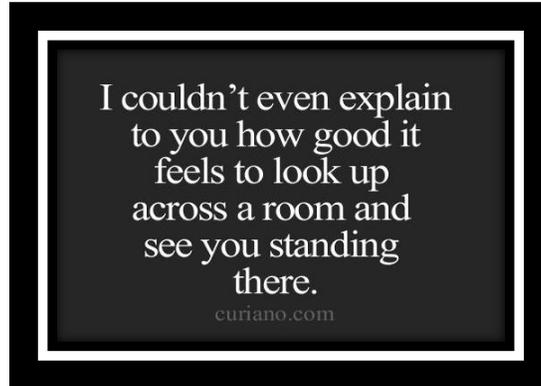


ACROSS THE ROOM



MARCH 11th - 10:00 A.M. - CUP OF HOTNESS CAFE, - L.A., CA

DRESSED to kill, in a bubble of her own making, Saffron stood electrified in the foyer of the new café. So many strangers . . . among them the few friends she'd managed to make in the process of meeting other shop owners, and the hiring process for employees. Except for family, none of them knew the first thing about the tall, impeccably dressed, red-head or what she'd overcome to be here.

First and foremost, they didn't know how vitally important opening this café in America had been to her. It and it alone would be the link between she and a sister she didn't know existed a mere three years ago. Not only that, it had been instrumental in bringing Ian back into her life, as well as repairing the decade long chasm that existed between she and her mother Sandra.

They were clueless to the importance of the 'still blank', Hotness Wall, and the significance it had played in coming to terms with her past. The upstairs dining room, (aptly nicknamed THE HIDEAWAY) would forever represent a place meant for romantic, clandestine meetings, it's massive window and rooftop deck, allowing customers the opportunity to make new memories, share old ones and allow themselves a modicum of peace.

A whirlwind of emotions momentarily flooding over her, she realized, there was and would never be, another place as special, (or hold as much love, laced with heartache) as 'The Cup of Hotness Café'.

Swept back to her first night in the Gangnam location's original vestibule, she'd been drunk and petulant crawling up the long steep staircase, cranky KPOP Idol, Kim Hyun Joong at her butt. What a night it had been following Uncle Ryu's funeral. A sassy blonde sister, hell bent on drinking her way through an entire bottle of vodka . . . a piggy-back ride through the silence of a picturesque snowfall, and finally . . . knowing without a doubt she'd met her Prince Charming, no matter what the circumstances.

The sound of her own out-of-tune voice, squealing the OST from 'Boys Over Flowers' crept its way back into her psyche like it was often prone to do. Chuckling, in spite of herself, she hummed it quietly, hearing Hyun Joong's determined reminder that, 'Boys Over Flowers' wasn't the drama where he got the girl. It had been 'Playful Kiss', (coincidentally, the only one she'd ever watched).

Yes . . . the days of 'Baek Seung Jo' and 'Oh Hani' were gone, and so was he. In the months that followed their parting, at least something good had resulted. A grave determination to honor the Father who had never been able to claim her, Young Jae Ryu. Now, with the Hotness Café branching out of its S. Korean comfort zone, maybe she could finally bury the hurts of the past and look ahead to the future with a new perspective.

Flinging her back into the present, the bustling noise of caterer's, and incoming news media, forced her out of her stroll down memory lane. The clock was ticking and there were so many other things requiring her immediate attention.

Nodding politely to a stranger in a crisp, white, catering uniform, balancing a tray of champagne glasses, she stepped outside into the sun, sucking in a deep breath of cool air. *Where was Saffire and little Sienna?* Having texted earlier, she'd promised to be on her way soon. It was already pushing 10:00 and the opening festivities were about to begin.

Slightly worried but, realizing children ran on their own time schedule, it was easy to put her concern aside, the moment she zeroed in on co-owners, Maud and Serae, making their way toward her through the outdoor seating area.

Grateful they had made the long, exhausting trip from Korea specifically for the opening, Saffron sized-up the two middle-aged, women gleefully. After the devastating fire in Gangnam, Young Jae's legacy would've been all but forgotten, if not for their selfless love, dedication and unending assistance in helping her rebuild.

