his hand and led him upstairs, unlocking my door and letting us inside.

We barely make it to the bedroom before he pushes me against the wall.

He grabs my hair in his hand and turns my head to meet my lips. The kiss is rough and slightly desperate; his teeth tug at my lip and break my skin. I can taste my blood and I pull him closer for more.

His hands let me go and move to the hem of my dress. He pulls it off of me so quickly, part of it rips under his hands. I honestly could care less. When he has me naked, I start to feel a bit self-conscious. I’m not bad looking, but I don’t look like these beautiful girls on TV here in Korea. Not even close.

He steps back to take all of me in, every curve and every angle.

“Beautiful,” he says, his hands brushing over my breasts and lightly flicking the nipples under his thumbs. I take a deep breath. He changes tactics, then lightly pinches them. When he sees what must be the unbridled lust in my eyes, he pinches harder and I moan. “You like that?” he asks and I nod.

He moves, lifting me as if I am as light as a feather, and places me on my large, white bed. The sheets are cool and soft under my bare skin. I recline and look up to watch as he slowly removes his clothes, performing a new act of torture.

I take in every inch of honey skin that is bare before me, trying to memorize every part of him, from the way his abs ripple like a swimmer's, to the little mole on his left pec, to the thin happy trail leading down to an impressive cock with a Jacob's ladder piercing.

He moves like a cat, climbing onto the bed and holding himself above me, making sure he doesn't touch me, the sadistic bastard. The way his eyes look as he stares down at me is predatory, and it sends shivers down my spine.

He dips his head and his jaw brushes against my chest before he moves and I feel his hot tongue press against one of my nipples. He licks them both before he bites one and I jump from the pain. No one ever did that before, and I am kinda surprised to find that I like it.

He moves up to bite and suck at my neck, tasting my skin as if he needs it to live. His hands hold my waist tightly, hard enough to bruise, and one of them starts tracing my skin, down my stomach and to my thigh, skirting my dripping wet core and driving me insane. The pain of the bites and the gentleness of his hand are disparately dazzling and I need more .

"Have patience, jagi," he whispered, "and you will be rewarded."

With that, one long finger presses against me and I eagerly part my legs farther. He caresses my clit with one finger, teasing me, before he slips it inside. He begins to stroke me slowly, lazily.

"More," I groan.

He smirks. "You think you can command me? Very well, then. You'll get what you asked for." He slips in a second finger, and even I can tell how tight I feel compared with the size of his hand.

Thrusting his fingers in a bit faster, I can't help but moan.

"Is that better?" he asks.

"Ah ... wipe that smirk from your face and keep going," I snap, barely able to get the words out properly.

He pinches a nipple again, hard. "You don't get to boss me around. I will punish you."

"Did you ever think that that was what I wanted?" I ask.

His teeth graze a nipple and he replies, "Ask and you shall receive." He moves himself lower onto the bed and I feel his hot tongue brush against my clit, sending shockwaves all through my body.

I arch my hips without thinking about it, giving him easier access to all of me. He inserts a third finger, stretching me wider than ever as his tongue, lips and teeth continue their pleasurable assault on my clit. It goes on for a few minutes, until my body climaxes with a shudder, and I cry out his name as he laps my juices with his tongue.

As I pant, flat on my back, he sits up, smiling down at me, smug at his performance.

Dastardly. I saw stars.

He taps my cheek to get my attention and he moves me into a sitting position on the bed, ready to get his own pleasure.

"I hope you're ready. What I have done so far is nothing compared to how rough I will be from here on out."

That should have made another woman run out the door, but not me. His hinted depravity only excites me more, and I don't understand why. I watch him give his long cock a few strokes, not that it needs to get any harder as it juts from his lean hips.

He tilts my head and slowly pushes his cock past my lips and down my throat. He starts out slow and easy, acclimating me to the feeling. I absolutely need the time to adjust. The last men were not as, um, gifted as Jeong-Ki.

He tastes like salt and desire and I savor him as he starts to go faster, deeper into my throat until I gasp around him, choking but loving it at the same time, tears coming to my eyes. For someone who hates being controlled and told what to do, his complete control over me turns me on like no other. He keeps treating me like a toy, like I belong to him to play with, and maybe I do.

He pulls out of my mouth without letting me taste him. "Good girl," he says, again biting the sensitive tip of my ear and giving my neck a bit more attention, physically marking me.

Placing a hand to my chest, he unceremoniously shoves her back. "Still wet from before?" he asks, and I nod. "Still sore?" Again, a nod. "Think you can come again?"

"I don't know," I reply honestly. My willing partners were never this good, and the gang members who used me never made me come.

"Hmph. Whether you think you can or not, you will," he says, positioning himself over me, suspended on his muscular arms.

I look up into his ink black eyes, which have darkened even more with lust. He watches my expression as his tip teases my entrance, barely pushing the opening. "Tell me, is this what you want, Moriah?"

“Yes,” I reply.

A sharp tug on my hair. “Yes what?”

I smirk. “Yes, sir .”

“Better.” And with that he inserts himself inside of me, making me stretch around him. I moan, spurring him on, slowly at first to get me used to his girth inside of me and to find a rhythm he likes. Each thrust makes me wetter and wetter, easing my pain, until he picks up his speed and ferocity.

He makes me gasp with every thrust, every grind of his hips against mine, and every moan he lets out as my muscles suck him in. I put my hands on his shoulders but he moves them and pins them above my head, making me immobile.

He looks down into my eyes again; his filled with passion, lust and something dark and deep. “You are mine, Moriah Romano. Mine.”

