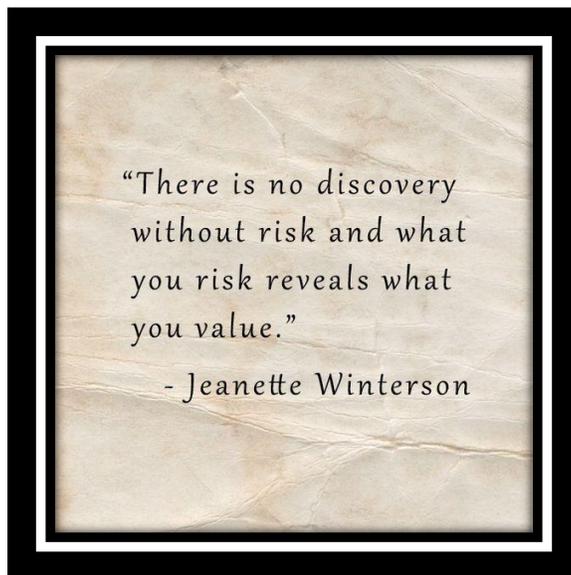


-13-

DISCOVERY



MARCH 13th, 2017 – 6:30 A.M. – CUP OF HOTNESS CAFÉ, L.A.

WITH storm clouds billowing on the horizon, the morning brought the promise of rain. Standing in the café doorway, head bakery chef, Wallace flipped the sign from ‘CLOSED’ to ‘OPEN’, staring out into the still deserted, pre-dawn street. Tired before ever beginning what he knew would be another hectic day without owner Saffron and Co. he sighed loudly. *When would the madness end? The absence of Serae at 5:30 spoke volumes. Just like yesterday and the day before, they would be lambs for the slaughter, left to keep the newly opened café afloat all alone.*

Two waitresses had already bailed, citing the fact they didn’t make enough money to deal with all this ‘shit’. He didn’t know why he wasn’t surprised. Since the accident, their social media pages were trending, and customers were flocking to the small café, hoping to get captured somewhere in a news report, managing (in the chaos) to drive potentially good employees away.

If it kept up, and Saffron didn't return soon, he wasn't sure how loyal to the red-head he could even stay. Hearing the commotion of another business day already underway in the kitchen, he smiled wanly, making his way back into the warzone, never imagining he could relate to the familiar saying, 'another day . . . another dollar.'

It didn't take long before the front door jingled open, ushering in the first 'diehard' fans of the past few days. Shaking the damp sprinkles from their jackets they dropped into the table nearest the front window, chattering loudly. And, within a short 15 minutes, the establishment began to fill up and come alive.

Reporter Stewy, stood outside the door contemplating whether now was a good time to enter or not. His stomach growling, he was a sucker for pastries and black coffee. He'd done his homework both before the opening, and again last night in continuation of this (personally rewarding) journey, researching the first Hotness Café in Gangnam, with original owner Young Jae Ryu; Saffron's second location in Japan, and all other parties involved. Not for lack of trying, the hardest to get background information on being Idols, Kim JaeJoong, Kim Hyun Joong AND lastly, Kim Junsu.

Chuckling, he thought about the implications of finally getting 'real' proof that the two sisters, lying comatose in University Hospital were indeed MARRIED to Idol friends JJ and Hyun Joong. Both celebrities were engrained in not only the S. Korean music industry but Japan's as well. At least that part of the equation fit. *Considering they were the first on the accident scene, he had obviously missed them at the opening. Someone working that day had to have seen or served them! But, who?*

Folding his umbrella, he swung the café door wide, envisioning (with today's forthcoming information) the opportunity to finally take a lengthy vacation on a beach somewhere in the Caribbean. Strolling toward a table along the 'Hotness Wall', his eyes darted from one side of the tiny establishment to the other.

His perception of it since the opening hadn't changed. He liked it. It was a quaint place, with several areas reminiscent of the Gangnam café, including the upstairs dining room and picture walls. However, after digging deeper, the biggest difference . . . was clearly L.A. (despite its

Asian population) had no need for a place catering specifically to an Idol community at the same level of the other locations. There was the disconnect.