“Oh my! I thought the re-opening in Korea was going to kill me. That was years ago. I’m getting old.” Huffing and puffing, Serae dropped into an iron bistro chair, fanning the beads of sweat already popping up on her high forehead. “I’m gonna need a stiff drink child. And, SOON.”

“No, you most certainly are NOT. Remember what the doctor said. Do you want to have a heart attack on Saffron’s special day? I can’t even deal with you sometimes. Now behave yourself.” Scolding her playfully, (the always motherly) Maud flicked the back of her sister’s greying head, ignoring Saffron’s giggles. “See what I have to put up with? An aging ahjumma, (MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN) wanting to disobey me and act like an eighteen-year old again. Drink my ass.”

Leaning over, Saffron hugged Maud’s broad shoulders warmly, her voice cracking with sudden emotion, “You two . . . what would I do without you?”

“Aishhh, God only knows.” Patting Saffron’s hands, the heavy woman settled into the chair alongside Serae scanning the already bustling shopping area, her eyes steely. “Where the hell’s our little hippie anyway? I thought she was supposed to handle ‘NCT’ when they got here? We saw their van in the back parking lot.”

Taking a breath, she couldn’t help being reminded of Saffire’s first working day at the Gangnam café. Sliding idly down the stairs, fresh out of bed, not a care in the world. “I swear the older that girl gets the more unpredictable she is. Used to be pure laziness, now she uses the little one as an excuse.”

“I’m sure she’s on her way, and ‘NCT’ has a perfectly capable manager. Trust me they know where to set up. It’s not rocket science. All she’s going to do is run shotgun for me. I have too many other places to be.” Knowing her sister’s limitations all too well, Saffron added off-handedly, “Besides, you know idols are her specialty.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

Slipping into the conversation, Serae bent forward curiosity enveloping her face. “Has your mom and Kyong arrived yet? If there’s gonna be drama, we’d just as soon get it over with BEFORE the party begins. You know how much they hate the idea that we’re involved in this little endeavor.”

“Yeahhh, I know. But . . . come to think of it.” Glancing around, it suddenly dawned on Saffron that they weren’t there yet. “I haven’t seen them. Wonder what’s going on? Their plane was supposed to land around 8:00. Guess I’ll have to shoot them a text and find out. Knowing Kyong, he’s probably dragging his feet. Pretty sure, no matter what Mother says, this is the LAST place he wants to be today. Especially because it involves me. Now, if it had been Saffire . . .” Rambling, she stopped there, before going to a place she didn’t need to on this, the perfect day for introspection.

Cocking her head, she smiled instead announcing pleasantly, “Doesn’t matter. It’s a beautiful day, and so far, everything is going exactly as planned. I’ll see you inside in a little while.”

* * * * *

WATCHING her disappear around the corner, back straight, high heels clipping with determination against the cobblestone, Maud sighed, “Dear Lord she’s got so much on her plate already, what do you think she’s gonna say when she finds out?”

Squinting into the morning sunlight, Serae tapped her fingers against the metal tabletop lazily. “I don’t know, but it won’t be long and our little surprise will be rumbling through here like an earthquake, upsetting everything in their path.”

“And, Saffire? She frustrates the hell out of me, even thousands of miles away, but that doesn’t mean I don’t worry about her. Wouldn’t have executed this deal if I didn’t.” Wiping her brow Maud fidgeted in the uncomfortable wiry seat. “God, I hope we did the right thing.”

If not this . . . what would have been their other choices? Neither sister would have ever made the first move on their own. Her only hope was that the opening would be winding down before the earthquake hit and no one would lose their life in the process.

“Listen.” Avoiding the painful look in Maud’s eyes Serae hated to see her (already stressed) sister, second-guessing herself yet again. “We’ve had this conversation, MORE than once. What’s done is done. We certainly can’t worry about it now. The plane’s landed, and it’s nearly 10:00. All we can do is strap on our seatbelts and get ready for the ride. Everyone’s going to need us to be the strong ones.”

The sound of the chair scraping irritably against the brick as she stood, Serae ordered Maud curtly, “Text our little Saffire once more and find out where she is. Saffron doesn’t need to be chasing after her like an errant teenager. She’s got too many other irons in the fire.”

