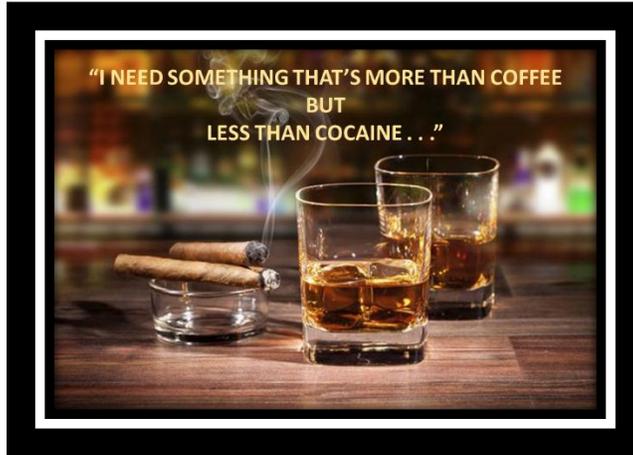


CHAPTER NINETEEN

**“I need something that’s more than coffee but,
less than cocaine . . .”**



THREE MONTHS EARLIER:

Monday - September 15th, 2014

9:00 P.M.

Cup of Hotness Café – Young Jae Ryu’s Apartment

NEGLIGENCE in collaboration with awareness produce remorse and shame in one’s psyche resulting in the need to purge the soul with truth and enlightenment. Such was the state of mind that Young Jae Ryu found himself in the night of September 15th, 2014.

Still warm, and balmy for fall, he sat hunched over the coffee table of his tiny living room above the café in a damp dress shirt and boxers, wringing his sweaty hands nervously. An opened box of expensive Cuban cigars beside him on the seat cushion with but two missing, called out to him like the lure of a wonton woman. Lifting his head he stared off into space finally focusing on the tapestry covering the hidden door to the secret dining room.

What would become of it once he was gone? The particulars of his already written Will bouncing around in his aching head made him



wonder why he had ever thought Sandra would care for this café the way he did, or leave her upscale lifestyle in America to tend to it. Slapping the side of his head at his own stupidity he scolded himself out loud boldly in English, “You stupid son-of-a-bitch. What were you thinking? Were you thinking at all?”

With no answer forthcoming, his insides churned, longing for the taste of liquor to help ease the pain of loneliness and death. Knowing exactly where his favorite whiskey bottle was stashed he lunged toward the small side-table, losing his balance in the process and crashing unceremoniously to the hard wooden floor.

“OUCH! FUCK.” One hand on the compartment knob underneath, the other on his knee he tugged it open, revealing the bottle of liquid gold that would save his miserable soul, at least for one more night. “Aishhhhh, there you are my yeobeso (SWEET). It’s been too long hasn’t it? Wae (WHY) you say? Because, a drunken man can’t run his life effectively.” The sigh he felt rising clear from the depths of his groin resulted in an ominous shudder creating a backlash of goosebumps. One finger in the air, he proceeded to discuss his dire situation with the unyielding liquor bottle propped up between his skinned knee and the sofa leg.

“However . . . my life . . . such as it is. Is nearly over. Or so I’m told. That means, you and I must collaborate in secret at least once more to help me make this final decision. De?”

Perspiration dripping from his thinning hairline, he swiped his forehead, a pained look crossing his sunken, sallow eyes. “Did I tell you, they didn’t have time to meet me?” Whispering into the stifling air around him, weakly he twisted the bottle top numerous times until (nearly spilling it all down his already damp T-shirt) he freed the warm liquid, guzzling it mindlessly. Burning a trail of fire through his already raw throat, the whiskey settled into his gut reminding him of all the reasons he never really drank anymore.

“Wae? (WHY?) Wae do you think that is? My girls. My precious girls. All grown up now, with lives of their own. What should I do? I can’t tell them about . . .” Another slug, this time causing him to cough, his insides rattling with the gurgling sound of his Cancer. “You know. Damn, my cigar, where’s my cigar. If I’m gonna die, by God I’m gonna die happy!”

Rising anxiously, every muscle and bone in his body aching, he lunged for the cigar box. “Pull it together Ryu.” Scolding himself again, he settled back into the warm prickly cushions, scrounging for the lighter beside the end cigar in the box. “But, I need them here. Sandra can’t possibly run this café.”

Simultaneously puffing and slugging down a gulp at a time, moments later he began to relax, his long bare legs propped precariously on the cluttered coffee table. He needed to make a list of things to follow up on. And, his daughters . . . he had no other choice. Kyong was too much of an asshole to keep the café, Sandra would sell, as well as his sisters. Maud and SaRae weren't equipped to run it at their age, and would be out on the street in the blink of an eye. His legacy? He would die being remembered as someone cruel and unfeeling.