I nod, unsure if I'm losing my mind. But I want to be his. “I am yours,” I gasp as his thrust hits a spot that makes me see stars.

He seats himself deep within me, staying in there. I feel his heartbeat and pulse in time with mine.

“No matter what, you will always be mine.” Each word was punctuated with a deep, hard thrust.

“Oh, Jeong-Ki, yes I am ... yours ... ah!” He finds that spot again, and he keeps hitting it with every thrust as my orgasm builds.

“That’s it. Come. Come for me,” he coaxes. His silky, dark voice combined with his

hard cock inside of me pushes me over the edge and I come around him, harder than before, squirting my juices on my silken sheets and coating him as he thrusts a few more times before he released his seed in me, truly claiming me as his.

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Moriah

When I wake up, the shower is running. My whole body feels like I got put through the toughest workout known to man. I relish the ache. Just thinking about how good Jeong-Ki felt inside me makes me want more.

I don't know what I was thinking last night, saying yes.

I'm glad I did.

For a minute I wait for regret to seep in, but nothing changes. I'm just sore and happy as Hell.

The bed next to me is still warm, so it hasn't been long since JK got up. I stand as well, wanting to start a pot of coffee before I take my turn in the shower.

Fuck, even my hips hurt. I didn't know that was a thing. That causes me to stumble and I see I accidentally kicked JK's jeans.

I bend to pick them and all our other clothes up off the floor when something heavy falls to the ground.

A gun.

He has a gun.

My whole body freezes.

Why does he have a mother fucking gun?

A wallet slipped out too, so I bend to pick that up, half-wondering if I let a gang member or random crazy person into my house, into me.

He has a Special Forces badge.

Officer San Jeong-Ki. Seoul precinct. Organized crime.

My intuition isn't always right; I've made some mistakes in the past. But right now I have a bad, bad feeling.

His phone is still in his other pocket, and it's locked but it shows previews of messages.

One is from someone he calls "Sergeant Dickhead".

"Did you find anything on Romano?"

There's more but it's cut off. I've seen all I needed to, however.

Hurt tears rise to my eyes and I blink them back. Men don't deserve to make me cry anymore.

How could I have been so stupid? Lured in by pretty eyes and a charming smile?

He fucked me to get more information on the bar, on me, likely on all my illegal doings that I don't have a fucking choice but to do. I can't risk a gang war between the Sicilians and kkangpae.

Bastard. Utter bastard.

I didn't ask for this life. I'm just trying to survive.

The water shuts off and I don't know what to do. I can't pretend I saw nothing when his gun and wallet are clearly on the floor.

A moment later, he exits my bathroom and walks into the bedroom. A towel is wrapped around his waist, and water droplets cling to his defined abs. His hair is slicked back, wet, and he looks like he belongs in a movie.

"Uh-oh. What happened?" His eyes glance from me to his gun on the floor, and his phone in my hand.

"You didn't think to mention your job?" I ask.

"What? That I used to be an idol?" he says smoothly. I mean, that's probably true. He looks it. But that's clearly not what I'm talking about.

"Don't act like I'm stupid." I shove his phone at his chest. "All I wanted was to tidy your clothes and a fucking gun and badge fell out!"

"So, you also stole my phone because of that?" He arches an eyebrow.

"Maybe I shouldn't have but I had to know if you were a psycho. Maybe the badge was fake," I say. "But no. You're investigating me. Pretending not to know who I am. What did you think? You could make me come a few times and I'd tell you all my dirty secrets ... not that I have any?"

He steps closer and I compensate by taking a step back, but now I'm backed against the end table by the bed.

"Maybe my visiting the bar started out as work. Last night... Last night wasn't work."

His eyes are sincere but how can I trust him?

I shake my head. "You still weren't honest with me. For all I know, you could've got up in the night and went snooping through all my things!"

"I didn't."

He steps closer and I have nowhere to run.

"Get out." I want to be assertive but my voice is barely a whisper.

He grins, bending to pick up his gun and my whole body freezes.

"Are you sure you are angry? Or are you turned on just a little?"

The safety is on. I keep repeating that in my mind as he drags the cold metal down my face, my neck, my breast, all the way until it presses against my pussy.

I take a shuddering breath and he laughs.

"That's not fear in your eyes. Why would I turn you in now? I like you like this. We could even have an arrangement..."

"No." My voice rises in volume, but only a little. "Get out. Don't ever come back. You found nothing on me, on my bar. You have no basis for a warrant. And if you return, it'll be the last thing you ever do."

The gun presses against my swollen clit before he withdraws it. "Fine, jagiya. But you haven't seen the last of me. I'll prove it to you: I don't want to put you in jail."

I'm silent, watching as he gets dressed, and I throw on my robe to see him leave. To

ensure he doesn't sneak around downstairs.

I'm so glad Sweet Cock-Tails is closed today.

I need to get my head on straight. Plus I have a meeting with the kkangpae. They have money to collect.

After that, honestly? I don't know what to do. Do I tell them about Jeong-Ki? They'll go after him if I do...

My conscience tells me to get rid of Jeong-Ki, but my gut tells me otherwise. Or maybe that's my bleeding heart. I don't know which.

I hate the way the kkangpae make themselves at home. They did it to Phil, and they do it here too.

As soon as the four of them arrive, they're behind the bar, making drinks, making a mess.

I settle up the money quickly, hoping they'll leave, but they linger, insisting I drink with them. Maybe if I have one, they'll go.

After I've had half the glass of vodka and tonic, one of them turns to me, a smile on his face I recognize all too well.