11:25 A.M. – IAN CARVER III

STANDING languidly against the circular staircase, Ian sipped his champagne, unconsciously running one hand down the front of his crisp white dress shirt. He’d done well. Investing in the café with Saffron had absolutely been the right choice. But then, nearly all his business decisions had been successfully engineered. All but one. Three years and several hundred thousand dollars later, the memory of his failed partnership with Kyong Ryu still left a bitter taste in his mouth. *He really should try to let that go.*

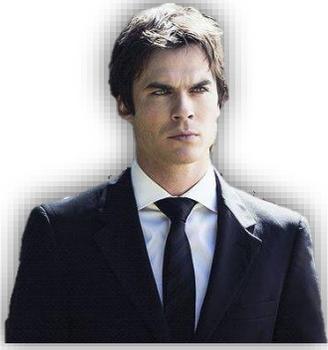
Today however, after the onset of Saffron’s decision to include him as an investor he would celebrate not only the success of the café but, a renewed, long-term relationship with her as well. Still cocky, a mocking grin crossed his handsome face. He was about to win . . . yet again!

Looking around the crowded room, his eyes rested on her tall, stately figure, poised and confident, leaning in toward an oncoming cameraman. There wasn’t a moment went by that he hadn’t thought long and hard about what his life had been like without the feisty, red-head.

There was something about her he couldn’t let go of even if he wanted. She was the challenge that kept him up at night. In the beginning, the harder he pushed, the harder she pushed back . . . but lately, by slowly chipping away at her stubbornness, she was faltering in her resolve to keep him at bay.

Doing what he did best, he knew it was time to interrupt the festivities. Standing in quiet contemplation wasn’t his style. Headed toward Saffron he floated out into the crowd of Asian couples, and chattering blonde Valley girls, smiling engagingly, fingers brushing against shoulders and forearms as he passed. Not holding back, he knew his mannerisms and good looks could bring a room of women to their knees.

Barely acknowledging him as one hand grasped her slender wrist, he curled his other arm about Saffron’s waist possessively. *If this was an interview. Why wasn’t he being included?*



“Ian, stop it. Not right now.” Embarrassed, she wriggled slightly against him, attempting to brush his arm away. Stepping forward, (leaving him in the shadow) her smile never faltered. “Please, don’t mind him. He thinks he needs to be a part of everything. What were you asking me now? How does our café differ from the other’s in the area?”

Scowling, Ian dropped her wrist, his eyes darting keenly from one side of the noisy room to the other. With loud music blaring from the outside patio it was difficult to hear actual conversation.

Searching for someone else to stroke his bruised ego he spotted Saffire playing patty-cake games with Sienna over by the office door. *Ahh, she was always up for some entertaining banter. Not only that, little Sienna made the perfect catalyst for flirtatious conversation, no matter what the situation.*

What came next, (as if from the throes of a bad, recurring nightmare) gouged him like a knife to the heart. For striding purposefully through the open front doors of the café, were none other than idols, Kim Hyun Joong, and Kim JaeJoong, in the flesh.

11:25 A.M. – JJ AND HYUN JOONG ARRIVE

IT’S incredible how thirty seconds can change the course of your life . . .

The unexpected arrival of two of S. Korea’s biggest Idols didn’t seem to faze the crowd of mostly American’s, more enamored of the young group ‘NCT’ pounding out dance music in the courtyard. On a finder’s mission to divide and conquer, Hyun Joong and JJ showed their invitation, sauntering relatively unnoticed through the front entrance.

“Wowww, place looks amazing, yah hyung?” Nudging Hyun Joong in the ribs, JJ marched forward understanding why Maud and Serae were so adamant about requesting his financial support for the new café. It was everything he’d talked about and more. Uncle would’ve been proud. Without being hands-on, Saffron had spent his money well.

Being a silent benefactor had been a blessing in disguise. Now, he would not only reap the benefits, but come full circle. Unburden his heart toward Young Jae and in the process, try

reconnecting with Saffire. *His heart still open, he needed to hear directly from her they were finished.*

Skating up behind JJ, assistant Nyoko, showing her exclusivity, leaned in dangerously close to his ear. Her lips grazing the tiny hairs of his sideburns she whispered, “I’m headed to the ladies’ room babe. Get me a drink yeah? You know what I like.” Grateful for her abrupt disappearance, JJ stopped Hyun Joong inside the doorway.