Why did owner's Saffron Ryu and (supposed 'boyfriend'), millionaire businessman, Ian Carver III collaborate on this relatively small endeavor outside of Asia? Because she had relatives living here? She hadn't changed her residency status from S. Korea. It was all a bit confusing to say the least. And, WHY for God's sake had she let Ian get down on one knee if she was already married to Kim Hyun Joong? The idiot had ignored the question at the hospital. Someone was keeping secrets, leaving it his responsibility to find out who, and more importantly . . . why.

Dropping his coat over the back of the chair, he pivoted in a complete circle making sure he took notice of everything around him. Especially any visible proof of the presence of Kim Hyun Joong, versus Ian Carver. Not seeing anything that stood out, he checked his phone for messages before spotting a waitress headed in his direction, coffee pot and cup in hand.

“Good morning, how are you? Looks like it's gonna be a nasty one out today, huh?” Her voice soft and melodic, her smile genuine, she raised the full pot in the air temptingly, “Coffee?”

“Absolutely. And . . . I'm great, despite the rain.” Studying her closely, he zeroed in on her nametag as the hot liquid filtered down into the tall cup. “So . . . Lisa is it? Seems like the new café's gotten off to an interesting start huh?”

Still smiling the young woman shifted from one foot to the other, glancing back at the counter to see if anyone was watching. Bending her head, she responded quietly, “Yeah, INTERESTING isn't the word. Is this your first time in?”

“Actually no. I was here for the opening.” Not sure how much real information he could squeeze out of her, he reached for the steaming cup of coffee hoping the other waitress across the room couldn't overhear their conversation.

“Ahhh . . . you must KNOW someone then. Invitation only, right? Hah, funny I don't remember seeing you. But, then again . . . it WAS packed, and I was CRAZY busy.” Shrugging

her shoulders, she set the pot on the edge of the small table, reaching for her order pad. “So . . . Mr.? What can I get you?”

“No mister, you can just call me, Stewy. Ummm. How about one of those signature Korean pancakes. I had a sample the other day, and it was awesome.” Changing his focus from food back to information, he struggled to find more common ground with the average looking, dark-haired American, Lisa. “Say, I know you’re probably busy, but since you worked the opening, are you an ‘NCT’ fan by any chance? Do you like them?”

“Wow, yeahhh. Weren’t they incredible? I actually managed to get an autograph. You’re a KPOP fan too then?” Grinning broadly, her eyes wide with excitement, she shoved the order pad back into her pocket. *Talking KPOP always gave her common ground with someone, making her feel more at ease.*

“I am. Hey, I didn’t get to stay very long, but just out of curiosity were there any other, like famous names in KPOP that showed up? Seems like this would be the place to hang out, seeing ‘SM’ and Korea Town are both so close. I get the feeling, if I keep coming I’m bound to run into somebody important.”

“OH. I’m sure you will.” Responding immediately, Lisa shivered uncontrollably. *Goodness, here was a kindred spirit. She’d finally encountered a true ‘fanboy’. Most of the employees and customers alike didn’t discuss their KPOP addictions openly, even if they had them.*

“In, fact . . .” Leaning in closer her voice barely audible, she whispered, “You know of Idols, Kim JaeJoong, of JYJ, and Kim Hyun Joong, SS501, right?”

Nearly coming up off the chair, Stewy’s demeanor changed markedly. “Of course, who doesn’t? Big stars, even in KDramas.” *He didn’t have a clue what he was talking about, but research, and this short interrogation was paying off! Lisa, was about to become his best friend.*

“Well, someone invited them to the opening. Not sure why. I spotted them together at the bar right before I left my shift.” Her eyes drifting back across the room again, she added, “But, since the accident, we were warned not to mention it to anyone. There’s already been a lot of press and

stuff. You know how Idols like to keep a low profile. So, keep it on the down low, or I could lose my job.”

“Yeah, yeah. Those sleazy reporter guys. Probably making up all kinds of shit that isn’t true just to make a buck.” Doing cartwheels in his head, Stewy grinned openly. “Eh, I was just curious anyway. This place should end up being quite the watering hole for stars coming to the States once the hype from the accident dies down, don’t ya think?”

Had he gotten what he needed from her yet? Somewhat. At least her information put JJ and Hyun Joong IN the café the day of the accident. No doubt they were here at owner Saffron’s invitation. But, that wasn’t enough to shout MARRIED to social media.

“Maybe. Nobody outside this area really knows or cares about what they do. But, back in Korea . . . that’s a whole other story.”