"So, Moriah-ya," he says casually, "we noticed you had an overnight guest last night."

"I'm sorry, is my sex life your business too?" I quip.

They all laugh as if I said the funniest thing ever uttered.

"Well... No," another one comments. "But it is when it's a cop. A well-known co, to boot. I do wonder how an idol became an officer, don't you?"

I stand up and my legs get weak.

"What the Hell?" I say grabbing the bartop before one of the men grab me from behind.

"Officer San Jeong-Ki and the woman who tried getting into our city using the Sicilians' blood money," the first man says. "What star-crossed lovers."

"I kicked him out!" I say. I feel frantic, but my body is sluggish.

They drugged me.

"I love this business, I wouldn't do anything to compromise it!"

One shrugs as he throws me to the floor. "Maybe. Maybe not. But we have to send you, and him, a loud and clear message."

I can't move. Even my eyes are getting blurry. The only upside here is maybe I'll pass out before they hurt me.

I know if I fight, I'll make it worse on myself. But laying here passive makes me livid.

My clothes tear, just enough to expose all the important parts to them.

The first man mounts me and pushes inside with no resistance, even as I do attempt to move and buck him off me. Even if I wasn't drugged, I wouldn't be able to do much damage. The second man holds my head and shoves his cock down my throat, while

the other two look on, stroking themselves.

I'm trying to fight. To stay awake and alert. To not give in. But it's so hard; the drug wants to take me under, while self-preservation won't let my brain turn off.

The first man finishes in me and the one in my mouth takes his place, while another replaces him down my throat.

Distantly, though I know it's only a few feet away, logically, there comes a clang and the sound of glass breaking.

Then bullets.

Four.

One by one, the bodies of the men drop to the floor, while blood splatters me from the two who were abusing me.

Each man has an identical bullet hole in his head.

My vision swims as I try to stand, in case whoever this is wants to kill me too.

I don't want to die like this.

A shadow looms over me and Jeong-Ki is there, though hazy.

"Jagi," he says, looking me over. "It's okay. You're safe now. I've got you."

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:55 am

Jeong-Ki

Moriah passes out in my bed the moment I lay her down. Her face is streaked with tears, her clothes under my coat, which I wrapped her in, are mere rags. I can't leave her like this, but even when I shout she doesn't properly wake. Just whines and turns onto her back, making my coat fall away. The drugs they slipped her combined with the trauma are taking effect.

I need to take samples of whatever the men left in her too. I can't take her to the hospital for a rape kit, because I'd have to file an official report, and that could incriminate her.

Despite my orders, despite what she thinks, despite what my boss thinks ... I can't send her to jail. I can't do that to her. What she said the other night, about never being able to be in control, about dealing with devils ... it stuck with me.

When did I ever have control? When have I ever not been dealing with devils?

Moriah and I are too much alike. No one should go through what we have been through. Ever. And yet...

I have to protect her. Job be damned.

I roll her off my coat and toss it behind me as I go into the bathroom to get something to clean her up.

First I cut the filthy, torn clothes off of her and toss them aside. She can wear one of

my t-shirts.

The dirt and dust from the floor wipe off easy enough.

I cringe at the sticky come leaking from inside her, stuck to her thighs. Not only do I hate that she was violated, I hate that another man touched her. That should be me and only me.

Only I can mark her as mine. Now that I've had a taste, I can't let her go, can't let anyone else have her.

She's mine.

And deep down, she knows it too.

I clean her quickly, leaving the washcloth as evidence.

I adjust myself in my jeans; I've been shamefully half hard since I was in that shady apartment and heard Moriah's cries. Now, touching her, having her vulnerable in my home, my jeans are starting to get painful.

Gently, I lean over her and run my fingers along her slit. Her hips shift, as if somewhere in her sleep, she can still feel me. I rub a little, enough to make her start to get wet, before I start to strip off.

This isn't wrong.

She's mine. Her body knows it.

Suspended over her, I kiss her face, then her neck, then take her nipple in my mouth, while I gently begin to push inside her.

Her little whimper as she seems to feel me enter makes me almost ready to come like I'm a teenager. I hold myself still for a moment, then move more, watching her peaceful, sleeping face.

Her body lets me in, lets me have her, and she is all I want. All I need.

And then her eyes flutter open. Still dazed, but awake.

“JK?”

“Shh,” I whisper, kissing her face as I keep moving inside her. “Let me erase all the evidence of those fuckers.”

Nodding, she keeps her hazy eyes on me until her body takes over, sensation winning out over exhaustion, and she comes with soft, quiet cries.

I follow her over the edge a moment later, filling her with my seed, claiming her.

“Mine,” I rasp in her ear and she makes a tiny sound of agreement. Gently rolling off of her, I pull her to me and she buries her face in my chest.

“You’re safe,” I assure her. “I’ve got you.”

“Do you?” she wonders, her voice wet with tears and hesitant.

“I do. And I promise I will never let go.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:55 am

Moriah

“I promise I will never let go.”

Jeong-Ki’s words ring in my mind as he goes out on the balcony to have a cigarette. I can’t quite believe them, but my heart tells me to try. To trust one more time. Sure, he lied to me at first. Maybe he’s not the gentlest. But even so, I’d like him to be mine.

If we survive all this, that is.

Even through the closed glass door that leads to the balcony, I can’t miss his shouted cursing and the sharp thud that hits the wall nearest me.

It wasn’t a gunshot, but my heart leaps into my throat anyway and I rush over to the doors. There’s something ... is that an arrow? Someone shot a damn arrow at him?

