

CHAPTER EIGHT

**“Did that go the way you thought it was gonna go?
... NOPE!”**



Wednesday, December 17th, 2014

11:30 P.M.

Gangnam, S. Korea – ‘Cup of Hotness Café’

“W *HERE* are you going JJ?” Uncle Ryu hovered between JaeJoong and a ‘blustery’ Saffron, wringing his opaque hands nervously. Even though JaeJoong’s face was creased with smiles, as he leaned over pecking Saffire’s blushing cheek, Young-Jae hoped he wasn’t upset with Saffron, and this would be her last interference. Watching his ‘chosen someday son-in-law’ wave goodbye out the front entrance, and into the wintery night, he sensed a feeling of unrest settle in over the café.

It was inevitable . . . that somewhere between the need for companionship and the search for self, the comradery of the two women (forced into a relationship not of their own choosing), would come to a screeching, grinding halt.

“JJ, don’t leave on account of me.” Saffron snapped, a fake look of satisfaction at ‘interrupting’ he and Saffire, passing over her dark and foreboding face. Parking both hands on her hips, she stared at him dragging each arm into his coat, and slipping on his boots.

“It’s cool Saffron. Princess and I were done . . . date over . . . weren’t we babe?” He chuckled, winking across the coffee bar at Saffire’s forced weak smile, unable to gauge whether she was upset with Saffron or not. *Didn’t matter that they had been disturbed, stopped in the middle of what could have been a night to remember, he was on top of the world. He had confessed . . . she ‘had’ to know he was in . . . all in. The rest could wait.*

Striding back over toward her confidently, he grazed her cheek with his warm lips whispering, “Thanks for serving my balls up on a silver platter earlier. Made for an interesting start to the evening. I’ll talk to you later.” Stepping away, he put one hand up in a tiny wave as he disappeared into the frosty night air, the door easing shut behind him quietly.

Somewhere in the split second between the click of the door handle and the unimaginable disregard for timing, Saffron realized she had inadvertently stepped into the ‘Lion’s Den’.

Hands parked disgustedly on each hip, Saffire watched JJ’s back disappear into the night, her chance to finish what they had started thwarted. *Was she upset? Mmmm, yes and no. Could Saffron’s timing have been any worse? Of course.* All sorts of random thoughts forming in her mind about what ‘might’ have been began to crowd out her rational unemotional thinking process, and fixated on the ‘intruder’ before her . . . she lost her ‘Cotton Candy Princess’ cool and turned quite unexpectedly back into her alter-ego, the ‘Cotton Candy Bitch’.

“What the hell Saffron! I can’t believe you right now.” Her fun giggling demeanor spun on a dime, eyes immediately flashing dark with rage. If her sisters body came any closer she was going to rip out every red hair on her clueless f’ng head!

“You couldn’t have just come in quietly, shut the damn door and gone upstairs? No, you had to bang around, check around, throw things around . . . You hate me don’t you? Why do you hate me?” She ranted, beginning to march up and down the coffee counter, slapping one hand randomly across the top, her eye twitching uncontrollably, mouth dry and underarms sweaty.

The more she thought about it, the more she decided that this ‘so-called’ sister, who wanted to ‘cozy’ up to her, find out all her ‘tricks of the trade’, lay in her lap, borrow clothes and act like her best friend, screwed her over by interrupting JJ . . . and now she was standing there looking like some clueless winter demon, seemingly without a care in the world.

uncle Ryu sulked away into the corner, almost feeling as if he needed to cover his head and his ears for the confrontation that was about to go down. Being prepared was one thing, observing was something else. Should he leave? Let them go? Intervene? Where was the cat? She was capable of slowing them down when things got out of hand.

Glaring back at Saffire, Saffron knew she had just interrupted them. Sort of like ‘baby mama’ had interrupted her and Hyun Joong but, in her defense . . . she hadn’t known JJ would be there . . . and more importantly, what the hell were the two of them doing in the damn kitchen anyway? The kitchen of all places.

“HEY! Listen up before you go getting your panties in a twist.” Saffron kicked one of Hyun Joong’s boots watching it careen across the newly polished floor, landing sole first against the doorway. “First off, I DON’T hate you. And secondly, how was I supposed to know JJ would be here? Am I telepathic? Can I see through walls?” Slapping her own palms down on the seat of plastic covered bar stool, she glowered at Saffire, (really just wanting to send it the way of the boot and throw it at her arrogant face). *She had held back long enough tonight.*

“Clearly, you and ‘Mr. Sexpot’ there were about to DO IT, in the freaking kitchen weren’t you? My kitchen! Where I bake! Five minutes later and you probably would have been bare-assed on top of the counter.”

As the impending tornado began to swirl from a small inconsequential storm to a raging, growling entity all its own, the participants stood their ground, (each convinced they were warranted in their fury).

“OH! Is that right? We were huh?” Saffire’s banging of the counter ceased . . . her first thought being, that this ‘pile of assumption’ standing before her had a lot of nerve barging in on her perfect evening, only to turn around and accuse her of something she hadn’t even done. And quite possibly would ‘not’ have. “Humph, that WALL there doesn’t resemble YOUR KITCHEN

COUNTER TOP in the least now does it? Just because you come from a world where desk and counter screwing go hand-in-hand, doesn't mean I do."