“For sure.” Hesitating, momentarily Stewy reached into his jacket pocket snatching a ‘fake’ business card with his personal cell number on it. “Here’s my card. Call me sometime, maybe we can have dinner.” Handing it over he hoped she would contact him privately, and be willing to spill even more information.

“Wowww, MR. Stone. You’re a freelance photographer. Are you asking me on a date?” Blushing she toyed with the bottom of her apron, reaching for the coffee pot.

“No. Wellll, maybe. Yes. I mean yes . . . I AM. I think we could have some fun together. Sounds like we have a lot in common. Do you already have a boyfriend? I mean a pretty girl like you.”

“Nooo, as a matter of fact, I don’t. And, thanks for the compliment. I’d LOVE to go out with you. I’ll put this in my phone, and get that pancake for you. Like, now . . .” Rushing off, embarrassed, yet giddy, the young woman disappeared behind the counter and through the kitchen door.

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HIS sigh, loud enough to be heard over the din of conversation around him, Stewy stood up desperate for a restroom break before any more banter with potential date, ‘Ms.-Flirty-Lisa’. Making his way toward the men’s room, eyes still peeled for anything additional he might be able to use (strangely enough, like a gift from God) he spotted them.

Two photographs laying side-by-side on a small table beside the office door entry. *Was anyone paying attention?* Trying not to look suspicious, he shifted slightly from his original path leaning over to see them better.

HOLY SHIT. THIS WAS IT. Kim Hyun Joong standing arm around café owner Saffron Ryu, and a grinning Kim JaeJoong . . . looking equally cozy with her twin sister Saffire. The adrenaline flooding his veins, his heart pounded wildly, even more dollar signs popping up before him like flashing lights in a nightclub. Gulping down his excitement he bolted into the restroom, hurriedly digging out his phone.

He needed proof. He had to take a photo. And, quickly! Along with waitress, Lisa’s confirmation of their presence at the opening, the nurse’s conversations, and pictures he’d gotten from the hospital, this might absolutely seal the deal for him.

MARCH 13th, 2017 – 9:00 A.M. - UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL – SAFFRON’S ROOM

EVERY attempt Ian had made to see Saffron was being blocked by someone or something. First, it was the doctor kicking him out. Second, Maud and Serae showed up, going from room to room making sure everything was okay. Finally, after the doctor left, he figured this was his chance to speak to her alone. But . . . nooo . . . before he could take one step, a blustering Kyong stormed in with Sandra right behind him, demanding answers. Now, three hours later, the smug nurse stated Saffron was sleeping.

Why was he letting the Ryu’s walk all over him? Didn’t they realize what it meant to be his fiancé? Shit, the engagement ring he’d slid on Saffron’s finger was worth more than her precious café. Kyong wasn’t the only one who needed answers.

Recalling 2014 was a record earnings year for his corporation, Saffron (at the top of her game), was both a force in the company, and in his bed. She hadn't even met Hyun Joong yet, so why not forget him? Seemed easy enough.

Another strange thing was . . . if he remembered right, she'd never had any intention of meeting her Uncle in Vegas. Pleading work, she'd promised a long visit later in the year, when ready to make a trip back to Asia. Smiling at the woman he remembered, he wanted 'that' woman back in his life . . .

In 2014 his family had their own ideas about who he should marry. Not just anyone could become a Carver and Saffron wasn't born with the right qualification. He was so close to achieving his goal, righting a wrong, until the accident, and now because of Hyun Joong, he was losing ground.

Spying the doctor leaving Saffire's room, he buttoned his suit planning on getting his own answers. Intercepting him he put on a charming smile.

"Excuse me sir, may I have a word?"

Knowing the situation, Doctor Lee stopped, sizing up the alleged fiancé of his redheaded patient. "Sure, Mr. Carver. Could we talk and walk. I'm on rounds." The muscle in his jaw twitched as the tall charismatic man came up alongside him. *Personally, he was rooting for the husband. However, his orders were to keep Mr. Carver in the loop.*

UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL COURTYARD

UNABLE to hear his manager, Joong stepped out to the private, balcony courtyard at the opposite end of the VIP floor.

"De, she's awake. If everything checks out, I can take her home tomorrow."

Assuring him he would make the scheduled fan meet, he said his goodbye's leaning on the glass door, slipping the cell into his pants pocket. Breathing in the cool, crisp, air after the morning rain, he walked to the stone railing, observing people coming and going about their lives.