But, was it fair to rip two young women from the lives and careers they were rooted in, just to satisfy his own need to rest unencumbered? Reaching for a yellow sticky pad and pen atop a scattered pile of magazines, he tried making sense of his rambling, inebriated thoughts. What was left to do before things got worse? Scribbling down a few tasks, the first one needing his immediate attention was contacting his attorney in the morning and changing his Will. The love of his life had moved on years ago, and their secrets had moved with her.

Saffire and Saffron would have to forgive him one day . . . because he was about to make them heirs to the 'Cup of Hotness Café'.

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9:30 P.M.

THE fan whirring overhead gave out just enough air to keep the middle-aged man from stripping entirely, still reeling from the heat of whiskey through his blood. Why couldn't alcohol cure cancer? Why did all the things that anesthetized a person, allowing them to dig deep inside themselves, end up being the 'vices' in life? Killers of some sort. Smoking to the lungs, alcohol to the liver, fatty foods to the heart. The body was a boiling caldron of garbage just waiting to spew over and end this precious thing called life.

He was a poet and composer at heart, right now, his soul should have been overflowing with prose and enlightenment going into the solitude of a warm fall evening. However . . . alcohol was rendering him helpless to his own feelings. Bringing into light the personal embarrassment of his past and dreadful duty, forcing him to cleanse himself before giving in to the Cancer that consumed him.

The letter came to him quite unexpectedly. Used to composing into the wee hours of the morning, he felt compelled to put some sort of an apology into writing to the daughters he'd loved but, never claimed. They deserved to know the truth. Especially, if he was preparing to tie

them down . . . together . . . forcing them to deal with each other for the first time since they'd been tiny girls sharing the same bassinet, cuddled beside one another for companionship.

Scrawling meticulously page after page hit the floor below him, tears wetting each apology, over and over again. Finally, exhausted and angry his weak arm wiped across the coffee table in frustration, leaving the pile of emotions scattered in a heap at his feet. How was it possible to explain his heart . . . his weaknesses . . . hell . . . his life in only a few short pages? Was this the only way?

Toying with the cell phone at his hip, he put out the remainder of the cigar against the box lid, smelling its poignant cherry odor one last time. His lungs, incapable of handling another, ached warning him to leave it untouched. Did he dare call? Standing, his eyes flung back and forth around the room resting on first one momento, and then another.

The picture on the wall. The box of letters from Sandra he had read and re-read only days earlier, still perched on the footstool by the rocking chair. Where did he begin? He was pathetic. He was a dying pathetic excuse of a man who was going to hell for his sins.

Coughing up phlegm and the taste of whiskey he knew his final days were near. What a hell of a time to go. The holidays were almost upon them. Thanksgiving, Christmas. There was still a café to run and Idols scheduled to show up. If only he could get the girls to visit before it was too late. His goal had always been to marry them off to someone special, not the dirt bags they were currently dating. Someone like his beloved dongsaeng's (YOUNGER BROTHERS) JaeJoong and Hyun Joong. Disappointment flooding his heart he grappled for an excuse to bring them together before it was too late. Moving forward, if he wasn't here to see them married, at least maybe he could see them happy.

He couldn't wallow in self-pity any longer. Tonight would have to be the final time. Tomorrow needed to bring a smile, a tray of cookies, a warm handshake. His fears of death and dying needed to be buried amongst the memories of his past.

No one could know of his fate. He was a happy, joyful man, known for his love of music, poignant stories and soft heart. That was how he wanted to be remembered. Not like this, drunken, sad and defeated. He had lived his life and lived it fully. So, if this were a song how would he tell the girls? He had to figure it out before it was too late.

Slouching back into the sofa his long fingers drifted toward the pen and paper once more. And, the painful story began to unfold.

“My dearest daughters: I loved you with every piece of my heart and soul . . .”

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PRESENT:

Monday, December 22nd, 2014

4:00 P.M.

EVERYONE has that pivotal moment in their lives where they can either accept the inevitable or continue to wallow in the pain of their past. Twins, Saffire and Saffron Ryu were certain their moments had come while regretting the decisions they'd made in their relationships with men.

Now . . . with the rug pulled out from under them again they realized their entire lives had been based on one massive lie. How would they cope? Was this the defining moment that could change their lives and destinies forever? Or, was it their opportunity to mature, accept the inevitable and move forward, putting the past behind them, relishing in the fact that they had each other. Could they trash the rest, and allow themselves to forgive?

Their positioning together on the small worn sofa, spoke volumes. Saffire, curled into a ball, head in her sister's lap allowed Saffron to gently stroke the long strands of her silken blonde hair. No matter the hour, the gravity of the situation or the inevitable outcome they were connected by blood and always had been.