Jumping over into the small kitchen area, Saffire grinned an evil smile at Saffron, mimicking the thrusting motion of intercourse against the edge of the butcher block counter.

"Is this what grosses you out so much?" She snickered, (through her attack on Saffron's misplaced assumptions). "Now, you'll have that image in your head the next time you come in here to bake 'goodies' huh? You're such a two-faced prude. Look at yourself, tell me you weren't DOING IT somewhere tonight too." Pausing, she leaned forward flicking a strand of Saffron's wild, unruly hair, noticing a stray piece of popcorn hanging off to one side. "Shit. You could have warned me. Text? Call? Knock? Yeah, something along those lines."

"I don't HAVE to see myself, and get the fuck away from my counter. You're disgusting, and yes . . . sex in the kitchen IS gross."

The red-headed 'Category-2' Tornado named 'Saffron' was winding up to a 'C-5', as she kicked the stool out of her way, smoothing down the flyaway strands of hair about her already flustered and reddened face, picking hurriedly at the still dangling popcorn kernel.

"And TELL ME do you really think you would have answered a call OR a text! A million bucks says you don't even know where your phone is." Snorting in anger, she hiked the annoying long woolen skirt up around her thighs. *She had had her fill of 'BITCH' tonight and didn't need Saffire to take her there for the second time.*

"Saffron, Saffire . . . calm down." Young-Jae urged them, floating in and around the two woman he knew were going to regret their confrontation in the morning. Was this his fault? They were fighting over JJ and Hyun Joong after all. Maybe he needed to back off. Let them handle their own lives. His good intentions were beginning to come back and bite him in his 'imaginary' ass.

But, they were sisters. Family. They had a future together, a future in the café, and their inevitable happiness was key. He had to see it to the end . . . no matter what the outcome. So,

dipping away into the confines of the staircase, he sat down dejectedly, head in his hands and waited. For what, he didn't know.

With her head tipped defiantly, Saffron attempted to ignore Saffire's childish actions as spotting the Vodka bottle on the bar, she snatched it up, stomping toward the dining room with loud determination, eyes focused on the unsuspecting photo of Kim Hyun Joong perched in its place of honor on the 'Couples Wall' beside Junsu. Her loud wheezing from numerous walks in the sub-zero weather wafted behind her sounding like an old freight train trying to get up the momentum to make it up a steep hill.

Saffire could see she was about to be 'dismissed', in Saffron's usual 'Corporate' manner. *Now what should she do? Stand her ground? Retreat upstairs lick her wounds and regroup? NO . . . HELL NO! Why did 'she' get to act so entitled? After all, the café didn't belong to just her. It was a dual ownership. If they were going to co-habitate, once again, it was time they got some things straightened out between them.*

So, racing after her, slipping and sliding across the bare wooden floor in her stocking feet Saffire met her adversary 'head on', skidding to a stop beside a moody Saffron, barking out, "I guess it's heart-warming to know at least ONE of us had time for sex tonight."

uncle Ryu's perfectly coiffed hair rippled in the breeze as both disgruntled women sailed past him in their haste to make short work of the impending disagreement. Did he hear her right? Oh my. He wanted to follow . . . he 'needed' to follow, but unlike their first heated encounter at the wall, something stopped him. Not daring to look, he closed his eyes continuing to listen to their heated exchange . . . hoping there wouldn't be blood. One thing was for certain, it wouldn't be the first time there had been a knock-down, drag out in the café over a loved one.

In the course of its existence, (mostly the early days) the Hotness Café 'Couples Wall' had seen its fair share of lovers spats and quarrels within the confines of its hallowed halls, all the way from the rest room in the rear, to the tiny vestibule and even on to the outside entry. And thus, the reason for Rule #1 of the Hotness Handbook. 'No dating the Idols.' Yes . . . he

was sitting here helping to break the very rule he had instituted. But, that didn't ease his lurching heart as he yearned for peace between Saffron and Saffire.

Breathing heavily, the two women squared off, trying to understand why no matter what they did or how they did it . . . they would never be on the same page. Having 'both' been raked over the coals in the past few months, between their relationships gone bad, the death of Uncle Ryu, and parents who never gave a shit . . . they were faced with the inability to see that together they were a force to be reckoned with, but separately they were headed for certain emotional death.

"Yeah, well you can't prove that." In a blaze of hatred toward the 'lying', ex-girlfriend, Chung-A, Saffron plunked the Vodka bottle down, jerking the photograph, frame and all from the wall, digging her nails into the back, as she pulled the picture away from the glass. Then slamming the empty frame on the nearest table, ripped the photographic imprint of her away from a smiling 'Seung Jo', clutching 'his' half in the palm of her hand triumphantly.

"That just DID prove it." Saffire wanted to feel sorry for Saffron at some guttural level . . . she obviously had been traumatized in the wake of her 'Seung Jo' encounter, but by the same token . . . her flippant and heartless attitude toward 'her and JJ's' feelings made it difficult to find the sympathy needed to make a truce between them possible.

