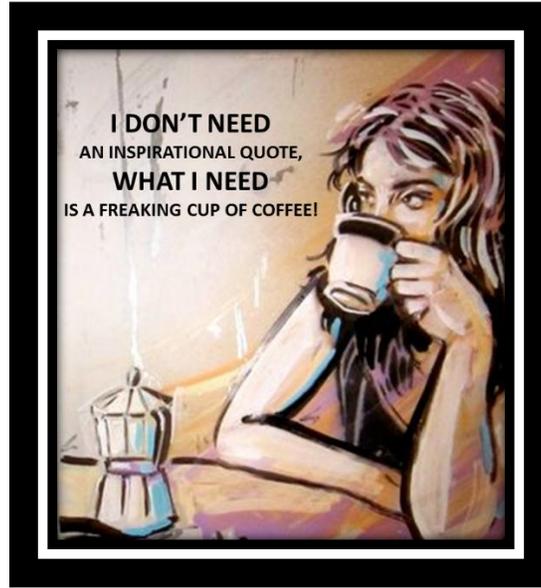


CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

**“I don’t need an inspirational quote,
what I need is a freaking cup of coffee!”**



Monday, December 22nd, 2014

9:00 A.M.

Cup of Hotness Café – Apartment

CLOSING the tube of lipstick, Saffron stood at the bathroom mirror critically inspecting her makeup. After the emotional roller-coaster she’d been riding for the last few days she definitely needed a break.



“Saffire you ready?” Exiting, she sashayed thru the cluttered living room and into the bedroom she and her sister shared ever since coming to S. Korea. Arms folded under her chest she stared at the lump on the sleeping mat. *Now what would become of the plans made to go Christmas shopping yesterday morning?* “Damn her.” Muttering under her breath, clearly the unresponsive Saffire was being selfish, egotistical, and self-servicing. *Probably acquired those traits from Mother, among other things.*

Snapping her mouth shut at Saffire's reluctance to deal with the situation and the day, she flipped her red hair behind one shoulder disappointedly. *It wasn't the end of the world. So the one person they'd known as 'Uncle' turned out to be their real father. Their folk's confession yesterday had turned her world upside down too but, was hiding in a corner crying at the injustice of life going to help?*

Talking down at the lifeless figure, she sighed in spite of herself. "This is no way for a Ryu to act. I don't know about you but, that's not how I was raised. Mother always told me, all a woman needs is a strong cup of coffee, a tube of red lipstick and she can tackle the world."

For her, today was the same as any other day. Having had her coffee this morning she had already made the decision to lock her emotions away (much like she did in the corporate world) and focus on the future. Now, wasn't the time to examine her feelings on the admissions made last night. After all, it was Christmas . . . she had started a new life . . . had a new boyfriend and wanted to celebrate that fact.

"Really! I know you can hear me. Come on, you promised we would go shopping together." Whining like a spoiled child she kicked at the bump on the sleep mat. Nothing. Reaching down she tugged on the blanket flinging it off her sisters back.

"Ughhh . . ." Jerking the cover out of Saffrons' hands Saffire brought it back up over her face, only her red-rimmed, swollen eyes visible to the impatient redhead. "Go away dammit. I don't feel good . . ." Peeping out from under the corner of the blanket she squinted against the bright stream of light coming from the only window in the room. *She felt dead . . . betrayed by the most important people in her life and now freaking Saffron wanted her to go shopping. The cold-hearted bitch, didn't she feel anything?*

"NO. What you expect me to do is enable you. I'm not doing that. Come on, get your ass up. Shopping will be good for you. Besides you need to get some gifts for the people you love . . . Remember? Like JJ maybe." Reading the anger in the pinched eyes staring back at her, she recalled the drama at JeJu, their fight after her first night with Hyun Joong and now the parents, realizing it had to be all about, sister Saffire who was being a typical drama queen. "God, you're so pathetic. Get over yourself."

