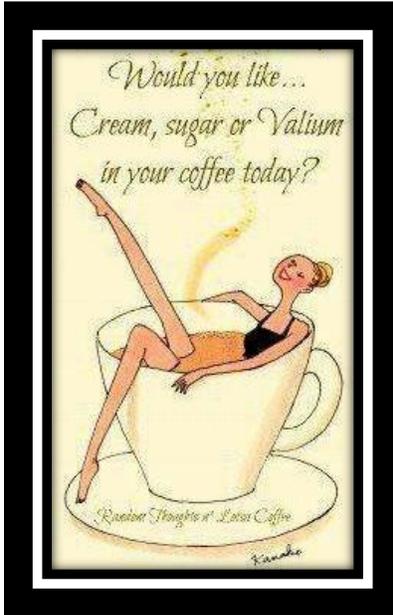


CHAPTER Seventeen

(Part 2)

“Would you like . . .

Cream, sugar or Valium in your coffee today?”



Sunday, December 21st, 2014

1:30 P.M.

Cup of Hotness Café – Café bar

Saffron bit into her sandwich, letting the mayonnaise dribble down her chin before swiping it with the corner of her napkin. “So, let’s talk about some of that ‘crap’ upstairs. A lot of it does seem sort of, well . . . unnecessary.” Scooting closer to the counter she added questioningly, “You said everyone has secrets. Certainly Mother does. So, what do you think Uncle’s hiding?”



Eyes focused on the back wall of the café bar Saffire kicked her legs against the stool, powerless to control her tendency to fidget. Unable to figure out herself what secrets might possibly be hidden among Uncle’s things in the café she shrugged. “Don’t know. Could be anything. I have secrets too.” Wriggling up against her sister’s side, she picked a chip off her plate, crunching loudly as she chewed.

“Why should I care about your secrets? I asked about Uncle’s.” Frowning, Saffron slapped her fingers away from the food. “Eat your own chips.”

“Ummm, well . . . obviously since he had a ‘secret’ dining room, he probably had a ‘secret’ love. And, we haven’t quite figured out who that might be, correct?”

Saffron nodded agreeably. “Nope, sure haven’t. Could be anybody. Might even be somebody we know, or have met before. You never saw that tall, skinny blonde lady that came to clean his apartment? I was too young to remember her name. All I know is, he always looked at her like she hung the moon. You think maybe it was her?”

“Someone actually came and cleaned up after him? I find that hard to believe. He never let anyone touch his music room, let alone someone he’d be having a ‘thing’ with.” Clinging to the bar top Saffire swirled the spoon round and round the middle of the steaming cocoa cup pondering her sister’s presumptive response.

Hearing information she was unfamiliar with, a stunned Saffron, swiveled on her seat as well, one hand grasping Saffire’s thin wrist, stopping the circular motion of her spoon.

“Music room? There was no music room in his apartment.” Suddenly, the blonde cleaning lady wasn’t taking top billing any more. It was about the lack of a music room in an apartment she’d visited many, many times over.

“Are you sure you came to the same apartment I did?” Squinting at her sister, Saffire thought maybe she had just been too young to remember a piano, or music room. Or maybe Uncle hadn’t allowed her free reign of the entire apartment, the way he had her. Why was this all so strange?

“Yeah, of course I’m sure.” Hands out, (drawing a picture in mid-air), Saffron allowed herself to take an imaginary walk back through the space she loved to visit. It had two bedrooms with a huge kitchen that led directly into the living room. Big, spacious and open. Sort of like a loft.”

“Huge kitchen? What the? We could barely scoot around each other’s butts in that tiny thing, and I was way smaller than I am now. Shoot, I didn’t even have a room of my own. I slept in his bed, and he always took the pull out sofa in the living room. We didn’t stay home a lot. That I DO remember.” Stopping midstream Saffire too began to envision the small apartment, cozy and

cluttered, much like the upstairs apartment they shared over the café. “AND! The roof . . . That was the place I loved the most . . . God, how I loved to practice up there. Made me feel like I was on top of the world.” Jostling Saffron’s arm, she was certain her sister was just having a memory fart. How could she NOT remember the amazing rooftop overlooking the sights and sounds of the city below? “Now, tell me you were never there. You couldn’t possibly have forgotten that, huh?” Anxious to hear the stories and remembrances of her other half’s precious memories she clung to her arm childishly.