"Besides, JJ and I BOTH heard you mumbling about it when you came in." She continued. "He even said something to me. So THANKS AGAIN, for ruining my perfectly GOOD NIGHT."

Struggling to maintain her 'Corporate' composure, Saffron searched for the words that would effectively explain the reasoning behind her actions. But then, in a last minute flip of the switch, she blurted out nothing but childish gibberish, unable to keep her feelings in check.

"THIS! Doesn't prove anything." Saffron held the crumpled shard of paper housing Chung-A's figure, up in Saffire's face wanting her to know that no matter how much she had thought she 'wanted' to be like her, now she wasn't so sure. "And while we're at it, let me tell YOU SOMETHING little, 'Miss-Can't-Make-Up-My-Mind-Cotton-Candy-Princess', you . . . you're messing with two 'best' friends, playing them off against each other. I know I said it sounded like fun and games before, but . . . well, now that I think about it, it's NOT. It's just wrong, on every level. And all that stuff I told you about being confused, and playing the field? Our GIRL TALK?"

Stopping, she grappled for an excuse for her own impulsive behavior with Hyun Joong, (now the Idol with a pregnant girlfriend). But there was none.



“Yeah, well . . . forget it. I’m sorry I asked . . . From now on, just don’t worry about what I do, or who I do it with . . . In case you haven’t noticed . . . I’m . . . a . . . big . . . girl.” Poking one finger into Saffire’s shoulder at each pointed word, she hoped she was making her point.

She was a big girl all right. Big enough to sleep with her Prince, but not big enough to own up to the fact that she walked away without a commitment or a regret. What did that make her? Any better than the sister who was waffling between two amazing guys . . . setting herself up for the biggest fall of her life.

Why did it seem like they hadn’t learned a thing from their mistakes? And why were they both so blinded they couldn’t see the forest for the trees? Was this what ‘real’ love did to someone? Maybe they were better off alone.

Her heart was telling her to wind down, throw in the towel and make amends . . . but her head was still in the game. (‘Corporate’ Saffron had not been laid to rest quite yet.)

So, flinging an angry look over her shoulder at the picture of a smiling Young-Jae, (desperately hoping he would understand) she started to move past Saffire’s broad stance, but Saffire refused to budge, puffing her ample T-shirted chest out in front of her, like a mother hen ruffling its feathers at a bold intruder.

“Touch me again, I freaking dare you!” Her eyes warned Saffron glaringly, as she reached out shoving the shoulder of her nemesis, giving in to her ‘own’ childish emotions. “And don’t think you’re going to throw that stupid line at me either, “Don’t worry about what I do.” She mocked, “Was it my imagination or wasn’t it you who called me a slut last week because I ‘immediately’ kissed JJ when Junsu was still ‘hanging in the balance’, then . . . turned right around and asked me for freaking dating advice! Obviously you don’t like yourself very much, ‘cause you can’t make up your damned mind WHO you want to be . . .”

Waiting for the introduction to hair pulling and clothes-ripping, Uncle Ryu leaned around the corner spotting a still indignant Saffire, push Saffron in the shoulder childishly. Fighting had ‘never’ been one of her strong suits. These were the moments they should have

gotten under their belts as youngsters fighting over random toys, sitting in the front seat of the car, or chores around the house. Not as adults, struggling to gain control of not only themselves but the situation. An opportunity missed in life. He had attempted to make a difference . . . was this proof that his efforts had been in vain?

“CAN TOO!” Saffron squealed back, knowing full well her sister had just ‘hit the nail on the head.’

“No you can’t. If you could, you wouldn’t be standing there dressed like me . . . you look ridiculous. But, that’s not even the point. You’re trying to be my damned boss. I don’t punch a time clock for you. What I do isn’t okay, but you on the other hand . . . well . . . it’s a ‘do as I say, not as I do’ moment right now isn’t it? I play by my own rules. You haven’t figured that out yet?”

Now, with her hands flying about in the air above her head, Saffron rallied, hoping she could at least get some sort of understanding out of her unmoving sister.

“Dammit Saffron, all I wanted to do was ‘date’ JJ and Junsu. Two ‘single’ guys. And follow my heart. Of which is really NONE of YOUR business either. I think we might have addressed that issue a few ‘arguments’ ago.” She added, a finger to her chin, remembering their fight in front of the ‘Couples Wall’ (after only one day in the café), when even then she had told Saffron in no uncertain terms she should mind her own business. *In truth, they hadn’t made much progress.*

Rattling on like she was prone to do, not allowing Saffron to get a word in edgewise, she continued heatedly, “And so what if they are friends, I’ll date and sleep with whoever I want to. But, how about you! You left out of here all decked out to ‘seduce’ Hyun Joong tonight . . . in MY skirt, WITHOUT your panties on, I might add. You forget I watched you get dressed. Ewww . . . Now I’m gonna have to burn it. And you have the audacity to make comments about me, like I said . . . how dare you judge me like that?”

Maybe she would have slept with JJ having been given the chance, but then again . . . maybe she wouldn’t have, and Junsu was a big boy. He had long enough to tell her how he really felt. Whether her heart was on the fence or not, she couldn’t control it, even if she wanted to.