How had his gotten so complicated? The plan was supposed to be simple. Arrive in L.A. tell Saffron everything in his heart, all would be forgiven, and they would live happily ever after. Now, he wasn't so sure about the perfect ending.

Eyes closed, he lifted his face to the sun breaking through the scattered clouds, thanking God she was awake. Silently, he prayed Saffire wasn't far behind, (after all they did so many things together). As soon as JJ arrived, he would be able to relinquish his duties as her guardian, allowing him to give all his attention to Saffron, and her complete recovery.

The amnesia was a minor setback. Understanding the deception he'd perpetrated, to stay close to her, was the bigger problem. Honesty was at the top of her list and their relationship had always been built on the truth. If she found out before remembering, could it ruin their relationship?

“Hyun Joong, what's this shit about Saffron not being allowed visitors?” Marching toward the tired Idol, Ian's brows furrowed in suspicious anger. “What the hell are you trying to pull now?” Having waited all morning to see Saffron, (only to be told the family had requested no visitors), made this time, one insult too many for his already frail ego.



Joong's fatigue returned full force at hearing 'Hani's' name spoken by this irritatingly, overbearing jerk. *Didn't he have more important things to do than ruin what little happiness had managed to come his way that morning.*

Birds, nesting in the small trees on the balcony, were witness to the burning anger permeating the tranquility of their surrounds as the two men faced off (like cocks fighting for breeding rights).

“What the fuck's your problem Carver?” The usually laid-back Idol swung around to face him, his patience virtually hanging by a thread. “It was Mother's request, and I agreed.” Not forgetting the way Ian had treated Saffron that Christmas of 2014 on JeJu Island, he wasn't shocked by the animosity he felt for the EX-boyfriend. This encounter was 'years' overdue!

“You're my fucking problem, and what gives you the right to call Sandra, Mother?” Nostrils flaring, Ian refused to cower to Hyun Joong's air of superiority.

“Yah? Scared, Carver?” Holding up his left hand Joong answered truthfully, “This ring gives me the right.”

Hands low on his hips, Ian sputtered out his revulsion for ‘the husband’. “Fuck you. It’s only a matter of time before I expose you for the fraud you are. Funny how she’s already blocked you from her life.” Hesitating he continued, “Don’t look so surprised, it’s obvious she thinks she’s back in 2014. You haven’t even met yet. So, pretty sure you mean nothing to her.”

“Eh, doesn’t matter dude, she trusts me. And, if I recall . . . you were standing RIGHT there when she declared to anyone listening, that I’M her husband.” Giving a tight-lipped smile, Joong still had the upper hand, and if he had to die trying, he would keep Ian away from her for as long as was physically possible.

Stabbing the air between them with his finger (like a knife), Ian scowled, “I . . . WILL . . . SEE . . . HER . . . AND NO ONE IS GOING TO STOP ME DAMMIT.”

Seeing a glint in the bastard’s eyes, Joong stepped closer his voice amazingly controlled and quiet, “You know . . . I thought you cared about her? Should’ve guessed you’re fucking ego is more important than her health. Upsetting her into a relapse is not caring, asshole. I’m only going to say this one more time . . . Leave her alone, because Mother still has to break the news about Young Jae before she leaves the hospital.”

“Screw you. I WILL NOT. Where do you get off thinking this is your call in the first place? I don’t care WHO you SAY you are. And, that ring doesn’t prove a damned thing.” *Where was the proof? Marriage license? Registration papers? He was lying. Plain and simple.* Forcing both fists to his side, the veins in Ian’s neck popped in visible fury.

“It proves everything it needs to for the time being.” Standing his ground Hyun Joong’s eyes were steely with determination.

“You’re a pig-headed son-of-a-bitch.” Railing back insults at someone he never thought would come back into his or Saffron’s life, Ian stepped closer. “And, what about Saffire and Sienna? Who’s going to spill that little bit of news? Regardless of what YOU think, she’s strong enough for the truth. I’ve known her way longer than you, and she’s going to be livid if she doesn’t know everything, especially about her sister.

“You know NOTHING about her.” Turning, Joong walked away slamming his fist on the stone ledge, before he popped Ian in the nose. His face twisted in agony at his own stupidity, he knew there was no reasoning with this asshole.