Blinking unconsciously, Saffron’s fiery red hair swayed around her nodding head. “Rooftop? Sorry, sis no rooftop. But, I did love going to the courtyard filled with cherry blossoms to read and think.” Lost in her thoughts of warm lazy afternoons, settled between the cushions of a weathered lounge chair, listening to the honey bees overhead, book in hand, she whispered, “Lots and lots of sweet smelling cherry blossoms. It was so far from the madness of Mother’s Chicago ice palace. Hands down, it was my favorite safe haven against the world I hated most. At least you had the beach, summer and sunshine year round.” Her voice waning, she mulled over how different her life might have been without the cold bitterness of long winters, cooped up in an over-decorated room she despised.

“It sounds wonderful, but trust me California isn’t all that special. I just got used to it after a while. Don’t you think that’s really odd though? Us visiting two distinctly different places?”

“I guess so.” Sliding her plate off to one side, Saffron had to agree. “My summers were spent near the Yeongdong Market. We did a lot of shopping. He taught me everything I know about cooking and baking.”

“Hmmm.” Dropping her head to her hands Saffire pondered the situation carefully drawing on her own fond memories of Uncle. “Well, I remember his place being in the heart of Seoul, close to the Nagwon Music Mall. Lots of action and street entertainers. He gave me my first violin.” Resting her cheek on the cool counter top she sighed. “Damnnn, this goes way deeper than I thought.”

“Wowww. For real. So, that means besides the café, he had two more separate apartments. Wonder why?” Scanning for messages on her cell, Saffron’s calculating mind began trying to make sense of their Uncle’s peculiar behavior not only prior to his death but, years earlier as well. What was he hiding from the family or the world that didn’t allow him to bring both of them into one apartment, even at different times?

“I can’t imagine.” Stumped as well Saffire couldn’t imagine how the man who’d basically molded her into the woman she was today seemed more of a mystery now, than he’d been the day he died.

“What do you think happened to them? I don’t think they weren’t mentioned in the Will. Already sold? If so I wonder what he did with the proceeds. Charity maybe? There wasn’t a large inheritance of cash or money in his bank account that was mentioned or someone would’ve gotten it. Right?” Saffron was aware that the questions were piling up quicker than the answers.

“I guess . . . Just more secrets.” Clicking her nails nervously on the slick coffee bar, Saffire wasn’t sure how to take this newly discovered information about living arrangements and a secret lover. Uncle was sounding more and more like the lead actor in a suspense drama, with her and Saffron . . . the unsuspecting fallout.

Feeling the electricity of uncertainty surrounding them, Saffron spun in fast crazy circles atop the rickety bar stool stretching one long piece of hair down her chest, twisting the ends uneasily, popping questions out quicker than Saffire could effectively respond.

“OMG, I wonder why he went to all this trouble to keep us separated, even here in Korea? That just baffles me. Doesn’t it you? And, let’s be real . . . why would they ALL do it? What would’ve possessed all of them to come up with such a ludicrous plan? Do you think he was being bribed? Or threatened maybe? He wasn’t a vindictive man.” Finally stopping her dizzying quest she pounded one fist on the bar in anger. “Shit Saffire, didn’t he think we would want to know about each other at some point?”

“I dunno. I wish I did. We wouldn’t be here if we knew the reasons. He wasn’t vindictive, but . . . you’ve seen Dramas . . . there had to been underlying circumstances. It’s never cut and dry where Korean families and relationships are concerned. We both know that from first-hand experience.”

Thinking back on their little fiasco in JeJu with the parents, Junsu, and especially Ian, she hated to throw the man under the bus who had spent the last twenty-something years raising her but it just seemed to make more sense.

“What about Fathers involvement? I’m finding out a lot of things about him I don’t especially like lately. It wouldn’t surprise me if he wasn’t at the bottom of all this.”

Saffron paused, having had to come to grips about the father who had treated her with less interest than the neighborhood garbage collector.

“Come to think of it, me either. Actually, wouldn’t surprise me if Mother and Father were both involved, don’t you think? Has to be why she’s coming clean with the two of us. The guilt’s finally getting the best of her. It’s probably a good thing they aren’t leaving Korea just yet. I’d like something more concrete to go on before they rush off.”