Saffron rose to her full height against Saffire's cutting remarks. No matter what she said now, it would make no difference what-so-ever. Saffire had made a stand. She wasn't about to budge. Their relationship as weak as it was, was skidding down a slippery slope with nothing left but a cliff to tumble over at the bottom. It was time to pull out all the stops, no matter who was at fault. She wasn't about to be demoralized again, like Mr. Big had been prone to doing to her. And especially not by this little snippet of a girl.

"Pffft, I look RIDICULOUS huh? Well, then that must mean YOU ALWAYS look ridiculous. And the skirt! Oh you mean THIS SKIRT? THIS F'NG SKIRT?" She wailed, her hands fumbling furiously for the zipper. "Go ahead, you can have it. Burn it, cut it to shreds, throw it out in the snow, I don't give a shit. Never should have let you TALK ME into wearing it anyway." Yanking it down, she allowed the scratchy wool garment to finally drop at her feet on the floor.

"OH MY GOD SAFFRON, DON'T!" Poor Young-Jae wailed, slapping his hands over his eyes instinctively as the skirt careened down her bare legs. Having listened to their ranting long enough, he began to realize they had come full circle . . . despite his interference, and ultimate failure they were still two young women, standing face-to-face with broken hearts and broken lives. Without even the ability to 'send them to the freezer' to work it out this time around, all he could do was continue to sit idly by and wait, or quite possibly . . . it was time for him to leave . . .

Now, standing only in Hyun Joong's white dress shirt, the tails barely covering her bare butt cheeks, fist clamped around his ripped, crumpled photograph, Saffron looked wickedly like something out of a B-rated horror movie. Her eye makeup smeared and running down around her eyes from crying, hair still sticking out everywhere about her anger-ridden face . . . proved to Saffire that something with the 'ex' in the torn picture had probably happened to ruin her 'perfectly' good evening with Hyun Joong. But, by the time the skirt hit the floor, she was past the point of caring.

"I'm tired of playing 'nicey-nice' with you," Saffire continued, observing the fact that Saffron's blood shot eyes had turned a cold steely blue, her expression resembling that of their mother, emotionless, and unforgiving.



“You don’t want a sister . . . you want someone to boss around and then beat up on when you aren’t getting your way. Hyun Joong not as good as ‘Baek Seung Jo’? Is that it? Did he turn out to actually be a MAN? And not a fucking fantasy . . . AH! That’s it. I’ve figured it out. There’s where your triangle comes from . . . You don’t need two real breathing men do you? You have Hyun Joong AND ‘Seung Jo’, at your beckon call. Lucky you. Must be fucking nice. When one disses you . . . Bamm! Here comes the other one.”

“Don’t go there Saffire.” Saffron warned, waving the photo of Hyun Joong in front of Saffire’s face, hoping to God that she could get the air-headed, blonde spitfire to stop talking before she put her foot in her mouth and broke the dam.

“It’s true. And I can GO wherever the hell I want. You can’t stop me. Nobody can.”

“That you can. So speaking of things that were said before . . . Maybe you should just GO HOME.”

Saffron hurled the remark out before she realized what she had said. But, once hanging in the balance between them, her (Hyun Joong related) outrage took on a life of its own making it virtually impossible to keep the rest of her tirade from following. “You don’t DO anything around here anyway. You roam around pretending to know what’s going on, when in fact I don’t think you even have the slightest clue how to make a decent cup of coffee.”

As Saffire swung away from her sisters half-naked figure, marching in her stocking feet in the direction of the staircase, Saffron, following close behind, kept instinctively yelling.

“Maud and SaRae can run circles around you, you know that. Go back home to your music and your painting on the beach. We all know you really want to. And guess what . . . I bet Junsu would even still date you. Wouldn’t be a total loss.”

Finishing off her declaration satisfied she had given the ‘hippie’ sister from California the best piece of her mind she could, she wasn’t expecting Saffire to retaliate in kind.

“Well, I could say the same for you. And I’m NOT going home. You couldn’t pay me to go back to the States, and I can hire a bookkeeper to take your place too ‘Miss Hoity-Toidy Personal Assistant’. I’m not lazy, just because I don’t know how to make a good cup of coffee. You’re freaking stuck with me. Like it or not. So if you don’t like it, then there’s a plane ticket with YOUR name on it out there too. Take your ridiculous ‘Baek Seung Jo’ triangle and walk.

See if I care. I don't need you, I never wanted a sister in the first place. Don't know why you even call yourself that. After today, you can just leave me the 'fuck' alone."

"Don't need me . . . don't need me huh? Okay, I get it. Ever occur to you maybe I didn't want a sister either. But nobody bothered to ask my opinion." Saffron sniffed in retaliation.

Saffire, parked herself at the bottom of the stairs, deciding she wasn't done with the conversation or accusations until she had her say as well. Rolling her head back and forth she sassed Saffron mercilessly.

"Aghhhh . . . You really are such a frosty bitch!" Palms fisted at her sides, she grit her teeth, unable to release her pent up aggression any other way except to resort to name calling. Flipping a clump of blonde hair behind her shoulder she headed up the slippery wooden staircase, the sound of her stocking feet bumping each step as she heaved herself against the railing in haste.