I open the door to ask and he keeps shaking his head, staring at it.

“It’s turning into Lord of the damn Rings in here,” he says, putting the cigarette out in an ashtray he has hidden by some bushes that line all the balconies, even ones this high up. “Get me some gloves, please. Top dresser drawer in the walk-in closet. The dresser is closest to the door.”

I go back into the bedroom and go into the closet, which is massive. It could fit my whole Chicago apartment inside I think. No wonder he had to specify which dresser, as there are four, plus two shoe racks, and the rails on which hang suits, shirts, tees, jackets, and more. All designer.

I find the gloves quickly and bring them to him so he can pick the arrow up.

There's something attached to it. Paper. He places the arrow carefully next to the ashtray and unrolls the paper.

"It's in Korean, but whoever wrote this isn't a native with Hangul, or they want us to think they're not," he muses. "The handwriting is stiff."

I lean over his shoulder to look at it and even my fairly meh Hangul is more natural than this. Was it deliberate to throw us off a scent, or is the person who sent it not Korean?

"They're using English grammar," I comment.

Jeong-Ki shakes his head. "I can't read this. Can you?"

I take the paper from him, holding it with the edge of his shirt I'm still wearing, and read this butchery of the Korean language.

"You thought you escaped to another country, what you didn't realize was you played right into our plans.

"Time is ticking, and your ex-idol boyfriend can't save your pathetic ass, no matter how tough he thinks he is now. He's still just a pathetic child."

I pause after I'm done reading, confused. Why does this letter sound like whoever sent this is actually after Jeong-Ki? I look up at him to ask when I see his big eyes grow even wider as gears turn in his head.

"They're not after me," I say quietly. "This whole thing with the kkangpae ... It has nothing to do with me."

He shakes his head, not in disagreement but as if he wants to clear it. Black bangs move like a dog shaking off rain.

“He used to call me that,” Jeong-Ki whispers, more to himself than to me.

“Come again?”

“Pathetic little child,” Jeong-Ki nearly spits. “Our old manager used to call me that whenever I had an issue with another member in the group, usually the same little prick. He—” He pauses to look at me. “You literally know nothing about BurntUp, do you?”

“Not a thing. Sorry.”

“Our label had big plans for us and while usually in K-pop, management and label are one, our label outsourced our management to someone in the US. Stefan Lear. He used to work with one of the biggest US music managers, but they parted ways and he had his own company.

“He was a colossal jerk. Especially to me. I was the workhorse. Spent extra time in the studio polishing up tracks while the other two vocalists didn’t have to — not that they could have anyway — and yet it was never enough.

“We had a pretty big break coming in the west. He was counting on us to make him millions of dollars and billions of won. But I had a breakdown.

“Between him and the one member, I lost my mind. Pil-Sung, the member who always pissed me off, crossed a line and I was done. I quit, relinquished most of my assets to pay for the broken contract, and hid until I decided to join the Special Forces.

“The last thing Lear said to me was, ‘You will pay for this, you pathetic little child.’ ”

Jeong-Ki’s hands shake and I reach out and hold them both in mine, thumb rubbing across the scar on his knuckles.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper.

“I’m not a victim,” he says. “Don’t pity me.”

Pursing my lips, I reply, “I can be sorry you were under a bad contract, with a manager who didn’t care about you, with a bandmate who drove you to literal insanity. It’s not pity to acknowledge that you went through things that, on the surface, may have looked like your choosing but were the results of one choice that snowballed and got out of your control.”

He squeezes my hands, silent for a moment. The humid summer breeze wafts in the air, and the city noises are faint in the distance.

“No one ever said that.”

“Said what?”

“That it wasn’t my fault, or my choice. Everyone kept saying, ‘Obviously he chose that path,’ when every fucking thing after I signed a contract would’ve resulted in penalties if I fought them. I didn’t have a choice; they just made it look like I did,” he admits. He looks up and meets my eyes. “Thank you, jagiya.”

I melt a little inside at that endearment and can’t help but kiss him.

Trust me, you would too.

When I pull away he shakes the paper in his free hand. “Let me get the arrow too. I’ll still run everything for prints but I’m pretty sure we got our guy. Now we just need to find him.”

The last part of the sentence hangs in the air, unspoken.

“Find him ... and kill him.”

* * *

While Jeong-Ki was at the police headquarters, I settled at my computer to research Stefan Lear, music mogul whose career nosedived when Jeong-Ki quit. It’s evident some people on social media dislike Jeong-Ki a lot, despite the fact his career ended a decade ago.

“He couldn’t handle that PS was going to be more famous,” someone wrote.

“More famous?” another replied. “That flop can’t sing; if anyone tanked Lear and his company, it was him and that screeching gasp he gives at every high note.”

I assume PS means Pil-Sung, the member Jeong-Ki mentioned earlier.

I read more, mostly opinion pieces, but many truth bombs are dropped in those. The psychological torment, whispers of physical and sexual abuse against Jeong-Ki, and the fact that the group’s fans always would push it under the rug.

“HE IS FINE. THIS IS HIS CHOSEN FAMILY!” their largest online fanbase wrote right before Jeong-Ki quit. “STOP MALIGNING HIS CHOICES.”

Maybe if you people stuck up for him instead of believing pretty lies, he wouldn’t have had a breakdown, I think as I scroll. I skip over anything about the group that

doesn't include the manager. If I never cared about them before, I certainly don't now.

Lear shut down all his socials after this Pil-Sung person failed as a soloist in both Korea and the west, and there are a ton of people with his name in America, and none in South Korea anymore.