“True. Maybe I’ll start a list of questions. Should we call and ask them over? I would LOVE to pick their brains after finding out about all this.” Squirming in the seat, Saffire finally jumped up, feeding her need to continue the quest they’d started upstairs, her mind reeling with things she’d been wanting to ask of her folks ‘together’ for years now.

“Sure, why not. We need answers right? I can call when we get back upstairs.” Thinking out loud, Saffron added, “Doesn’t it seem odd that out of all the photos we’ve gone through, there are none of the three of them past their pre-teen years? Just the one on the couple’s wall.”

Finger to her chin thoughtfully, the peculiar photo situation was a bit of a quandary. Usually when one kept albums, journals, articles and photos they spanned a lifetime . . . not just a set amount of years. It was almost as if someone had stepped in and taken the rest of Uncle’s memorabilia, either off-site or disposed of it.

“You know, it didn’t really dawn on me earlier but, you’re right. All there is, is the newspaper article, and the pictures down here on the wall. If there WAS a triangle or secret love affair, maybe the housekeeper was after Uncle or Father and mother disapproved. You know how jealous she can be.” Pausing momentarily Saffire added, “If you think about it, introducing someone else in the middle of a longtime friendship with the brothers would’ve probably set her off. Imagine I’m besties with Junsu and JJ and some girl weasels’ her way into the middle of that?”

Using herself as an example, she knew, (oddly enough) that was literally what had happened when the ‘photographer’ in JeJu cozied up to JaeJoong. She felt jealous and hateful.

“Well, I would bet you’d be pissed. And, surprisingly I wouldn’t put THAT past Mother either. Like I said, calculating to the end. Soooo . . .” Finger between her teeth, Saffron thought about the ramifications of the dilemma. “Maybeee, they knew this housekeeper person even when she was young. Uncle had a thing for her, and to cover his affair (considering he was a

major force in the musical arena), he took her on as his housekeeper, telling everyone she was the only one he trusted to have access to his private life. Ooooo, maybe she's the one who took all the rest of his stuff. Could be she destroyed it. OH my GOD! I'll bet that's it! But, wait a minute? If that's the case. Why didn't she ever go clean up at his other apartment?"

Jumping into the story, Saffire came alive. "Come on Saffron. Isn't it obvious he wouldn't 'want' her there when we were visiting? I'll bet she ended up coming by accident. Or, maybe it was a time when you came a week early or something. Seems like Uncle was pretty good at covering himself, all the way around."

"Then it's obvious you never met her." All Saffron could recall was a slender, bit of a woman, with a stark upward bun, and large dark eyes. Quiet and respectful, she whisked about the vast apartment in record time, never smiling and rarely speaking unless spoken to. If Uncle did indeed have a love affair with the unusual woman, she definitely knew her place.

"Nope. Can't say that I did." Thinking about the Saffron's earlier description of her did make Saffire wonder however, if after her assessment, it couldn't be a possibility. The vision of the woman with Uncle in the dining room had been tall, slender, and light-haired. But, still . . . the housekeeper? That seemed a little farfetched even for him. Her typically dreamy mind suddenly drawing a complete blank, she turned just when a call buzzed from Saffron's cell beside her on the counter.

* * * * *

1:30 P.M.

Gangnam, S. Korea – Hyun Joong's Apartment

FORCING down aspirins to ward off his hangover, Hyun Joong grimaced at the bad taste left in his mouth. Sleeping late hadn't worked and unlike JJ, he had an evening schedule. Dark circles and a foggy brain wouldn't help with the interview. Setting down the tea mug he picked up his phone.

He wanted to call Saffron, already she'd thanked him for the DVDs and they had been texting for the last couple hours. The fact that she was accepting his silly (and he hoped romantic) texts was making him giddy with happiness . . . was it okay for a man of his age to be giddy? Maybe he should keep that to himself, he certainly didn't need Yoochun and JaeJoong all up on his case more than they already were.

The phone rang between his fingers, drawing his attention away from the daydream of Saffron, a scowl replacing his smile at seeing the Caller ID . . . Chung A. Glancing up at the clock, he couldn't imagine why the hell she was calling. He was going to see her in a couple of hours. As the television droned on in the background he stared into the blinking screen. Third ring, he should answer . . . it could be important. Fourth ring . . . taking a deep breath, his finger hovered over the pulsating green light, then off it went and his voicemail came on.