Now she was done with the conversation, 'and' the sister from hell. For the umpteenth time in the last few weeks, she was determined not to cry or give in to her feelings of loneliness and abandonment in front of Saffron, and especially not to let on how hurt she had been.

Young-Jae scrambled to his feet, attempting to beat the aggravated Saffire to the top of the stairs. This had gone too far. Now they were playing with fire. Harsh, cutting words . . . words that he associated with his own family members . . . sisters and a brother who said things that could never be taken back, or brushed over in the future. He had left this world, without the joy of hearing apologies or loving encouragements for his life or his accomplishments, from any of them. This was obviously his mission. NOT to let these girls head down that same tragic path, to the same desolate end.

Saffron squealed after Saffire's retreating figure, taking the stairs two at a time, unencumbered by clothing, "Frosty bitch huh. That the best you can do? Heard it before. And don't walk away from me, we're not done yet . . . you're always such a baby. You think you're better than everyone else, and don't have to do anything 'cause you're so talented, you can paint, and you're funny . . . well DAMMIT, I can be funny too."

Her voice quivering as she watched Saffire burst through the bedroom door slamming it behind her, she was hard pressed to figure out how and why this was getting so out of hand between them AGAIN? *Just because she had barged in on sister's little encounter unannounced? Was she 'that' awful? After all, she lived here too.*

Scuffling toward the closed door, still cradling the liquor bottle in the crux of her arm, Hyun Joong's picture crushed between her fingers, she surrendered to the late night hour, resting her tired back against its hard wooden surface, randomly kicking the bottom with one heel.

"Come . . . out . . . of . . . there . . ." She murmured, with each kick of her foot. Sighing when she got no response, except the penetrating sound of Saffire's shoe hitting the opposite side, she unscrewed the bottle top, (reveling in the clear substance), and rearing her head back guzzled, until the bitter liquid careened out the side of her mouth, and down across the collar of the still crisply ironed dress shirt.

"Sorry 'Seung Jo'. My bad." She whimpered, attempting to wipe the stickiness away with the back of the crumpled picture. "I'll make it up to you, promise." Then meandering away, toward the small dingy sofa she hollered loud enough to be heard through the closed door, "You're just pissed 'cause I got laid and you didn't, SISTER," pleased that she had gotten the last word.

Young-Jae sighed, his breath easing out of him sadly as a silent calm settled over the tiny apartment. For the most part the drama was over. Now it was time to help pick up the pieces of their hearts. But how?

Fading in and out in frustration, he cursed out loud, noticing that it came off sounding like late night sirens in the background. He was too old for this shit! He needed a drink. For all his prior interventions, his presence was no longer required here. Maybe for once, he would have to let them learn to lean on each other. It was time for him to leave, (go drown his sorrows at his favorite drinking tent . . . think about where to go from here).

Tasting the sweet liquor that he loved in life . . . he glided with renewed enthusiasm down the steps toward the front of the café. Glancing back once more, longing to capture them both in his arms, (but unable to do so), not paying attention to the location of the front door, he

felt himself burst through the brick wall of the dining room and immediately into the tent opening. Clattering a shelf in his wake, a lone cup rattled precariously, threatening to fall, finally dropping over the side, straight down to the back of the 'always present' black cat, who hissed as she felt it careen across her arched fur . . . sending her scurrying after him, disappearing into thin air.

* * * * *

“**C**AN'T believe she was going to have sex in MY kitchen. I didn't have sex on Hyun Joong's counter . . . what gives her the right to 'do it' in my work space.” Swinging the bottle, Saffron grazed the lampshade on the side table, rotating it full circle and watching it as it stopped, tilting at a strange angle. “Let her go have sex with JJ next to the coffee machine, desecrate her own workspace.”

With Hyun Joong's picture cradled to her chest she dropped to the sofa sitting Indian style, dragging a throw over her bare legs. Tipping the bottle she guzzled the liquor again, welcoming the burn to her throat, finally lowering it as tears stung her eyes, wondering if they were from the booze or the fight with this 'so-called' sister.

Smoothing out the crumpled, torn photo in her lap as runaway tears dripped onto the back of his dark head, she couldn't help but wonder, 'now what'? She had left Chicago for a new life . . . was this it? A sister she didn't know, a new boyfriend with a baby on the way, and a coffee house.

Sniffing, wiping her nose with the cuff of the sleeve, a shadow of a smile broke out over her face, remembering the look of dismay when Joong eyed her in one of his best white dress shirts. Peering at the new stain with watery vision, she shrugged . . . “Huh, serves him right for not telling me about baby mama.”

Straightening up, she flicked the back of his dark shaggy head in frustration. Sighing heavily she took another shot off the bottle, disillusioned with the reality that her perfect man was flawed. Saffire was right, her dream man only existed in her mind. No one could live up to her expectation of 'Baek Seung Jo'.

“Well Saffron where does that leave you . . . are you going to fight for the ‘real man’ Kim Hyun Joong . . . or sink back into your dream world hoping perfection comes knocking on your door?”

Realizing he had been right in asking her to leave, (she should have understood instead of acting like a spoiled child) she decided that she wasn’t going to add to his problems, resolving instead to be supportive, especially (if by some chance), baby mama wasn’t lying.