Then I see a thread from a sasaeng, which is basically a stalker, who used to follow Jeong-Ki specifically.

"That motherfucker Stefan Lear got all Jeong-Ki's money and assets and now lives nice and cushy in the Gold Coast of Chicago, in a mansion near the lake."

Chicago? The bastard lives in my hometown? I don't know why that bothers me, but it does. He doesn't deserve to live in Chicago.

Hell, he doesn't deserve to live.

My phone rings; it's Jeong-Ki.

"I found him," I say without greeting. "Well, almost."

He chuckles. "I got his address, jagi. The prints on the letter came back a small-time kkangpae wannabe. It took some polite persuasion, but he gave me Lear's address and phone number in Chicago."

"So ... road trip? Or are you going to insist on playing by the rules and being polite?"

Jeong-Ki scoffs. "Okay, I deserve that. Fuck the rules. Those went out the window when I saw you attacked. Let's go."

In the end, we decide to book separate flights, just since it seems like he's having us watched.

Incheon has three flights to Chicago the next day, arriving within 5 hours of each other. I take the early one, Jeong-Ki will take the later one. Meet up at a hotel he booked under an assumed name, while we each have to waste money and book separate hotels under other names in different parts of the state.

"You have a town called Sandwich?" Jeong-Ki asks, wrinkling his nose.

"The UK has a place called Twatt. I think they win," I quip, making him laugh. He really has the cutest laugh ... if you ignore the fact he's likely insane.

I admit, I missed Chicago. I love this place, despite feeling more at home in Seoul. When you grew up somewhere so iconic, it's in your blood forever. Maybe, when this is all over with, I can have Jeong-Ki here for a small vacation.

The time difference is brutal, and when I get to the hotel, I fall fast asleep without even changing my clothes or showering.

An unknown amount of time later, the bed dips, waking me.

My heart hits my throat, and I forget I was waiting for someone to arrive. Hell, the sleep was so deep, I forgot I traveled at all. In my mind, there should be no one in my apartment, and I can either freeze or fight.

The old me would've fought, and after what just happened to me, my body wants to freeze, to let panic take over.

I can't let it.

Rolling over, I bring my knee up, hoping to hit something, while I use the other pillow to try and smother the person, or at least startle them.

Who thinks a person will get attacked with a pillow, right?

A man coughs and curses in Korean, and that's when I recognize his voice.

"Oh shit, Jeong-Ki!" I sit straight up, dropping the pillow, and realize I kneed him right where it hurts. "Why would you sneak up on me like that?"

"I thought it would be cute..." He coughs. "To surprise you with a kiss, like the movies."

"This isn't fucking Sailor Moon ; I was ready to suffocate you!" I cry, but at the same time I can't help the laugh that escapes.

"I'd rather be suffocated right now," he admits, leaning on his back and groaning. "Is my misery really that amusing to you?"

I nod as I giggle. "Sorry, I needed this laugh before we continue," I say, leaning over to kiss his cheek. "I didn't mean to harm your future children."

"Our future children," he mutters, turning over. "I think I can breathe again without agony."

"Good," I reply, choosing to ignore his mildly possessive response a second ago. I begin to stand when a strong hand grips the back of my neck, pulling me back down to face him.

His black eyes glitter as he whispers, "You will pay for that later."

Shivers dance on my skin and I reply, "I'm looking forward to it."

He lets me up finally and I take the liberty of ordering food for us. There's a chance we may not get the upper hand against Lear, and I'd rather die with a full stomach.

"How do you think he did it?" I ask as I spear my tteokbokki with a toothpick.

Jeong-Ki looks over at me. "Did what, exactly?"

"I mean, somehow he organized it so, if I paid off my friend's debt to the local kkangpae, I'd have to leave since my inheritance came from the Sicilians. Or was it serendipity that I did that and he heard about it somehow -- likely via the kkangpae -- and got lucky?" I wonder. "It feels like we are missing a key element here that connects me to you."

Jeong-Ki nods, slurping some japchae. "That is why my sergeant was sure you were running this whole thing. There's something we're missing here on how he found you and tailed you from here to Seoul, knowing you'd get embroiled in the kkangpae again, and knowing that was my division."

I pause. "He could've found your division from a sasaeng. Some still follow you."

He groans. "Don't remind me."

"It's how he found me and tracked me. Do we think the kkangpae were paid off to tip him off for anyone going to Seoul he could manipulate remotely?" I wonder.

"That's such a crapshoot," he muses. "But then Lear was never a smart man. He got lucky and came up with half-baked ideas that somehow paid off -- usually because of me."

I don't believe in coincidences whatsoever. Plus, it would've been easier to just look for someone already in Seoul. When we find Lear, I plan on interrogating him. Not only is he psycho enough to want to track down and hurt Jeong-Ki, he's also apparently manipulated my business to do so, as well as stalked me.

Sorry, buddy, I used to be nice. Not anymore.

* * *

After dinner, we head to Lear's lakeside mansion; the home he bought with all of Jeong-Ki's money. Bastard.

"He has a typical security system. All we have to do is jam the signals and he won't know what hit him," Jeong-Ki says.

"Suddenly you really don't give a shit about the rules, huh?" I comment.

"Not after how I rescued you," he replies.

You neglect to mention how turned on you were even while you rescued me, I think.

He takes his phone out and presses something on an app. "Make sure you have a data connection in case you need it on your phone. Our Wi-Fi receptors are also going to be affected."