Releasing the tension with his breath, he was glad he didn't have to deal with the 'bitch from hell', just yet. A shiver ran down his spine at the gravity of the lifetime commitment he would be forced to accept with this crazy woman, if indeed she proved to be pregnant.

Rising, he squeezed the phone in the palm of his hand, taking the mug to the kitchen, rinsing it and placing it in the sink. "Stop being a coward." Scolding himself, he leaned on the granite counter his face going blank as he listened to the message she'd left.

"Damn." Eyeing the fat envelope JJ called 'blood' money, laid almost peacefully next to his car keys, she talked about wanting to meet early, mindlessly rattling on and on, 'blah-blah-blah'. He had stopped paying attention or caring after 'meet early'. And, even though he agreed with JJ about the money, he was still going to pay it, if for no other reason than to simply get her the 'hell' out of his life.

With his previously happy mood destroyed, frustration took over because once again, she was calling all the shots. Saffron had said it best. Chung A still had him by the balls. Shoving his wallet and keys into his pants he firmly resolved that the next time he saw Saffron he would tell her everything about his past relationships . . . all of them, including HyeSu. Pulling the ball cap over his dark scruffy head of hair, he headed out into the cold, snowy day.

* * * * *

1:45 P.M.

Gangnam, S. Korea – Out on the street

DROPPING the lighter into her purse, Chung A squinted through the falling snow at Hyun Joong, parking across the street from where she stood shivering in the cold.

Studying her while she fidgeted from one foot to another, Joong's mind registered the clicking sound of her nails echoing off the buildings and the unlit cigarette hanging from her

dry lips. Noticing the hard lines of her face he couldn't believe he'd been attracted to her. *Had she always looked that way? Cold, ugly, and desperate.*

“Damn I needed this cigarette,” Sniffing in the frigid air, she connected her nails obsessively, still trying to hide it from him. *Why the hell was he sitting in the car?*



Even more than a smoke, her mission today was money. So far she had avoided his request for trips to the clinic but, thankfully that would be over soon. After the fight with the redheaded bitch, she could tell he had lost his patience, it was time to cut her losses and leave the country. If her plan worked she would have enough money to set her up for a long, long time.

Turning to ignore him, there was no way she would venture across the street like a common hooker. She did have ‘some’ pride left. Pacing before the store window she continued shivering, her eye catching the baby crib, decked out in frothy, pink, lace. One hand unconsciously rubbing the cheap, scratchy wool of her coat she licked her chapped lips, recalling the horrible event that had given life to the plan she was now executing. If she was being honest, Hyun Joong had been distancing himself from her even ‘before’ her trip to the Emergency Room.

The memory of antiseptic burning her nose, the coldness of the room, nurses buzzing around spouting off heart rate, and oxygen levels, along with the excruciating pain ripping through her body was unexpectedly real to her once again. Sure she was dying and ready to ask the nurse to call him, when the doctor informed her of the miscarriage. Ignorant of the pregnancy in the first place, she began to realize this was a way for her to continue hanging on to him. As her body rejected the new life from her womb, a plan to trap her boyfriend Kim Hyun Joong, formed in its wake.

Only now nothing was working. She had lost him for good and even if she hadn't miscarried he wouldn't have married her just for the baby's sake. Since leaving JeJu he'd ignored all of her calls and texts but, this one. The inevitable had finally happened. It seemed she was dead to him.

Carefully putting the cigarette back into the pack she tried not to bend it, longing for the sweet taste of the smoke filling her lungs, calming her nerves and giving her courage to finish what she had started.

“Annyeong my love.” The endearment falling away in the wind around her, she waved watching him approach through the whiteness, his boots crunching the icy snow on the road.

Nodding his head without answering he raked her over in the tasteless, winter coat. *What in the hell did he ever see in her? She was like despair, a cancer he had to cut out of his life or she would drag him down into a black hole, sucking him dry.* Shoving one hand deeper into his pocket, he crushed the thick envelope of cash, wondering how he ever thought this woman would replace HyeSu in his heart.