“Still . . . the bitch can’t have you . . . I claimed ‘Baek Seung Jo’ tonight, I have the rug burns to prove it.” She declared, hearing the phone ding loudly in her ears. Glancing around, then down, she was surprised to find it had been stuck into the front pocket of the shirt. Retrieving it as ripples of giddiness washed over her, she saw the ID flash ‘Baek Seung Jo’.

“Huh . . . want to know if I got home okay . . .” Sobering, she read aloud thoughtfully, picking her teeth with a thumbnail. *Not a good idea to talk to him tonight, not after being dismissed like an inconvenience.* Still she needed to answer him, so typing ‘YES’, she hit ‘SEND’ then turned off the phone pitching it on the table.

Staring at the bedroom door she thought to herself . . . *Sister . . . sister . . . who the hell asked for a sister, not me.* She knew she had let her emotions get away from her tonight. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!* Knocking the back of her head on the wall now she scolded herself for not coming in quietly, maybe she had been hoping for a little comfort from the ‘Cotton Candy Princess’. After all, that’s what all the ‘Hallmark’ cards said, “A shoulder to lean on”, in times like this.

“Aishhh . . . obviously that was a pipe dream.” She muttered, imitating uncle (using the Korean slang word he would utter when he heard something unbelievable).

Well she learned tonight she couldn’t count on any sympathy from her ‘other half’ . . . and obviously ‘other half’ didn’t care about her well-intended advice, that it was never a good idea to get between two friends. Saffron had seen it many times in the office, and it always turned out badly.

But, what the fuck did she know? The kitchen fight popping to the forefront of her groggy mind she realized that not only was she ‘bossy’, apparently, she was ‘just like her mother’! How the hell would Saffire know anyway? That was beyond her. Her sister the ‘musician’ had probably

spent as much time with mother as she had with father . . . That would add up to a total of a few weeks during their entire twenty-four years of existence.

In the long run she had learned tonight that it was impossible to be someone else, she had to be Saffron. Raking the hair from her forehead, drinking and thinking . . . her dilemma was . . . who the hell was Saffron? And the longer she drank, the harder she thought . . . Was she the calculated woman that seduced Hyun Joong? The baker that comforted the patrons with her pastries? The little girl looking for a father? Or the independent person who wanted to live her own way. Staring blankly at the bottom of the bottle she finally realized . . . “Shit, bottle’s empty.”

Setting the bottle on her lap, no longer interested in numbing her brain, she glanced out the high tiny window to the nighttime sky, wondering if it was snowing in Chicago. Holiday parties would be starting and if she was there tonight what would she be doing? Attending one of the many functions with Mr. Big, on her arm as his trophy date. The woman behind the CEO, taking care of any problem that arose, making sure everything ran smoothly in his life. She had been good enough to organize his office, furnish his house, and sleep in his bed . . . just like a good, dutiful wife. Only she wasn’t his wife and never would be . . . that job had been assigned to someone else years ago.

She needed to remember why she had left Chicago. Because, for all her cold steel exterior, inside she was a lost child, looking for a home. Surveying her surroundings, she was amused at the fact that these three rooms were a far cry from the ‘Four Seasons’ in New York, or even her old apartment, that Mr. Big had paid for. However, even with the shabby sofa, wood floors, and bathroom smaller than the closet at her mother’s house, it still felt like home.

The only thing missing was Uncle Ryu. Staring yet again at the door where her Bohemian, airheaded, (couldn’t decide between two men) sister moped about her ruined night, it was a fact Saffire had been thrust upon her newly peaceful existence. But, wasn’t that why she came to Korea . . . for family? True, uncle had left her when she needed him most, but he had brought her Saffire. Granted, even though she seemed a poor substitute, (fact was, she wasn’t ‘Suzy Sunshine’ herself . . .) and they were still family. The only real family she had left. Saffire leaving wasn’t what she wanted, nor was she useless at the café. Saffron didn’t know why she had spat it out. Hatful words to the one person she really wanted acceptance from. Somehow they would have to come to terms with their difficult personalities, and learn to run this café together in the process, because ‘she’ wasn’t going anywhere.

Like ‘Scarlet O’Hara’, vowing never to go hungry in ‘Gone with the Wind’ she vowed never to go back to Chicago, Mr. Big, or her life there . . . she had never felt more alive than in the last couple weeks. And, she didn’t regret anything that had happened to her in Korea, inheriting uncle’s café, sleeping with Hyun Joong, and especially gaining a sister.

After Midnight

Hotness Café – Saffire’s room

THE night sky outside Saffire’s window glowed brightly in the full nearly midnight moon. She didn’t know how long she sat, back against the hard wooden door, staring at the lone tennis shoe that had careened off the baseboard, landing upside down against the wardrobe cabinet, until dozing intermittently, her head finally dropped forward, startling her awake. It was way past 12:00.

With visions of M&M’s and cotton candy slipping away from her, she listened at the door for any sounds of Saffron, coming from the living room. Maybe she was finally either asleep, or wasted . . . or both.

