

CHAPTER NINE

(Part 2)

“Love is in the air, I can smell my coffee brewing . . .”



Thursday, December 18th, 2014

11:45 A.M.

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

MAUD stepped away from her position, hovering over the new cook. She hated to bring someone else into the establishment that had always been known for its amazing home-cooked recipes and baked goods, but . . . she and SaRae were needing a break from the everyday grind, and the ‘sisters’ weren’t exactly picking up the slack, or filling the gap left by Young Jae.

Last night and this morning were proof yet again, these new owners, were going to need a serious lesson in responsibility. If there was ever a time she needed Young Jae’s advice it was now. *Why was he gone? Why did it have to be him of all people?* He had been the rock that the café had been built and tended to on. Her initial fears of losing it to his wretched sisters, or

even his brother had never materialized, but Saffire and Saffron weren't pulling their weight either.

Staring off into the burgeoning dining room, she watched the hustle and bustle of the regulars, a few newbies, and her faithful staff. Saffire, who should have been helping clear tables, was AWOL, (doing God only knew what), Saffron was rolling silverware at Young Jae's empty table in the back, and the others were doing what they did best.

Then there was Yoona. Ahhh, young Yoona. Hands down her best employee. Hard working, energetic, punctual . . . she needed to consider a raise for her. She deserved it. Even today, she had arrived much earlier than expected, looking adorable and ready to help out, before the 'sisters' had ever even opened their lazy, hungover eyes to think about getting up!

Yoona had always been Young Jae's favorite, and he was often found trailing along behind her as she cleaned up, chatting and giving her advice like a concerned father. It was a sad day to see her going it alone.

Sniffing uncontrollably, Maud listed into the open kitchen doorway, for once in her life wishing the day were already over, and she could go home. Her heart was weak with sadness and twisted in aggravation over the girls and the role they were having in the drama that was beginning to play out in the café because of them and their relationships with the idols. If one more incident took place in the next few days or weeks, she would have to take some sort of action. Rules were rules, and she and SaRae had already bent them nearly to the breaking point to accommodate the two saucy Americans.

"Sis? You okay?" SaRae's soft voice behind her, jolting her back to reality, was the reminder that there was still a café to run . . . regardless of the circumstances. She rarely wore her heart on her sleeve, but today for some reason she was intensely emotional.

"De. Of course." Pivoting away from the doorway she faced her other half with sad determination. "Just reminiscing is all."

"Jalll . . . I understand." SaRae leaned into the door jamb as well observing the lunch crowd, and workers. "The sisters aren't doing so hot are they?" She asked still attempting to be low key.

"Not really."

"What do you think the real reason is? 'Cause I get the feeling it isn't us, or the café."

Maud tightened the apron strings about her belly, a faint sigh emanating from her full lips. “Where do I start?” She somewhat chuckled. “Look at Yoona over there . . . What a work horse. She runs circles around those other two, even together. I hope she knows how much she’s appreciated. Couldn’t survive without her.”

SaRae’s head nodded approvingly. Maud was right. She was hands down their best employee. If only Saffire would pick up and take off like that. But, sadly she seemed bogged down in her own left behind life and unyielding emotions. Saffron started out on the right foot, but in the course of the last few days, she too had slipped from the dogged determination she had started out with, to a lackadaisical ghost of who she had been.

“Hard to figure out those two.” She muttered, swiping her hands together as if attempting to wipe the slate clean for the day. “Come on. Standing here asking questions, isn’t getting the work done. I’ll round up Saffire, you get Saffron over there. Maybe we need to have a little pow-wow after things settle down.”

But, things weren’t going to ‘settle down’, as SaRae had hoped . . . for just then, the front door swung open and in walked one of Korea’s most popular and cherished idols. G-Dragon. It was Thursday, and he was right on time. However, today he hadn’t come alone. He strode in purposefully, his face smiling with determination, in his arms . . . a large stuffed bear. And without glancing in either direction but straight ahead, made his way around the crowded dining room toward, none-other-than . . . Yoona.

“What the hell?” Maud murmured in the background.