"Are we sure he won't be expecting us? I mean, we both did leave Korea pretty quickly," I say, doubt creeping in.

Jeong-Ki grins. "You don't seem to fully grasp that Stefan is a grade-A fuckwit with money for brains. If anything, he thinks you left after what happened to you. Which, by the way, you really should've been seen at a hospital."

I wave a hand as if to wave away his concerns. “I need the person who did this to me dead, Jeong-Ki. That’s all I need. All the years of helping clean up after the bodies were gone from behind the bar I used to work at made me pretty desensitized. So just pray I get to enjoy this.”

He regards me for a minute, dark eyes calculating what I said. Then he nods. “Let’s go.”

A window is open and the sounds of a man cursing heavily hit my ears.

“Fucking shit ass... They told me to hook it all up to the Net. It will work fucking perfect. Now I’m even in the damn dark, these fucking tech cunts...”

Even his lamps were running on Wi-Fi? What a pretentious prick.

As were his locks.

Jeong-Ki turns the knob on what would, historically, be the servants’ entrance and the door easily swings open. We walk into a darkened hallway, but it’s short, and the lights from the outside give us enough illumination to see by.

And it’s easy to find Lear. His voice echoes in the large house as he bumps into something and curses.

Jeong-Ki picks up a long, thin decorative vase along the way, and one doesn’t have to be a genius to know what he’s going to use it for as he holds it like a baseball bat.

We enter an office, where Stefan is bent over a router, muttering and cursing. I clear my throat to get his attention.

He leaps to his feet, startled, but I can only see shadows as Jeong-Ki immediately

whacks him in the head with the vase, creating a dull thunking sound. Stefan stumbles and falls to the ground, but this isn't a movie, and he's not unconscious.

Quickly, Jeong-Ki removes his belt and I do the same, so we can secure his hands and feet.

We need answers before we kill him.

"Teamwork," Jeong-Ki comments, giving me a fist-bump. He grabs Stefan's phone from his pocket and takes it before he gets his phone and turns the Wi-Fi back on, along with the lights.

Stefan, already dazed from the hit, groans and squints in the light. Then his eyes focus on us.

"Looks like I have visitors. Jeong-Ki, you know better than to hurt your elders."

Jeong-Ki punches him so hard in the diaphragm it makes me wince. "You're older, that doesn't mean you ever get to demand respect from me, you cockroach."

Stefan coughs and grins up at me this time. "You look surprisingly well considering what you went through three days ago. I was supposed to get the footage. But your little boyfriend didn't leave anyone alive to get it to me."

Fucking monster.

I reach my leg out and kick him square in the face with my heavy boot, and the crack that follows is so satisfying, as is the mess of blood now running from his shattered nose.

Jeong-Ki gives me another fist bump.

“Here’s how this is gonna go, okay? You’re already a dead man. So you being a stubborn boomer isn’t gonna help you. So, you’re going to tell me what this is all about. You got Jeong-Ki’s money. You don’t know me. So how did you decide to tail me once I got to Seoul, and why still go after Jeong-Ki? What’s in it for you?”

He spits out blood and a tooth. Guess I hurt more than his nose.

“Why should I tell you shit?”

“Because you’re gonna die anyway,” Jeong-Ki says. “At least this way, the kkangpae members here you worked with won’t outlive you for long.”

Lear grins, a terrible pantomime of happiness as blood stains his teeth and lips, as well as his saggy face.

“ I’m not the one with the local kkangpae connection, children,” he says, almost in a sing-song voice. “I merely got paid to facilitate everything that happened in that place. First, just to hurt you, Moriah. And then, when you left for Seoul, I got paid even more to hurt you ... and then hurt him.” He nods at Jeong-Ki.

“ Who paid you ? Because it wasn’t just me that got hurt. My friend did too!” I cry, remembering how bruised and in pain Phil would be every time the men left. The time they sent him to the hospital...

The ghoulish grin widens. “You truly are a stupid child. Did you think your precious friend was a victim? He did all of this to you. And has plans that go further than me.”

I used to hear when you were enraged, you saw red. Well, my vision blacks out for a moment before I realize I’ve got my knife in a death grip, pressed against his flabby throat. A bead of blood runs down the blade.

“You’re lying.”

His eyes move to Jeong-Ki. “He took my phone. You can see for yourself.”

“I plan on it.”

And without further conversation, I slice through his throat with my serrated army knife, relishing in the gurgles as blood rushes up his throat and out of his mouth as he feels his life begin to fade.

Good fucking riddance.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:55 am

Moriah

We stand there a moment before I clean my blade on his jeans' cuff, mind blank.

He was lying, right?

"Moriah-ya," Jeong-Ki says. "I'm gonna unlock his phone, and you have to tell me if what I find really is your former friend." He bends down and cuts the dead man's thumb off to unlock the phone before standing back up, phone in one hand, thumb in the other.

He scrolls for a bit, his brows drawing as he reads messages in Korean too fast for me to try and follow. I'm fluent, but not as good at reading it as a native.

"This ... can't be," he whispers, his honeyed skin going a sickly shade of gray.

I put my hand on his arm, and his tremors make me shake.

"What is it?"

He closes the messages and says, "He was telling the truth; he was paid to have the club roughed up, and he was paid to have local kkangpae follow you and then find me. Even the police got paid to give me that assignment at your bar." He turns to me. "Did you ever see a picture of our group?"

I shrug. "Maybe. I told you, I don't know K-pop."

“Go look us up. The last album promos we did.”

I get my phone and do just that, though the first thing that comes up is Jeong-Ki’s “shocking” departure.