Where had she gone wrong with this ‘sister’? Not more than a few days ago they had been ‘partners in crime’. Plotting and giggling together like two school girls, crushing on their Bias’s. Now . . . there was an ocean between them, with no rescue boat in sight.

For all her ‘happy go lucky’ attitude about guys, the café’, even Korea . . . she was lonely and scared. She missed her music . . . her orchestra pals . . . the warm sands of the ocean . . . even her stupid childhood room and her old life. Here it was only a week till Christmas and she hadn’t done any shopping, sent cards, or even thought about a tree and decorations. For all her griping about Saffron not knowing who ‘she’ was . . . it was plain to see, she was suffering from the same disorder.

Saffron was right. She did wander around the café, for the most part clueless, and unconcerned about her role in its future. She talked it up, hoping in the process, to talk herself into loving it as much as she knew her uncle wanted her to. But, when would this feeling of despair lift, and she finally feel like she belonged here? Never?

Tonight with JJ had been amazing. A quiet respite in the midst of her turmoil. And then . . . traveling at break-neck speed she had allowed Saffron to spoil its magic. Hoping to recapture

the warm coziness from earlier . . . before all the drama and harsh words, she stretched her cramped legs, pushing herself to a sitting position, seeking out the big wool blanket strewn haphazardly across her bed roll.

In a last minute decision, she grabbed it, (and Saffron's) unlocking the door and tiptoeing gingerly across the darkened living area. Attempting to avoid the clutter of papers, water bottles, and dirty clothes it was apparent she and sister Saffron weren't much better at housekeeping than laid back Uncle Ryu had been.

With the tucked away private dining room her ultimate goal, she passed a snoring Saffron, curled in a tight ball, fist up under her chin, empty liquor bottle teetering majestically at the edge of the coffee table. Almost to the staircase, she paused. Turning around, she snuck back quietly, stifling a snicker, and spread the large wool coverlet over the outline of her passed out form, still dressed only in the white dress shirt, she had sped up the stairs in.

“We're a hot mess, you know that?” She whispered to Saffron's calm, serene face adding. “I really DO like having a sister.” Then stretching down, she brushed her lips to the top of the reddish-blond head, proceeding on toward her chosen place of rest.

Saffron, dreaming of racing through the cool grasses of a Chicago autumn morning, her father tossing a little blonde headed girl up in the air in front of her, mumbled . . . “Me too . . . me too.”

After Midnight

Kim Hyun Joong's Apartment

HYUN Joong picked up the pink lace bra tracing the silk covered wire along the bottom edge remembering how she felt in his hands. The night had been perfect . . . she was perfect and now she was pissed. Scooping up her sweater burying his nose into the soft cashmere he inhaled the perfume that he was beginning to associate with her long red hair and ruby lips.

Fuck, he should have told her as soon as she followed him thru the door. Now, on top of dealing with Chung-A and her clingy



possessiveness, he had to make it up to ‘Hani’. Folding the sweater he laid it gently on the sofa beside the bra, when his phone dinged. Well, at least she texted him back.

“YES” was all it said. He stood poised, as if waiting for more to appear. *So, was he supposed to read between the lines?* Of course, one word didn’t constitute a sentence, but the three letters spoke volumes. Knowing it was probably useless he still touched ‘CALL’, not surprised when it went straight to voicemail. *She had shut him down.*

Collapsing to the sofa, placing the phone on the table and dragging the sweater once again onto his lap, he caressed it like he had her hair after they had made love. Uncertain what to do next, he wondered, would a grand gesture impress her? Profess his love? No, he couldn’t say he loved her, (hell he hardly knew her) besides, neither one of them expected that kind of commitment. Physically he wanted her. But, emotionally? What did he want out of her? Understanding, support, friends with benefits . . . he wasn’t sure. Scrubbing his face he was exasperated at the mess he found himself in all of a sudden.

Tossing her sweater off to one side, he headed for his room telling himself to sleep on it. So much had happened in the span of a few hours, he desperately needed time to process. Tomorrow would be another ride on the roller coaster with Chung-A nipping at his heels, Saffron not speaking to him, and a movie that claimed all of his concentration.

If he ever needed advice, now was the time . . . acutely missing Uncle Ryu, he knew he could have confided in him. Although truly, he didn’t think uncle would approve of him dating his niece with a pregnant ex-girlfriend demanding a promise.

“Mianhae uncle, in my defense, she’s chasing me with the force of a freight train.” He shook his head snickering, not wanting poor Young-Jae to get the wrong idea. “Not that I mind. Ahhh . . . uncle she’s a dangerous woman, pretty sure she’s going to break my heart, but I have no desire to give her up.”

* * * * *

After Midnight
In front of the 'Hotness Café'

JUNSU stepped from the warmth of the black SUV, pulling his collar up around his neck against the biting wind. He knew it was late. Bored, alone, and tired of reading fan mail, even the Internet had failed to interest him any longer, so here he was.

Scanning up and down the dark street in front of the café, he took the initiative to text Saffire one more time before trying the door.

SR. R U up? I'm downstairs. Wanna see you for a minute.



Nothing . . . For the third time. Was she avoiding him? Angry because yet again, he had been gone to JeJu on his birthday two days ago, not making it possible to invite her to join him. Stupid lawsuit! It was beginning to take over his f'ng life.