* * * * *

“**I**S there an idol coming in today?” The little girl asked, her face pinched as she tugged on the bottom of Yoona’s apron until the concerned employee dropped to her knees in front of her, saddened that no one had shown up yet, and lunch was nearly over. “Mommy brought me last week too, I guess we were too late.”

Yoona smiled, watching as the dark-eyed girl returned the gesture shyly.



Suddenly from behind them came a deep familiar voice, as G-Dragon stepped up grinning, the bear clutched tightly in his arms.



“How about me? Do I count as an idol?”

Swinging around excitedly, it was hard to discern who was more shocked to see him, Yoona or the child.

“OH!” Throwing her arms about his blue-jeaned legs, the girl giggled, then backed away bashfully. “Is that for me?” She asked, staring up at the large teddy bear, her small frame shaking with excitement.

G-Dragon hesitated only slightly, then winking down at Yoona, dropped the bear into the girls awaiting arms never wavering in his last minute decision. “Of course it is. It’s for the prettiest girl in the room. That’s you isn’t it?”

Blushing, she giggled caressing the warm fur of the animals back where he had laid close to the young idols heart.

“I don’t knowwww . . .” She answered still shocked and surprised that he seemed to have shown up just for her behalf.

“You are.” Yoona chimed in, hugging the child fondly, knowing that this ‘man’ she had finally hoped to have feelings for, was doing what he always did best. Being kind and loving.

Oh she knew the bear had probably been for her, but without blinking an eye, he had offered it up to a little girl who longed to see an idol, (making her day without any reluctance at all).

As the mother snapped pictures, and he signed autographs for not only her but others in the café, Yoona busied herself with cleaning up the remaining tables. Her nervous heart wouldn’t let up, noticing he continued to glance over at her waving, slightly and smiling . . . his eyes dancing with undiscovered mischief. *What WAS he up to?*

“Can you come sit with me for a minute?” He finally asked, stepping up alongside her amicably, one hand outstretched to take her own.

“Ahhh, de. I guess.”

Scanning the room for any signs of the two noonas, she slipped her fingers into his, allowing him to guide her to a table close to the rear of the restaurant. The bear had disappeared out the front door in the arms of a grinning and satisfied dark-headed girl, and along with it had gone a modicum of his confidence. Pushing her gently down into a chair, he too seemed to be eyeing the room cautiously, as if expecting someone to come interrupt them before they ever got started. But why would they? This was the ‘Cup of Hotness Café’, where Idols and their loved ones were exempt from onslaughts of reporters and crazy fangirls.

Chuckling he gently caressed her one finger across the small table for two, swallowing the lump in his throat before bursting out with . . . “I like you Yoona. I’ve liked you for a really long time now.” His eyes daring to meet hers were ablaze with passion and still held a sense of foreboding that she might not reciprocate his feelings. “I want us to date.”

“Wha? Date?”

Knowing she probably looked ridiculously startled, Yoona sucked in her breath, feeling his grasp on her fingers tighten as she reacted. *OH SHIT! That sounded like I don’t want to. Calm down Yoona. You were hoping for this.* Backing up she too gulped inconspicuously, clutching her skirt with her other free hand nervously.

“Date. I mean . . . de . . . sure. I would love that.” She finally answered quietly. “You like me? You do?”

“Of course I do. Isn’t it obvious?” His smile lit up the darkened corner, as if the sun had just burst through the clouds on a stormy day. “You know the bear was for you, arasseo?”

“I figured. And, de. Maybe it WAS sort of obvious. You liking me . . .” Now ‘she’ was blushing. Much like the small girl he had just told was “the prettiest girl in the room”.

“So . . .” Now sitting forward eagerly, he grasped his fingers around her entire wrist tugging her toward the center of the table. “Do you like me too?”

Yoona took one more glance about the emptying space signifying the fact that the noona’s were busy. *What about the rule? Was it time to confess anyway?* She had dreamed of this moment. Longed for it in fact. Fantasized about it over and over in her head. *How would he say it? What would he do?* And now . . . having watched him in one simple act of kindness, disregarding the noona’s #1 rule, her answer came quickly. “Of course I do. Isn’t it obvious?”