I click on images and that’s when it’s my turn to tremble.

It’s Phil.

Phil was in Jeong-Ki’s group.

Granted, in this picture he has pastel pink hair and a ton of makeup on, reminiscent of 1980s female pop stars, and a sequined suit, but it is definitely him. There’s no missing his flat nose or permanent pout.

“Ji Pil-Sung,” Jeong-Ki spits. “Or as you knew him, Phil the bartender.”

I shake my head. “No. No way.” Dread pools in my gut as I try to explain this away with logic. Because this seems like a bad thriller than my life right now. “Jeong-Ki, you weren’t there. They raped him so bad he had to go to the hospital ! I was the one by his side all night, keeping the cops at bay!”

Jeong-Ki shows me his scarred knuckle. “I did fight him once, when I left the group. But the story on the internet about how Pil-Sung got his chipped tooth and I got this is not true.”

Doing a quick scroll, I see a story about how Jeong-Ki got so enraged at Pil-Sung a year before the group broke up, Jeong-Ki punched Pil-Sung, chipped his tooth, and that gave Jeong-Ki the knuckle scar.

“What really happened to his tooth then?”

“Well, he and Stefan Lear needed me pliant, reliant on them, unable to escape. A scandal that I was this tough violent bastard was perfect. Who would want me then? I could stay in the group, do everything, while Pil-Sung was a sweet little angel victim.” His voice goes up an octave on the last four words, a mocking pitch.

“So, he argued with me, got in my face. Did everything to make me punch him. He slapped me, he pushed me, he threatened me. I didn’t give in. Do you know what I saw that crazy bastard do?”

He pauses and I shake my head again.

“He fucking beat himself bloody, chipping his own tooth. And when I tried to stop him, he bit me so hard he left this scar. Luckily the one on my neck faded. I watched as he bashed his face into a wall to make people think I beat him.” Jeong-Ki runs a hand through his hair. “I knew if I left, I’d never make it in K-pop. So I stayed. They got what they wanted out of me for another year, another album.”

“Are you saying ... he told the guys to go that hard on him? To hospitalize him? Just to ... what? Fuck me up?” That makes no sense. He hated Jeong-Ki. So when I got to Seoul it makes sense he would use me to find and hurt Jeong-Ki more.

But why did he do it the three years I worked with him? He can’t have known I’d get an inheritance.

Where do I fit in here?

Jeong-Ki nods at my question and says, “We need to find him. Quickly. Before he discovers Lear is dead.”

“It’s Friday. He’s gotta be at his bar,” I reply, feeling numb.

My best friend.

He set me up to be assaulted every fucking month? And what happened in Seoul? I feel sick and close my eyes, willing the shakes to go away and the bile to settle back down.

I am betrayed, violated, hurt.

But I am also angry as Hell.

And he will regret what he's done.

Jeong-Ki's gentle touch grasps my upper arms. "Jagiya... Have you ever killed anyone before?"

I shake my head a third time, eyes squeezed shut.

"You may be going into shock."

"No. He deserved it. I knew what I was doing," I assure him. "It's Phil. I can't... He was supposed to be my friend!" Hot tears slip down my face.

"He was supposed to be mine too," Jeong-Ki whispers, kissing my temple. "I'm sorry he hurt you too, even if he never touched you himself."

The only thing my mind will do now is repeat one simple phrase: "Kill him slow."

* * *

The bar, what I call the fake Sweet Cock-Tails now, is hopping. It looks like the elite of the city are in attendance. It's no longer the dive it was when I was here. I guess my money helped, since he was nearly penniless when the group disbanded.

"Do we wait until they close?" JK asks me.

I purse my lips and shake my head. "Phil loved playing the victim. But he also loved playing hero, taking care of me after work. If he doesn't know I know what he's done, I can work with his hero complex better than the victim one."

JK nods and gives me a tiny fist bump. "Where do you need me?"

I gesture with my chin to the gangway. "Service entrance. I'll let you in."

Leaning in, he kisses me once before walking away.

Meanwhile, I bypass the line and, as security tries to stop me, I quickly move and get lost in the throng of Chicago's elite.

The bar attire has also been elevated, and my jeans and sweater do not fit the dress code, earning me vicious looks from the patrons.

Good, let them stare. They'll stare even harder when I leave here covered in my ex-best friend's blood.

Phil is laughing and chatting up a good looking couple while mixing their drinks. He looks more like the idol he used to be, with his styled and dyed blond hair and Dior blouse.

How did I never see the wickedness inside him? How did he fool me all this time?

And most important: why did he do it? What does he get out of this? Besides a few hundred thousand dollars; but he didn't know I'd be rich.

Was it truly because he just likes seeing people hurt?

Time to start behaving like I'm in a drama as I let a few tears squeeze down my cheeks and approach the bar.

For a split second, Phil's carefully molded mask of beauty fades to shock when he sees me, a hint of panic. It's gone, and carefully contrived worry molds to his perfect skin.

"Mori?" he says, over the din. "Are you okay? What are you doing here?"

"I needed my friend," I say, trying to sound pitiful. Trying to sound like him. "I see how busy you are but ... please? Can we talk? Privately?"

He nods and says apologies to the couple before he leads me where I knew he would: the storeroom that has the door to the gangway.

"Hey, what happened? Did something go wrong in Seoul?" He puts his hands on my shoulders and his face uncomfortably close to mine. To see if I lie, maybe?

I nod and the sob I let out is half-real, just not for the reason he thinks. "Remember the deal I had to take? They— They—"

He pats my back. "It's okay. You're safe here."