The letter explaining their mutual story between them, void of the luxury of therapists or outside influences . . . they had all they needed to survive. Uncle, (their father's) favorite bottle of whiskey . . . his box of cherry cigars . . . mac 'n cheese . . . chocolate . . . and each other.

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“**A**T least he loved her.” Swiveling to face the peeled paint on the ceiling, Saffire sucked a long draw off her thin cigar watching it curl in swivels above her pursed lips. Smoking had always been a no-no at her house, so she'd been prone to experiment on the sly with friends and co-workers throughout the years. The only thing she hadn't perfected was blowing smoke through her nose.

“Doesn’t make it right.” The half-empty whiskey bottle to her mouth, Saffron gulped another swig, swishing the remainder around lazily.

“Aghhhh, who fucking cares now anyway? Is being pissed off gonna make any difference? Yeah, so they made a big whopping mistake . . . like we’re perfect.” Already feeling the residuals of the straight, bitter alcohol, Saffire’s rubbery limbs, wobbled as she rose from her fetal position between Saffron’s outstretched legs. “Damn . . . help me up will ya?” Begging she grabbed the back of the couch with one hand, teetering between the precipice of couch and coffee table, as if hovering about to fall backward over a cliff.

Trying to be accommodating, Saffron flung her upward nearly toppling her face first off the narrow cushion.

“HOLY SHIT. I didn’t say throw me off.” Barely able to focus, blinking into the dimness of the room, Saffire studied the sliver of smoke still rising from the glowing embers of the cigar between her fingers. Feeling the crunch of paper, she reached under her butt, pulling the letter out (before it got ruined) shaking it in Saffire’s direction. “You’re still pissed off aren’t you?”

“I dunno.” Saffron wasn’t sure how to answer that question. Of course she was angry at some level. Angry that the past had finally collided with her future. Okay, so they’d been childhood friends. Mother, Father and Uncle. So, there’d been a triangle love affair going on when Father went off to the military. So what. Men went off to the military all the time in S. Korea. It was a way of life. Her Father Kyong had to know what was going on. He wanted Mother and couldn’t have her, Young Jae wanted her and wasn’t brave enough to take her . . . and typically Mother wanted it all. Young Jae, Father, money, happiness, security . . . her list went on and on.

She could see mother doing something like this. Because of the level of her need for prestige, every calculating moment of her decision was laid out in the letter like an open book. Father had to be willing to sell his soul to the devil to have her. It seemed as if they had all been selfish in their own way.

“Humph, well, this is how I see it.” Dropping to her knees on the floor, Saffire crunched the letter between two fingers hoping her sister wasn’t going to hold her forthcoming and drunken answer against her.



“Oh great. Let’s hear it. ‘Cause you’re so wise, after half a bottle of alcohol huh?” Teasing her mercilessly in order to lighten the suddenly somber mood Saffron swatted her sister’s head playfully with the empty envelope, leaning forward as if impatient to hear her out.

“Uncle . . . well, father, you know who I mean . . . was a musician. He was a JJ or a Hyun Joong. You know how we are. All we want is to make music. I get it. Can’t be mad at him for that right?”

Agreeing wholeheartedly Saffron nodded, “Right.”

“Well then . . . mother fell for him. I guess we can’t fault her for that either, right? After all . . . we fell for Idols, right?” Knowing she was in the ballpark, the usually perceptive Saffire was hitting all the points she was certain would sway Saffron to her side of thinking.

“We did. Right.” Cupping her chin in her hands Saffron thought about the relationship she was having with Hyun Joong, wondering if mother had had the same butterflies over Uncle she was having when she was with this amazing man.

“Okayyyy, then throw Father into the mix. They’re brothers and friends with the same girl . . . Pausing, she smiled wanly, humming ‘Almost Paradise’. “It’s your classic K-Drama triangle, Boy’s Over Flowers, Father is Goo Joon Pyo and Uncle was Yoon Ji Hoo, Hyun Joong’s character. That leaves mother as Geum Jan Di. Don’t you see it?”

“Should I?” Perking up, Saffron hummed along as well, re-lighting the butt of her own small cigar sucking in the cherry flavored smoke, watching it billow out above Saffire’s golden head of disheveled hair.

“Yes. It’s as plain as the nose on your face. Mother played them. Both of them. Just like in the drama. She was Jan Di, leading poor Hyun Joong on, along with Goo Joon Pyo, making HIM believe they’d have a future because she was pregnant.” Stopping, her eyes rolled back remembering the ache she’d felt in her heart when Yoon Ji Hoo had confessed his love to a sleeping Jan Di. So sad. So dreadfully sad. Her chest heaved in continuation of her dramatic story-telling. “In reality Hyun Joong, was the second lead, and we all know he never gets the girl.” Flipping her head back toward Saffron she frowned. “I dunno how you can be so pissed off at Joon Pyo in all this. Damn, all he did was love her.”