He and Sandra had decided to follow the doctors’ suggestion, not to push Saffron to remember. He’d assured them she would recall quicker if they put her in familiar surroundings, answering any questions truthfully.

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SIRENS blared below as an ambulance entered the driveway to Emergency, reminding them this was a hospital. Grinning, Ian observed Joong’s ridged stance, sure he broken the cool exterior of his rival.

“I’ve always loved Saffron.”

Spinning on his heel, hands in his pockets, Joong regarded him with loathing, “Love? Since when is it called love to cut her off from the outside world, crush her dreams, and mold her into a trophy to dangle on your arm for everybody to envy.” Giving a short laugh he added, “Surprised Carver? She told me everything, from the moment you approached her at college to publicly dumping her on social media.”

This narcissist asshole would never know true love, why was he wasting his energy? It would be better spent on Saffron.

Strolling past him, Joong slammed his shoulder into the bastard, halting as the venomous response dripped from Ian smirking lips.

“And, you think you were any better? You used her, then left. No contact . . . nothing for two years. So, tell me? Who’s the bigger asshole?” Smelling the doubt, Ian when for the kill. “You’re so fucking stupid. You honestly think because you SHOWED UP, she’s gonna drop everything WE built together for you and your philandering, Idol lifestyle. Face it Joong, all you were was a fling . . . an adventure . . . a fucking fantasy.”



The chirping of birds broke the silence around them. Hyun Joong, realizing like he had at the opening that losing his cool wasn't the answer, refocused his thoughts on Ian's final words.

Lies, they were all lies. The letter she'd written, (the one he'd read a million times) said she loved him and couldn't forget him. Reading between the rambling, anger-scribbled lines was his Hani, asking him not to give up on them, to come and get her, prove his love. All the amnesia meant was she had to fall in love with him again. A challenge he was gladly willing to accept.

Cocking his head, he gave Ian the 'Baek Sung Jo' grin, Saffron loved. His answer . . .

"You're right Carver, I gave her all of that, And, I plan on doing it for the next fifty years. Because she's MY woman." Giving him the finger he growled, "Fuck you, do your worst. It'll never be good enough to beat me." Swinging the door open, he strolled through, putting as much distance between him and the bastard (trying to believe his own bullshit).

3:00 P.M. - UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL HALLWAY

STROLLING Sienna purposefully toward Saffron's open door, Kyong noticed Sandra, one hand on Saffron's elbow helping her out the door, for a walk down the hall. Not sure what to do with his emotions, they collided inside his gut like nothing short of a cosmic explosion. The daughter's who no longer existed as such, one alive and well . . . walking on her own, the other . . . lying trapped in her own body, close to death only footsteps away. Not to mention Sandra, Sienna, Ian, Junsu, and soon to be arriving, Kim JaeJoong.

There was no disappearing around a corner, no avoiding the situation, no turning back. Confrontation was inevitable. His chest rising and falling with each exaggerated breath, he began to wonder if his brother Young Jae wasn't watching from above, laughing at the state of his uneasiness.

He'd already alienated Sandra by siding with Ian over Kim Hyun Joong. But, what did he really know about the Korean Idol? Not much, and the bottom line was . . . Ian could and WOULD make his life a living hell going forward if he didn't play the ally.

But, the longer he played 'Russian-Roulette' with Sandra's feelings, the further apart they grew. In a mere two and a half days the life he thought he'd managed to secure, was crumbling

like a rotted building beneath him. Standing in silence, he warred with himself until anger overtook him.

Why was it Saffron (who'd shunned him, even after groveling at her feet years ago), stood walking of her own accord? While Saffire, his beating heart, he feared might never walk or hold her precious daughter again? This was so unfair!

The thoughts he couldn't control, flew from his mouth like angry wasps in search of fresh flesh to sting. "This was all your fault!" he shouted throwing a finger out at Saffron accusingly. "Why are you awake, and walking while my Saffire nearly lost her life?"

MY SAFFIRE. Stunned, Sandra drew both hands up to Saffron's ears hoping to shield her from the wrath of the man she thought had spent the last several years vowing to change and turn over a new leaf. *It was bad enough Saffron had no recollection of Saffire at this point, or who the child was in the stroller. But, for her to hear Kyong blame her for an accident that clearly, she had no control over was more than even she could bear.*

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