"F.U." Her middle finger in the air, Saffire re-covered her head, dismissing her sister bluntly, muttering, "Leave me alone . . . I can't deal with you right now."

Not caring how Saffron felt she turned over curling back into a ball and the sobbing started all over again.

“Fuck you too. Cry the day away. See if I care. I’ll go without you. I’m not letting Mother, Father, OR you ruin my holiday.” Spinning on her stockinged heel Saffron’s lower lip quivered uncontrollably as she held in the tears. *She didn’t need them. None of them.*

Moments later, to the sound of scuffling boots, more mumbling and finally the slamming of the door, Saffire peeled the quilt off her head and sat up. *Why did she have to ‘suck it up’ for her damn sister’s sake anyway? She didn’t understand. She hadn’t spent years in the same house with a man who proclaimed to love her as his daughter, only to find out it was all a lie. Could she ever forgive him?*

Pounding her fist on the bare floor in anger, she felt much the same way as the night she’d crept into the café after her horrific departure from JeJu Island. The small cluttered bedroom bespoke yesterday’s frenzied discovery of Uncle . . . no, Father’s hidden boxes in the wardrobe. JaeBear, nose to the floor laid sprawled out at the foot of the bed roll, his thin ripped arm crushed beneath his massive belly.

She felt like a child again. Unsure of her past, present or future. Whiling away in limbo, waiting for the miracle she knew would never happen. The blinking light on her phone drew her attention back away from her own dismal thoughts. Picking it gingerly from beside her she scrolled down long enough to see in the course of the night, she’d received numerous texts from various sources, and more than one message.

9:30 SARAE – SAFFIRE. DID THE SISTER’S COME? DID THEY FIND ANYTHING? CALL ME

10:00 JUNSU – EVENING LOVE. HOPE UR GETTING SOME WELL-NEEDED REST. I’M WORKING HARD HERE IN THE FREEZING COLD. MISS U. TALK WHEN I GET BACK IN A FEW DAYS. SARANGHAE OPPIA.

10:15 JAEJOONG – YOU NEVER CALLED ME BACK. IS EVERYTHING OK? WHAT HAPPENED W/UR FAMILY? I WAS GOING 2 COME ON OVER, BUT THOUGHT MAYBE U NEEDED MORE TIME. CALL ME. PLEASE!

10:30 MOTHER – SAFFIRE DEAR. ARE YOU ALRIGHT? I SENSED YOU WANTED TO TALK LONGER. CALL ME IF YOU NEED ANYTHING. I’LL BE HERE FOR ANOTHER FEW DAYS. PLEASE DON’T BE ANGRY AT US.

10:35 FATHER – SWEETIE. CALL ME. THERE’S MORE TO BE SAID. I KNOW YOU’RE STUNNED AND UPSET. I LOVE YOU. DADDY.

11:00 JAEJOONG – PRINCESS R U ALREADY IN BED? I’M WORRIED ABOUT U. PLEASE CALL ME. I WON’T SLEEP UNTIL U DO.

11:30 JAEJOONG – SHOULD I COME OVER?

11:45 JAEJOONG – U MUST BE SLEEPING. I HAVE 2 MEET MY PARENTS TOMORROW, BUT CALL ME WHEN U GET UP. THERE’S SOMETHING I HAVE TO TELL U.

Blinking down into the phone her mind, along with her senses continued to register a numbness she couldn’t explain. All these people obviously cared about her. So why did she feel so all alone? Even Saffron, in her agitation, cared enough to at least attempt to get her out of bed to face the day. But, facing the day wasn’t what she wanted right now. She wanted to forget she was Saffire Ryu. Daughter of Young Jae Ryu and Sandra Kroes. She didn’t want the pity of SaRae, Junsu, JJ, her parents or Saffron. She wanted only to wallow in a black hole of depression. Allowing her emotions to rule the day.