If so, he needed to make it up to her. What was she doing to him anyway? He should be concentrating on his schedule for the remainder of the week . . . that new movie script he had received (to do the OST for) before his military service. Even his upcoming concert tour. Anything but her. What the hell was he doing anyway? Standing here on a deserted sidewalk, in the middle of a freezing winter night, his heart exposed . . . feeling like a school boy looking for a rock to toss at a darkened bedroom window. Was he that desperate to keep her away from Jae? He guessed so.

Did he dare knock? If Saffron was home as well, he would certainly wake the both of them. Nooo, probably not the best option. They worked hard, and got up early. After years of phone calls and texting, he had just wanted to talk face-to-face.

Sighing he refrained from knocking, shoving the phone back in his pocket despondently. *Now what? He had taken the time to drive all the way over here.* The adrenaline pumping through his veins at the thought of seeing her, had awakened every bone in his body, so now . . . retreating home to bed was an unthinkable option.

The drinking tent. That was it. It was just down the road, and barely pushing midnight. It would be a welcome diversion, allowing him the opportunity have a few beers and maybe even some well needed companionship with the locals, before heading back.

Satisfied with his decision, he strode grudgingly back to the vehicle, kicking little piles of snow along the way, noticing one small set of footed boot prints leading up to the café doorway, mixed with another larger set following them. Frowning questionably, he pursed his lips in thought slipping inside and pushing the starter button, hearing the engine whirr on quietly underneath him.

Had someone been there recently? Not dismissing JJ's bold declaration to, "Let her decide who she wanted to be with", he shook his head at his own jealous stupidity, pulling away from the curb and making a Y-turn at the empty intersection. *Boot prints in the snow could mean anyone. JJ was practicing tonight. He had already confirmed it with his manager. What an idiot he was.*

After Midnight

Leaving the local drinking tent

JAEJOONG was alone . . . with his thoughts and his bottle. Between the noonas and Saffron he had been called out for the second time this week over his impending involvement with Saffire. Even so, the memory of Young-Jae's whispery words in his ear, rang out clearly through the alcohol as tugging his coat around him he drifted out and away from the drinking tent into the clear December night. *"Be yourself, be yourself . . . just be yourself."*

Did Young-Jae 'want' him to have a thing for Saffire? Now, the questions that had plagued him from their first meeting were starting to make sense. *Was he somehow pulling the strings? And why? He thought Uncle Ryu loved he and Junsu equally. He knew how extremely close they were. So, why would he be forcing the three of them into this love triangle? He had always been there to give well needed advice, but never interfered.*

Trudging through the few inches of snow back toward his car, he felt a strange presence following him. Flipping back, expecting to see the figure of another tent patron, there was nothing but powdery snow behind him, and the footprints his shoes had left as he walked.

Spooked again . . . he grumbled to an ‘invisible’ Young-Jae, threateningly. “Don’t mess with me uncle. I mean to have this girl. No matter what you do or say.”

“Is that right?”

Young-Jae, flung his arms out around himself, reveling in the encouraging words he had been hoping to hear all night. JJ wasn’t going to give up and throw in the towel. Even though he had purposed himself to stop interfering, maybe now, he could rest easy, go ahead and concentrate solely on Saffron anyway. Clearly, Hyun Joong needed a swift kick in the ass, and he might just be the one to give it to him. Dropping back away from JJ as he stepped up to his car, the happy glow to the spirit’s luminous face returned.

Bleary-eyed and exhausted, JaeJoong rested against the car door debating whether to get in and risk driving, or call a taxi. It was a good neighborhood, the vehicle would survive the night.

“Drive? Taxi? Walk?” He muttered to himself, fumbling in his pocket for a cigarette while he pondered his dilemma. And in the split second it took to watch the tip flare red in his face his decision was set. He had left Saffire and the ‘Cotton Candy Wonderland’ hanging. Surely in only a short forty-five minutes she hadn’t gone to bed? He needed to go back. Apologize not only for leaving the way he had, but for sticking her with the cleanup as well. She didn’t deserve that. Hell, he didn’t deserve her. It was a quick trek, no need to drive . . . the cold air would be a good way to clear his head. Taking one long drag off the smooth tasting cigarette, he stepped away from the car, determined to make things right.

* * * * *

PLAIN and simple . . . it was a ‘drive by’ . . . straight out of every Korean Drama ever written. Junsu, was headed to the drinking tent, focused only on his thoughts of the elusive Saffire, at the exact same time JaeJoong came meandering up the hill toward the café, ear buds in, head bobbing to one of his favorite upbeat tunes, oblivious to the sounds around him. As if in slow motion, like a thief in the night . . . the car ascended upon him . . . bright lights in his eyes, forcing him to attention. Glancing up he couldn’t help but think it looked familiarly like Junsu’s black SUV.

Junsu's head swiveled curiously as he stared out the darkened window. *Was that JJ?* Spying a lone figure coming closer and closer as the vehicle made its way down the deserted street he was beginning to recognize his best friend's tall, lean form.

Time stood still as they passed one another, neither bothering to stop . . . realizing the fall out would be clearer in the light of day.

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