As they laughed together, G-Dragon spotted Young Jae's smiling photo in his place of honor between his brother and sister-in-law on the 'Couples Wall'. The café owner would be happy and proud to know that he had picked well. He knew Yoona had been his favorite.

* * * * *

MAUD, SaRae, Saffron and Saffire gathered in the small break room hosting the onslaught of roses and massive Jae-Bear, shortly after G-Dragon's descent on the café and the waning of the lunch crowd.

Looking wary and uncomfortable, Saffire picked at one nail, her eyes downcast at the freshly cleaned tile floor. Saffron not much more good-natured, kept glancing out at the dining room, smiling faintly at Yoona and her new idol interest, heads together chattering at a back table, like two love-birds. She knew if Maud or SaRae had been closer to the door, there would have been hell to pay, but covering for her new found friend, she stayed parked in that one spot, her tall frame disallowing any view from inside the cramped room.

Nudging Saffire in the arm, to look at the couple at the table she whispered. "Aren't they adorable? Remember what we talked about upstairs when we were cleaning up? We need to say something about the rule. Maybe now's the perfect time." Nodding toward the noona's it was certain the meeting wasn't going to go their way if they didn't take control right from the beginning. Saffire nodded agreeably.

Maud could see past Saffron's shoulder when she leaned over to talk to Saffire, noticing that her number one employee was perched on the edge of her seat at the very last table in the dining room gazing lovingly into the eyes of G-Dragon.

Jerking her head toward SaRae, she squinted her eyes, concern written all over her aging face. "Did you know about this?"

"Ani! Of course not. Did you?" SaRae answered (just as uneasy in the situation as her sister was).

"I wouldn't be asking if I did, now would I?" Maud hissed, totally ignoring Saffron and Saffire, heads still together, whispering between the two of them. "Bet those two knew. Look at them." She announced sure of herself.

“Maybe.” SaRae shifted positions to see the couple better. They looked more than cozy, and Yoona was ‘still’ on the clock. Not supposed to be loitering in the back ignoring her unfinished work, no matter who was there.

“The rule . . . the rule . . . the rule . . .” Maud muttered. “Young Jae would have a fit if he knew.” She added, almost despairingly.

Saffron swung her head around to face the noona’s, her eyes flashing angrily. “NO! I don’t believe he would!”

“Me either.” Saffire agreed. “He was the ultimate romantic. You should know that. If it’s true love, he would never stand in their way. Rules or not.”

Maud balked at the young women’s boldness, especially Saffire . . . even knowing she had been the recipient of the late night date in Young Jae’s dining room last evening.

“He created that rule for a reason.” She snipped, sniffing despondently her eyes misting with unshed tears.

“And it wasn’t for anyone’s benefit but yours was it?” Saffron interjected, moving toward the older woman purposefully. “I think we need to take this conversation somewhere more private.”

“I agree!” Shoving her way in between the two women, Maud stormed through the doorway and out into the hall, headed for the upstairs apartment.

Passing Yoona and G-Dragon, she feigned a weak smile, then turned away, eyes set on the stairwell. Following close behind, Saffire and Saffron skimmed next to the couple, mouthing an encouraging “hwaiting”, as they went, feeling like Young Jae’s ‘rule’ was finally about to be laid to rest . . .

* * * * *

“**I**’VE got the rest of the day off, can I come back and take you to dinner?” G-Dragon leaned back in the chair, satisfied he had gotten what he had come for. A date with the beautiful waitress he had been secretly courting on paper for weeks now.

“Like this?” Yoona smoothed her hands over the white apron, feeling down to the black slacks she always wore when working. “I don’t know. I’ll be sweaty and need to clean up first.” She begged off, wanting to say yes, but wishing she could go home first.

“Arasseo. Then give me your number, and I’ll pick you up at home. No managers . . . no drivers . . . just you and me. We’ll go someplace off the beaten path. Somewhere quiet. I’ll call you. Around 7:00. How’s that?”