Swiping her runny nose on the hem of her T shirt she tipped back over on her side hating the thought that when she did resume her life, in the land of the living . . . she might only be a shell of the person she was before. Her identity crumbling down around her like falling bricks. No longer sturdy or able to withstand the storms of life. This had been the last straw.



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3:00 P.M.

HER stomach growling uncontrollably, Saffire sat cross-legged in the middle of the bedroom floor, toying with her cell phone mindlessly. Having cried and slept and cried some more, now she was craving food and a shower. None of which actually spurned her into immediate action.

With even more messages popping up on her cell, the most disturbing was that of Kyong’s. She could literally ‘hear’ the desperation and sadness in his voice woven amongst the words of his texts.

Did he deserve her time or forgiveness? Especially now? She wasn’t a vindictive person . . . or was she? After all, she still held a grudge toward Antonio and what he had done to her only a few months ago. And, now in light of her own situation . . . it seemed the similarities of her ‘real’ father’s triangle loomed over her much the same. Had he had an affair with a married woman? Her own mother? Not knowing the particulars, or how long they had been in love, she could only speculate that mother, unable to have the man she really desired, had settled. On his older brother, Kyong.

Rising, she faced her reflection in the wardrobe mirror, running both clammy hands through her knotted, tangled hair. What a sight she was, with a bloated face, dark circles and bags under her eyes. Not at all reminiscent of the stunning blonde beauty that had graced the arms of numerous idols only days ago in the Toscana hotel nightclub.

She needed a drink, a shower and food. Preferably in that order. Something had to give or she'd stay in this state forever. Staring over at the violin propped in the corner of the room it surprised even her that at this particular moment in time, she harbored no desire to pick it up, play it or deal with the power it normally held over her.

The buzzing cell in her fingers, startled her out of the meaningless thoughts wreaking havoc in her muddled brain. *NO. She didn't want to talk.* Shuddering in denial she watched her father's call go to voicemail. *Especially not to him. What purpose would it serve if she did? What else could he possibly say after last night?*

She could already hear the apologetic tone he brought out every time she caught him drinking too much, too long, or he'd disrupted her quiet life with multiple women and loud parties. *Why would this time be any different?*

For some reason, the man she really wanted to talk to was her deceased Uncle. Longing for a direct line to the supernatural, she leaned into the wardrobe rubbing her itching back along the rough corner. *Would another trip to the dining room allow her the opportunity? That place seemed to be electrified with his presence.* Pondering her dilemma, her stomach growled again, this time loud enough to be heard. Fist to her gut she doubled over, (as if in pain) anxious and annoyed.

“Okay FATHER! You WIN.” Belting out the title she didn't feel he deserved she pounded the tiny phone button on her cell along with SPEAKER, giving in and waiting for the tortured sound of his voice on the other end.

“Ahhh, finally.” His reply was nothing short of expected. “How long have you been asleep?” Sadly, even in distance, he knew her too well. Disturbed that he read her like a book, she flinched, sucking on her bottom lip like the little girl he'd always been able to provoke.

“Does it matter?” Sarcasm had become her friend at an early age but, today it seemed even more appropriate.

“Well, don’t do it. You need to eat something, clean up and face what’s happening Saffire. You’re a grown woman.”

Now, this she hadn’t expected. No whining, no more begging for forgiveness. Not even a little bit. Who was this man on the other end?

“I am.” Lying through her teeth, she knew she wasn’t pulling the wool over his eyes on any level.

“Liar . . . a million bucks says you’re sitting or standing in your night clothes, in almost the exact same spot you dropped into last evening after we left. You haven’t eaten, or washed up yet and it’s late afternoon. I might not be your flesh and blood father but, you’re still my daughter. I’m not stupid. This is what you always do when you can’t deal with something. Been watching you since you were a tiny girl, curl into a ball and while away the days, depressed over a wayward friend, a concert that didn’t go your way, your mother’s absence, boyfriends . . . need I say more?”