Stepping up to face her, he scanned the quiet street, noting only a few people out on a Sunday afternoon with most of the shops being closed. Grabbing her wrist and dragging her to the passenger side of the car, he opened the door indicating she should get in. Feeling too exposed out in public, he slid into the security of the driver’s seat beside her.

Sitting in silence, he stared out the front window, gathering his thoughts. In only a matter of minutes the blanket of snow would make them invisible to the outside world. Licking his lips he spoke, his voice tired and flat. “Why the scene at Jeju? What the fuck did you hope to gain by doing that?”

Unaware her nails clicked together, echoing in the dead space in the car, Chung A collected her courage, venom spewing from her mouth as her hate for Saffron surfaced. “Ask your slut, she started it.”

Gripping the wheel, Hyun Joong’s knuckles went white. He should have known. With distaste visible in his eyes, he turned on her growling, “You’re a DAMNED LIAR Chung A. You forget I was there. I saw everything. All she did was defend herself.” What he really wanted to do was open the door and kick her out into the cold, snowy street, on her ass. Treat her as badly as she had treated Saffron.

Speechless, she winced, cowering into the door, her head pressed against the frosty window. Observing the set of his jaw, and hard line of his mouth aware she’d crossed the line.

There it was, every reason he needed to be done with her for good. Mustering up every bit of restraint possible his words cut loudly through the silence. “I guess I need to make myself perfectly clear this time. WE ARE OVER. FINISHED. I want you the FUCK OUT OF MY LIFE.

All I've been doing is wasting my time. I don't love you. Never will. If we find out today that you're pregnant I'll take responsibility for the child and that's it."

Tearful with fright at the coldness in his brown eyes pinning her to the spot, Chung A was sure he was crazy. As pissed off as he'd gotten in the past, he'd never spoken to her like he had just now. God, she was craving a cigarette so bad she had the shakes.

Releasing his hands from the steering wheel, he fisted them in his lap, his voice going monotone without a second glance to her cowering beside him. "Here are my conditions. I want you out of the dance team immediately. There better not be any media show up on what happened on JeJu and if you ever talk 'to' or 'about' Saffron again . . . well trust me, you don't want to know what will happen." Continuing to hold himself at bay, he caught his breath observing the dissipating snow already blanketing the windshield. "And, lastly . . . if there is a child . . . I want custody. There is no way in hell, I'm gonna let you raise my child."

Risking his anger she bit back loudly, "Bastard. How do you expect me to survive if I leave the tour?" Whimpering at his sudden movement, her eyes flew closed, holding up her hands in defense as something heavy landed squarely in her lap.

Bastard? Did he hear her right? Did she really think he was 'that' kind of a man? To leave her homeless? Staring her down in disbelief, he started the car, letting go of his breath, watching as it clouded up between them.

"There's more than enough there to get you through until you find another job. Meet me at the clinic in two hours." He couldn't spend another minute in her presence or he would do something they would both regret.

"And, if for some reason you don't show up, I can assume everything we had over the last year has been a con . . ." Turning on the wipers he eked out a meager smile. The snow was letting up, the sun beginning to peek through the clouds. Maybe he could salvage the day after all. Leaning over her, he opened the door, "Don't ever show yourself to me again," dismissing her as if she had never existed.

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1:45 P.M.

Gangnam, S. Korea – Hotness Café

HAND in the air, Saffron snatched the phone before Saffire could see who was calling. “Hold on. Maybe it’s Hyun Joong again. We’ve been texting.”

Rolling her eyes, Saffire quipped, “Of course, he’s as relentless as JJ. Maybe worse. Tell him to wait. My guess is, we’re probably gonna be here all day.” Another buzz from her own phone only served to reiterate what she already knew. Shaking her head in disbelief, she attempted to ignore it, to no avail. Muttering, “Damn” under her breath she stared down into the message . . . from Junsu. It was just getting worse. A knot in her stomach she typed in a smiley face hoping that would give him enough to go on without words. Would this infernal ‘triangle’ never go away?

“Naww . . . it’s not him. Saffron’s voice echoed her disappointment at seeing SaRae’s name pop up instead of Hyun Joong’s. “Annyeoghaseyo Auntie.”

“Oh good! Saffron honey, you answered. Are you and Saffire BOTH back?”

“Yep. What’s up? Other than the café being closed, is something wrong? You sound stressed.”