“Sure. That would be fun.” Standing she re-adjusted her apron, wiping a few stray pieces of hair from her face. “I really need to get back to work. I’ve already probably put my job in jeopardy. The noona’s don’t like us to fraternize with the idols. It’s a rule they have.”

“Oops. Mianhae. I hope you don’t get in trouble.” Standing as well, he leaned over and hugged her gently, unable to resist the clean, outdoorsy smell of her hair, and softness of her shoulders against him. “I can go tell them it was my fault. Get you off the hook.” He offered quietly in her ear, before allowing her to step away from him.

“Ani. It’s okay, really. Saffron and Saffire both said not to worry. They would take care of it, if it became an issue. And Uncle Ryu . . . he always told me to follow my heart no matter what. We’re cool. Here’s my number.”

Waiting for him to punch in her cell number, she smiled as he turned toward the door. *Was she dreaming? Had he just asked her to dinner? Would he really follow through? God she hoped so. Not only could this be the start of something amazing in her life . . . maybe someday he would be her ticket out of this grueling job. She loved the café, but without Uncle Ryu, it just wasn’t the same.*

* * * * *

IT was pushing 8:00 P.M. It had been an exhausting day. Between the morning hangovers, and drama from the night before . . . to the ‘talk’ with the noona’s, both sisters were feeling the strain.

Standing side-by-side, Saffire . . . paintbrush in hand was carefully tracing out the name for a new section of the ‘Couples Wall’ called the ‘Hotness Wall’. . . while Saffron supervised.

“Are you sure that’s the right color?” She barked, hoping the bright turquoise wouldn’t be too garish for the soft muted colors of the café.

“It’s gotta be.” Saffire called back over her shoulder. “It was the only color that wasn’t dried up in the bottom of the paint can. Don’t you recognize it from the ladies restroom wall? Uncle Ryu must have been desperate when he asked for help painting.

“Oh that’s right. But, ewwww. It’s really bright don’t you think?” Saffron scrunched her nose in disapproval.

“No. It’s perfect. I love it.” Saffire waved the paint brush in the air, finally feeling in her element. “So who’s the first picture on the wall?” She asked, thinking if she had her way it would be JaeJoong.

“How about Hyun Joong in Playful Kiss?” Saffron cringed, waiting for Saffire’s snippy comment to drop.

“Ahhh. Of course it would be one of the ‘Playful Kiss’ twins first. Well . . . whatever. Okay. But, I don’t think we have any pics of either of them yet do we now?”

“I can go print one off the computer. Just give me a second.” Saffron was already turning to head upstairs, when Saffire reached out and grabbed her by the back of the shirt.

“Whoah. Wait up. This wall is supposed to be ‘special’. You remember? It’s for Idols and fans together.” Holding the almost dripping paintbrush in the air above Saffron’s head, she smiled. “It has to be taken first . . . then printed out . . . framed and mounted. So make up your mind. Who will it be? Hyun Joong or Baek Sung Jo? And it will have to be the next time he’s in the café. I’ll take the pic.”

“Hyun Joong. After all he IS one in the same.”

“Yay! You finally figured that out.” Saffire returned to the wall, sweeping a scroll around the ‘s’s in Hotness, working her way into the capital ‘W’.

“It’s good being the owner.” Saffron folded her arms, finally satisfied she and Saffire had gotten through to the noona’s about making some well-needed changes around the café’, starting with the rule and the wall.

Suddenly from behind the unsuspecting girls, their parent’s voices flew through the air like a million tiny darts aimed at the backs of their heads.

“Oh my God I can’t believe it’s come to this!” Sandra Kroes literally shrieked, hands to her cheeks in apparent embarrassment.

Father, Kyong Ryu dropped his travel bag on the nearest table . . . eyes piercing as he observed both girls, clad in dirty worn blue-jeans, sporting T-shirts that said ‘Cup of Hotness Café’ swing around to lock eyes with he and his ex-wife.

“We got here just in time.”

* * * * *