The silence on the other end was deafening. *Why, even though he was right did she wish he was wrong? Because by his own admission . . . blood or not . . . he was indeed her father.* He’d nursed her when she was sick, sat by her when she failed, hugged her when she was depressed, encouraged her when she incapable of doing it herself. Hating him was NOT an option, no matter how much she wanted to.

Had he conspired against her on purpose? Like Antonio? Not really. Had he used her to get something out of mother? Maybe . . . until she knew the whole story she probably couldn’t judge him even on that count. Was he a feeling, breathing, human being with needs and emotions that no one else understood? Of course he was. Was he perfect? Never.

“Daddy?” Muttering the title she struggled to forget, it was easy to hear the catch in his breath in response.

“What baby girl?”

“Are you sorry about what happened? You know . . . mother, Saffron and Uncle?”

Without hesitation the resounding “YES”, flooded her ears with renewed encouragement.

“Me too,” was all she could manage to squeak out in response. “I loved Uncle, I did. But, you’ve always been my dad. No matter what. And, you always will be.”

What more did he need to hear? Kyong's face softened on the other end of the phone dropping his head in shame. He didn't deserve her forgiveness, let alone her love. He, and he alone had been responsible for the heartbreaking split that had torn his family into a million scattered pieces.

"I don't know what to say to that, except I'm so sorry pumpkin. You don't know how much. And, I'll do whatever I can going forward to help make it right. Please, believe me."

She believed him. She truly did. The pain in his tone was undeniable. He'd spent a lifetime away from Saffron, and even Mother. No wonder he drank, caroused with random women and was a diehard workaholic. He was trying to fill the void they had all left in his life.

"I do. And, I do love you daddy. I always will. No matter what."

"I love you too." Pride aside, Kyong sniffed away the tears threatening to break through like an overflowing dam. "Now. Pull yourself together and get something to eat. I can hear your stomach grumbling from here. You're skinny enough as it is."

"Okay. I will."

"Promise. And, call me if you need to talk any more. Maybe we can meet for lunch or dinner before I go back. It is almost Christmas." His voice softening at the mention of the nearly forgotten holiday he remembered the gift he'd purchased for her in JeJu only a few nights ago. "And, I got you something special."

"You did? Thanks daddy. I'll text you. Bye."

"Bye honey."

The click and dial tone, (proof he was gone) helped settle her quivering nerves. One hand on her heart she whispered to the ceiling softly, "Sorry Uncle. He's still my dad."

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Gangnam, S. Korea – Café

SAFFRON sat in the café sipping her favorite Mocha coffee lost in thought. How did she ever think this would be fun? Missing Saffire, she felt instead like today's outing was a chore. She might as well be back in Chicago shopping for clients off a list Ian had made.

While watching consumers loaded down with packages she sat in pain with blisters from her new boots, crying in her coffee thankful it still gave her time to listen to carolers in the plaza. Sighing she read the list her and Saffire made before the uproar of secrets, ghosts, and warrants. She'd managed to cross off everyone but, Jaejoong, Junsu, and Hyun Joong. Blowing the rising steam off her cup not caring about the J's, her biggest problem was Hyun Joong.

Outside the bedroom she knew music was everything to him. As for personal hobbies, they consisted of reading Manga's, soccer, and fishing. Fingering the necklets around her neck, she was sure fishing lures, shin pads, or even a set of books wouldn't be a gift a girlfriend bought.

Disappointed she patted her heart, not having a clue about what would touch his soul. It had been so easy with Ian, they just never spent Christmas together. She and Ian always celebrated 'after' the holidays by taking a vacation together.

“Excuse me, aren't you Saffron Ryu?”