“Oh Lord honey we’re so sorry about you girls coming home to that but, the two of you should know what’s about to happen. Your father’s sisters are on their way over there. Said they’d be arriving sometime after 3:00. They wanted a cell number for one of you but, you know me. I’d die before giving them anything to go on. And, when I told them the café was closed and you were on holiday, they said they get a warrant to search the premises. One way or another they’d get in. I didn’t know what else to do but, call and warn you.”

“A warrant? What the hell for?” Saffron knew it was the holidays and it was no secret they weren’t at the top of the relatives Christmas list but threatening them with a Search Warrant? That was ludicrous.

Hesitating on the other end of the line, SaRae muttered, “I don’t rightly know sweetie. Something or someone’s put a bug up their butts. I can’t believe they still think they can get the café. They have to know that’s a done deal.”

Jumping from the bar stool angrily, Saffron lifted the cell from her ear mouthing to a curious Saffire. “The aunts from hell are on their way over with a freaking Search Warrant. Auntie doesn’t know why.”

“Dear God Auntie. What else do we possibly have that they want? The freaking sofa? Bed rolls? Or maybe they’re after the damned 1960’s magazines.” Now she was really getting pissed. Of all the stupid, asinine things to do, come knocking after the reading and final dissolution of Uncle’s Will, just to cause trouble.

SaRae’s voice on the other end was apologetic. “Mianhae . . . I wish I knew. I should’ve called to tell you they came over right after you left for JeJu. Barged inside that day too saying they needed to search the apartment. I refused to let them, and they huffed off saying they’d be back with a Search Warrant. Damn, Young Jae’s probably watching down on all this, horrified.” Sounding close to tears, she kept going, hoping to make the level-headed Saffron understand none of this was her fault.

“That’s one of the reasons we decided to close up the café until after Christmas. Things were so slow, and I didn’t want any trouble during the holidays.” Pausing again, she sniffed sadly. “I knew you girls had your own issues going on, what with your folks being here.”

Now it was all beginning to make sense. So, the relatives from hell were crawling out of their coffins hoping to seek out some more proof that could usurp her and Saffire’s claim to the café. What did they know about Uncle and the damned apartment that she and her sister didn’t? Once again, it was all about the money. Mother was a millionaire and Father wasn’t far behind. Maybe with luck one of them could just pay them off and they would slink away. But, sadly she didn’t think that would be the case. Were they after compensation for having the family name tarnished by the very existence of Uncle’s questionable café? One could only speculate.

“It’s okay SaRae. We’ll watch out for them. They can search all they want but, they won’t find anything. Saffire and I have already torn this place upside down. There’s not another copy of the Will. And, even if there was, we would’ve already come across it. You did the right thing, closing up for Christmas. We’ll make it up during the New Year, don’t you worry.”

“Gamza honey. We’d come over for moral support but, poor Maude’s laid up with her arthritis today, and with the snow, it’s just impossible. Please be careful. They’re a couple of greedy, heartless bitches those two. Never did like ‘em. Nope, never did.”

“You go ahead and take care of Maude. Thanks for the heads up, we’ll be ready.” Laying the cell on the counter, facing (a more than interested) Saffire, the ‘tornado’ Saffron normally kept at bay began to swirl inside her stomach.

Bitches was right. How dare they come snooping around, threatening the Aunties and demanding access to their private apartment and personal things? That meant not only did they know she and Saffire were out of town, they figured they could finagle what they wanted despite them being here. What if indeed, it was about the Will? Contesting it at this stage of the game could mean closing the café in the interim. It would be disastrous for them all.

“Lost my appetite sis. We need to get back upstairs, there’s still lots of stuff to go through. Maude is right. They are a couple of stupid freaking bitches. And they aren’t gonna get their greedy little paws on this café if I have anything to say about it. Have you seen anything important enough in all this stuff to get a Search Warrant for?” Dumping her half-eaten sandwich in the sink, Saffron waved Saffire to follow her.

“Nope. Just a bunch of old picture boxes, and the secret door leading to the dining room. I’m not worried and neither should you be. Let ‘em freaking look.” Saffire sniffed, hiking her sweat pants up as she padded toward the wooden stairs. Even so, the light-heartedness of the day all of a sudden seemed burdened with more impending drama.

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2:45 P.M.