You're not.

I wipe my eyes and go in for the kill. "And there was this guy ... I thought he was into me but it turned out he was only pretending so he could arrest me. That's why the kkangpae attacked me and I just ... I needed home."

"A guy? You mean he was a cop?" Phil asks, and I nod. "Give him up to the kkangpae. Let them have him in exchange for your safety."

You'd love that, wouldn't you?

I take a breath. "Can I open the back door? I need air."

“Yeah, of course, noona.”

I do so, peeking to see JK, who nods at me. I pretend to take a deep breath while signaling for him to wait and listen.

“Better?” Phil asks when I turn back.

“Yeah, I just need it open.” I wipe my eyes more. My makeup is a fucking mess.

“So, this asshole guy, you really should get the kkangpae to fuck him up. They will love it if you give him up and probably leave you alone,” Phil continues, his face lighting up like a kid at Christmas. “I mean, he deserves it.”

“Who deserves what, now?”

Phil’s head whips around at the phrase, said in Korean, and he turns three shades lighter than normal.

JK shuts the door behind himself as he saunters in, gun cocked. “What’s up, hyung ? Miss me?”

Phil stammers. “How... Did you trick me?” That is said to me, eyes hard and accusatory. “Don’t believe anything he says! He’s always been jealous—”

“Will you shut the fuck up for once in your life? You annoyed me with your singing and now you’re annoying me when you speak,” JK comments.

Phil stammers, his face turning red from anger. He’s so focused on JK, the punch I land to the side of his face comes at a total shock, sending him barreling into a case of expensive whiskey.

It tumbles down, bottle shattering under his weight.

The stench of liquor permeates the air, and Phil yelps in pain as the alcohol seeps into his brand new wounds from broken glass. He tries to push himself up, only embedding the glass deep into his palms as he cries.

“Poor baby. That’s what you get for touching people when they don’t want you to,” JK sneers. He saunters over, looking like an actor in a drama with a tiny, pleased smile on his face. “I’ve never been a violent man. But you? You bring it out in me. I guess that’s your talent. We couldn’t find one when you were a trainee, but look. Now we have it.”

Every time Phil tries to move, glass embeds itself somewhere, and the clothes he's wearing don't even dull the sting like they would if he had on something thicker, like jeans and a sweater.

He’s trapped, and we didn’t even try.

I watch as JK squats down and picks up a big, sharp piece of glass. He holds it up so it shines in the thin bulb’s light we have back here. Whiskey drips off of it, and he licks it with a smirk.

Fuck, that was hot.

“You shouldn’t touch what isn’t yours,” he whispers right before he plunges the glass into whatever Phil has that passes for a cock.

The scream is ear-shattering, but the music in the bar is so loud, likely no one heard him. His face contorts in agony, tears running down his silicone-enhanced cheeks.

JK stands, and blood pools between Phil’s legs.

“Oh, that was a long time coming,” he comments, then gestures to me. “He’s all yours, jagiya.”

Watching my best friend for years sob and try and get up only to make himself bleed more should make me sick. Should make me feel guilty.

All I feel is regret that he's not suffering more.

I want to drag this on. I want him to know what it's like to be violated by more than a piece of glass to the balls.

But I also know we don't have long before someone comes looking for him.

I grab Phil by his dyed, straw-looking hair and tilt his pitiful face up to meet mine.

"Why? All I wanna know is why? Why have them hurt me — hurt you too for that matter?" I ask.

"Me? I liked it," he says, that innocent smile still in place. "You?" He tries to shrug and winces as the glass in his body jostles. "Why not have them have their fun? I liked watching you cry. You acted like your degree made you such hot shit. People even liked your drinks better than mine. So I liked seeing you put in your place.

"Now, why did I let them do that in Seoul? Because you being a Sorrento is such a big deal, they nearly killed me because I didn't know. So once I got out of the hospital, I ensured the ones you were dealing with in Korea got their hands on you after I paid off his Sergeant." He points to JK, his arm weak and shaky. "You fucked me over. Figured I could kill two birds with one stone."

The first part of that is almost what it seems like he did to JK when they were in the group together.

Humbled him. Belittled him. Made him feel less-than. All out of ego and pride and arrogance.

“You’re a fucking monster.”

He has the nerve to laugh. “I’m the one who got half your inheritance while meanwhile you were gang raped by the kkangpae at my orders. You don’t get to be condescending to me, you gullible bitch.”

I hit him again, relishing the blood that sprays from his split bottom lip. I wonder idly how much the lip injections cost him.

Still, he seems undaunted. “You don’t have the balls to kill me. Meek little Mori, doing what she’s told. Pretending hard work can make dreams come true. Bullshit. I can see you’re ready to cry now, aren’t you?”

I nod. “I am,” I admit, voice wavering. “I’m sad you turned out to be such a rotten cunt.”

That wasn’t what he was expecting, and his last expression in life is shock as he feels the glass against his throat before I slit it like butter.

Blood gushes down his front, the arterial spray soaking my clothes. Shock remains on his face as he gurgles out his death rattle.

I stand, dropping the glass, as I watch his body slump over, dead.

Warm hands grip my shoulders from behind and turn me.

JK’s eyes are so dark, it feels like looking into a black hole. But these black holes are filled with adrenaline and starlight.

“You’re fucking beautiful like this,” he rasps. “Powerful. Covered in blood.” He kisses me, kisses away some of the blood that hit my cheek; I taste it on his lips when he brings them back to mine once more.

“Now ... how about that trip to Jeju I promised you?”

THE END