Reaching over the arm of the couch, Saffron snatched Saffire by the wrist, tugging hard. “Shut up. Stop calling Uncle, Hyun Joong. It’s fucking weird. And, this isn’t ‘Boys Over Flowers’. It’s our life dammit. Put the bottle down too, you’ve had enough.”

Cringing, Saffire knew she was right. Releasing the neck of the large whiskey bottle, already halfway to her open mouth, she heard it thump back onto the cold oak floor. Despite her drunken analogy to the popular Korean Drama, now they were down to the nitty gritty. This was serious.

Even though she hated to admit it to herself, she was having a hard time ‘not’ blaming Mother for most of what had happened. Revealing the truth of the pregnancy would’ve been the right thing to do. Not to mention the fact that she’d ran to Father instead of telling Uncle why she didn’t want to be the wife of an Idol.

But, the worst thing was . . . how calculated for her to sleep with Father behind Uncle’s back, then pass she and Saffire off as his. Her selfishness hurt everyone in the process. Could she effectively get past that, like she wanted Saffron to do?



“Anyway . . . did I specifically say I was pissed at Father?” Standing, Saffron picked up the empty bowl of mac’n cheese on the coffee table, staggering toward the kitchenette. “Maybe I’m just disappointed, in them all. You’re such a damned romantic Saffire. You and your dramas and dining room fairy tale. You let JJ spin the tale of the mysterious woman in Uncle’s life, without even a thought to how it might have really gone down.”

One hand on the counter, she crushed the butt of the cigar in the water-filled bowl with the other. “A bag of damned secrets. And, for what? Just to keep us apart? That’s bullshit.” Burping loudly, she leaned over, switching on the light. “We’re fucking family. All of us, whether we like it or not.”

Rendered speechless, Saffire opened and closed the lid of the cigar box wearily. Her head splitting, all she could see was the scattered and fragmented memories of a handsome man who’d not only played the strings of a guitar, but the strings of her heart as well.

Mumbling, under her breath, “Maybe this was how it was meant to be,” all she knew was at this point holding a grudge or being hateful wasn’t going to bring him back, change the past or impact the future. “Still. Uncle asked us to forgive them. Didn’t he?”

“HELL YES.” Slamming one palm into the tiny fridge door, it was clear Saffron wasn’t there yet. “And, I want to . . . really. I just don’t know if I can. You forget. You HAD a father . . . in fact . . . two fathers. I didn’t have any. Tell me how that makes it okay to forgive them? YOUR . . . I take that back . . . OUR FATHER . . . the selfish ass, decided he didn’t want me. He only wanted you.” One finger poised in Saffire’s direction, she gulped loudly understanding that what was spewing from her mouth (drunk or not) was actually what was burning inside her heart.

She’d been the forgotten one. Mother might have not been the greatest mom in the world but, she had done her best. She’d provided for her, loved her in the only way she knew how, and made sure that (at the very least) she had a relationship with her ‘real’ father, Young Jae. Kyong was a coward, a fucking coward who wouldn’t step up and take even a tiny bit of responsibility for the little red-headed spitfire who’d been just as anxious to capture his heart as the blonde princess he fawned over.

For the first time since meeting the blonde princess who’d come squalling into the world alongside her she thoroughly understood the basis of her pain. It was rooted in rejection. Rejected for not having the right bloodline, hair color or parentage. Cast aside except for birthdays and holidays, for what? To what end? Now was the time when she needed Saffire to know the depth of her agony. Why she couldn’t function in relationships, why she craved the fairy tale romance too. Why she hopped from man, to man, to man, unable to find the one soul she could connect with. It all boiled down to him. Kyong Ryu.

Saffire’s head dropped, her lower lip quivering uncontrollably, her eyes welling up with tears. For all her own pain, (in not being mother’s favorite, or having the maternal influence she needed in life), her sister’s was so much more acute. “I’m so sorry Saffron. I guess I never thought about it that way.”

Reaching out one tentative hand she grasped her sister’s pant leg sadly. Whether they drank together, smoked together, fought together or ran the café together, this was one area she fell short in. She would never know what it had been like to be without a father. “I . . . I can’t imagine how it must’ve been for you.”

And, that was how the two sisters came to understand each other. Both broken . . . both rejected in their own way by parents, family members and past relationships, that night, they started on a new life journey together. With memorabilia, vices, and hope for their future surrounding them, they dug deep, sobered up and began planning their Christmas together.

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