Cup of Hotness Café – Uncle’s Dining Room

THE second box finally emptied of its contents, produced nothing of interest to relatives. What it did contain however, was a myriad of items, including scrapbooks for each of the twins, (from the time they were babies clear up until they graduated high school); a song journal of original songs written and composed by Young Jae; and a recently dated list of items that needed to be tended to, penned in his own handwriting. Among them . . . changing the Will, with a large check mark beside it, scribbled ‘done’, across it in red ink.

Whatever their father’s sister’s thought they’d be entitled to in the ‘first’ copy of the Will, had obviously been eradicated by the writing of the second and final copy. Laying the note out flat

across the table Saffire was satisfied that when they came knocking, this was all that needed to be produced. Hopefully, along with them, the café were safe.

Parked side-by-side on the hard wooden bench, wrapped tightly in blankets to stave off the cold each of them scanned their respective scrapbooks, amazed at the complexity and care by which someone had bothered to assemble them.

Perusing pictures, mementos, drawings and report cards . . . finally came the letters, one written from Mother to Uncle every year on their birthday, like clockwork. Year after year, of poignant informative letters, keeping him updated on all their activities in the States. Things like, mentioning how excited Saffron was to have visited with him the summer she turned thirteen. And, in Saffire's, how attending events, and concerts, she had quietly observed her, unnoticed in the background.

Remembering how she'd felt about mother's absence in her life growing up, as she'd been handed the antique violin, brought fresh tears to Saffire's already weary eyes. *Why had Sandra Kroes spent an eternity being someone she wasn't, only to suddenly come clean?* Surprised and confused, she just didn't understand.

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“DON'T read anymore.” Pleading for the girls to give up on the letters and move on to something else Young Jae paced, in as much as his feathery light feet could touch the hard floor beneath him. “Put the boxes away. I don't think I'm ready for the outcome.”

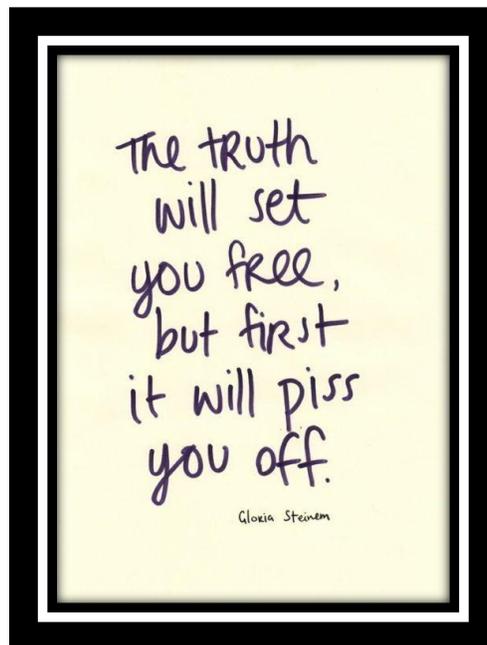
Some time ago he was . . . but, ultimately now faced with the reality of it, he wasn't. Once the truth came out, he would never have this opportunity again. He felt it. The heavens were swirling with anticipation of his arrival. Now, he was suddenly apprehensive and afraid. They wouldn't be a part of his daily life anymore. He couldn't hover, watching them while they slept, wrap his invisible arms around them when they wept, or laugh with them in their happiness. They would cease to be the center of his existence.

No matter how he ached to keep Sandra alive he'd given her up years ago but, this . . . this would be no easy feat. They needed to finish their investigation and save it for another day. Let Christmas be a festive, fun-filled time this year. They were in love. He could manipulate this to some degree. Or so he thought . . .

Folding the final letter, Saffron held it securely in her lap, fingering the already worn edges. “Saffire. Why was Mother writing about us like this to Uncle? It all seems extremely personal. I didn’t think he cared THAT much about our lives? What are we missing here?”

“Beats me. Maybe she just wanted to keep him updated. Another question on the list we should ask when she gets here.” Still swiping random tears from her flushed cheeks, Saffire could only imagine what had been going on for years, that they were both clueless about right under their noses. Now, torn between sadness, disappointment and anger, she couldn’t wait to get her hands on her parents.

Saffron’s red head popped up at the clanging of the front door bell downstairs asking, “Did you hear that?”



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