Bringing her back to the present, she looked up, focused on the handsome man in front of her. *Oh God, her worst fear had finally materialized, someone identified her from the bitch slapping video.*

“Um yes I am, do I know you?” Sitting at attention she tugged at her clothes aware of how his sweater hugged the outline of his muscular chest. *Dear God, please don't ask about the video.*

“No, but I stop at the Hotness Café every morning on my way to work. I knew your Uncle Ryu. I was so sorry to hear he'd passed.” A little embarrassed he gave her a dimpled smile.

“And, you are?” Thoughts of the video and Hyun Joong forgotten, Saffron checked him out noticing the big hands he shoved into the tight jeans, liking the way they hugged his hips.

“Oh, how rude of me,” Bowing low he announced quietly, “Kim GiHoon, I'm a writer for MBC. My father took me to the café often over the years. I've been privy to many dad and Young Jae stories about their Idol days together.”

“Pleasure to meet you Mr. Kim. Tell me was Uncle thinking of writing his life story?” Smiling she bowed her head, appreciating his flower boy looks and the heady scent of his cologne.

“No I’m a Drama Writer. Although, I have to confess. I saw you carrying pasties from the kitchen and asked SaRae about the attractive new employee. Since then, I’ve been working up the courage to ask you to coffee . . . or dinner?”

Damn he’s hitting on me? Why? Is he after information? No, please no he’s too freaking cute with his smile eyes. This was so wrong . . . if she loved Hyun Joong why the butterflies? Why did her gaze go from his luscious lips to the muscles flexing under the fitted sweater?

“Well I’d be happy to have coffee the next time you drop by the café.” Hearing the phone buzz while ‘Jingle Bells’ played in the background, Saffron peeked at it, seeing it was from ‘Baek Seung Jo’.

Oh shit, Saffron what are you doing batting your eyes at this man when you have a boyfriend? Stupid girl . . .

Happy he got an introduction but, curious why Young Jae hadn’t mention having a niece, he frowned observing a brow lift when she glanced at the phone before her delicate hand flipped it over.

“Not bad news I hope?” His question showed his concern for her well-being.

“No . . . but, I do need to take this.” Ashamed at her behavior Saffron stared at his chiseled jaw, unconsciously twisting a strand of red hair in guilt.

“No problem, I’ll be sure to stop by the café again soon. Please, take my card, it’s been a pleasure to meet you.” Holding it out he could sense she didn’t want him to know who was contacting her. Wishing she would ignore the cell and invite him to sit down. Instead, she cautiously took it from his hand, dismissing him with a small smile.

As if Hyun Joong was aware of her discretion the cell buzzed again. Saffron turned in the chair stuffing the card into her purse watching him stroll out the door. Shivering, a sense of foreboding touched her with the knowledge she’d just pulled a Saffire and cheated on her boyfriend. No, that was silly, it wasn’t like she’d slept with the guy. The attraction had to be because she was missing Hyun Joong. *Right Saffron, let’s go with that story.*

Taking a cleansing breath, clearing her mind of any lingering lustful thoughts she smiled at the ID becoming conscious she should change the name from ‘Baek Seung Jo’ to ‘Boyfriend’.

“Ah, he sent a picture,” Slapping her cheeks she squealed like a fangirl at seeing the cute selfie.



TODAY'S BEEN A ROUGH DAY . . . BUT THINKING OF U HAS MADE IT BETTER . . . MISSING MY OH HA NI . . . SEE U SOON.

How in the hell could she look at another man? Remembering how he took care of her drunken state in Jeju, or the memory of him spooning her naked as they slept.

With tears shimmering in her eyes; Saffron traced the heart in the photo, unable to understand how a simple gesture could deliver a strong loving message. In Jeju he stated he wasn't romantic, but she found him charming anyway. Grinning, she typed a heart emoji, immediately erasing it. Finally settling on the simple words 'MISSING MY HYUNNIE', she hit SEND as the ID flashed in a message from her father.

Biting her lip, this was the third one, she hadn't read the last two, in fact she hadn't read any texts from either parent . . . so what was the real issue? Never one to avoid a problem, this time however, learning of her parentage was like jumping into a pool without knowing how to swim. The emotional dam inside her soul could burst at any moment bringing a tidal wave of rage, resentment, and feelings of betrayal down on her.

Saffron had thought her father issues had been resolved years ago. Although childhood Kyong Ryu had been on a pedestal so high he could do no wrong. Tall and handsome, he made her feel special spending the whole day taking her to lunch and then shopping, how could she 'not' worship him? He succeeded in explaining why he only visited a couple times a year with finesse. With love and understanding, she naively accepted his reasons of distance and business.

Then on her thirteenth birthday something happened. He'd picked her up as usual but, although lunch he was preoccupied with his cell. She had important news to share and her chance finally came during dessert.

“Father, my math team at school won the State Championship,” She announced, voicing her accomplishment proudly.

“That's nice honey.” Aware his cell phone rang, his voice was vague, breaking her heart as he excused himself from the table.

Blinking away the tears threatening to spill over onto her nice outfit, Saffron shut her phone off. On that day the pedestal cracked. In years to come, the pedestal crumbled into dust. To this day he'd never given her validation on her accomplishments.

After getting home she talked to Uncle Ryu, recalling how excited he been finding out her Math Team won State. She never realized how much his approval meant until this very moment. How he would drop everything when she called. For him, nothing was trivial when it came to his sweet Saffron.

“Uncle Ryu why didn’t you tell me?” Bitter laughter escaped her red lips at the irony of the situation. *Would her life had been better knowing Uncle was her Father? And, whose fault was it, Mother, Father, Uncle, or all three equally agreed to this secret?* Hugging herself, “God” how she wished she had one more day with Uncle, wanting desperately to hear his side of the story. She missed the sound of his voice, and security of his arms telling her everything would be fine.

Swiping at a lone tear, she rose tossing the cold cup of coffee in the trash can. No longer in the mood to shop, she swore she had to be hormonal. The weight of what they’d found yesterday was literally sucking the life out of her. She needed her sister, they had to talk.

Slipping on her coat, she figured surely Saffire should be up and dressed by now. If not, she’d kick her ass out of bed. Resigned at having a plan, she gathered her packages preparing to trudge through the mounds of new fallen snow on her way back home, alone. *What she needed before arriving was a peace offering for sister.*

Now believing that Saffire was handling the overload of information the only way she knew how . . . self-pity. Seeing a convenience store up ahead she felt as if Uncle . . . no . . . Father must have guided her there, ‘cause boldly stuck to the window was an advertisement for ‘Mac n’ Cheese’ Saffire’s favorite comfort food.

3:00 P.M.

Cup of Hotness Café – Apartment

IF it was possible to feel better after talking with Kyong, despite finding out about her true parentage, Saffire didn’t feel abandoned, or even without an identity like she thought she would. It was time to re-evaluate her relationship with the father who had always been there for her, despite her insistence that he lacked the skills to parent her successfully. It was a fact . . . Saffron had suffered the most. Growing up with cold and calculating Mother, void of Father’s warm hugs, encouraging words and lax disciplinary tactics.

The small shower enclosure seemed to envelope her in a swath of overpowering heat, despite the chilly bathroom. Washing her hair her emotions did a tug of war with her practical side.

She needed to allow herself time to process. Not angry, or sad any longer . . . now she would have to settle for something akin to apathy until she knew all the facts. Maybe a call to Mother later was warranted, in order to get more information to go on. She needed to be more like Saffron now. Steady . . . firm . . . not so sensitive about every little thing. Time to put on her big-girl panties and deal with her past. If she didn't. There could be no future.

And, what about JJ and Junsu? Where did they fit into this little scenario? Should she tell them? If she didn't they would find out eventually anyway.

“Hey sis, you finally awake?” Saffron’s voice could be heard loud and clear above the gushing sounds of the shower in Saffire’s ear. She was back from shopping.

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