Ignoring her, the crowd and the local paparazzi, Hyun Joong, eyes peeled for Saffron was unsure if he should stay by JJ’s side or head off on his own to seek her out. *It was just another opening. He wasn’t there for the press recognition, or even to support Saffron. He was there to reclaim her.*

Suddenly, the music from the patio began to die down, the bustle about them intensifying as a flurry of females converged on the main entrance, swallowing Joong up in the crowd.

Annoyed, he stepped aside, rising on tip-toe to look over the sea of heads blocking his view of the room, recognizing (by YooChun’s description) the face of Ian Carver. *Stupid son-of-a-bitch, JJ had mentioned he would be here. That meant, if he was in the house, Saffron was surely holding court close by.*

Locking eyes, the two silently squared off (like boxers about to duke it out in the ring) Ian’s jaw twitching irritably at the sight of the Idol’s somber face. But, what caught Hyun Joong’s eye next, pierced every corner of his already fragmented heart.



11:25 A.M. – SAFFIRE AND SIENNA

HAND’S down, today was Saffron’s big day. Blonde hair braided casually at her back, Saffire flipped her head in laughter at tiny Sienna’s rendition of ‘Itsy-Bitsy-Spider.’ Perched on her mommy’s lap, stubby fingers twisted in all directions, the garbled baby words drifted to her mother’s ears, bent close enough to hear through the din of noise around them.

Trying desperately to concentrate on nothing and no one else but her child, Saffire couldn’t help but notice the aggressive Ian, staring through the crowd in her direction. He was, as always . . . arrogant and annoying. Muttering cuss words quietly under her breath, she still couldn’t figure

out why Saffron was settling, allowing him back into her life. And, more importantly how he'd managed to manipulate her into making him co-owner of this amazing café.

It just didn't seem right or fair. Young Jae would not have approved of the pompous, money-hungry, millionaire, no matter how much money he was willing to fork out. Incessantly attempting to flirt with her, and get her into bed over the years she (of all people) knew his intentions never seemed honorable. Save for one thing. Sienna. He adored her. Constantly dotting, spoiling her with toys, candy, and loads of hugs.

Damn him for capturing the heart of the one pure thing in her life. Even though her sister swore he'd changed, she put up with him for that reason, and that reason only. Truly, the only one who should have her daughter's heart was the father she would never know. Dear sweet Prince Jae.

Eyebrows frowning through her smile in Ian's direction, Saffire's heart thumped anxiously in her chest. The only one able to topple her perfect little family would be Kim JaeJoong himself. *What would've happened if she 'had' called him for today's opening? Nooo, despite the outcome, in the interim, the drama wouldn't have served any of them any good. Especially Saffron.*

Today, she would have to be satisfied with the tiny bits and pieces of their past she'd managed to help incorporate into her sister's passion.

For starters, an exact replica of the monstrous cappuccino machine JJ had so boldly kissed her over the very night they'd met. She'd been a bitch to him to be sure . . . but still . . . mumbling, 'Even a bitch deserves to be loved,' he'd pressed his warm lips to hers with a gentle determination she hadn't experienced in years.

Then there was the set of twelve white 'JJ' coffee mugs donning the shelf over the countertop, the engraving 'stay hungry, stay foolish' entwined between the J's (meaning nothing to anyone else, but her).



Upstairs in THE HIDEAWAY, hung a hand-crafted oil painting from Mother, depicting a view of Gangnam's skyline in the dead of night, under a romantic, full moon, a smattering of snow, dusting the nearby rooftops.

And, finally . . . her precious café's mascot, A tiny, coal black kitten by the name of 'She-Devil', cuddled in Saffron's office, tucked away from the noise and excitement of the day. She had successfully made her mark.

Jogged out of her thoughts, Saffire barely noticed when the loud KPOP music outside the café ceased, creating a flurry of excitement around the room. Silence meant she was needed. Today, 'NCT' was her only responsibility. Quickly assessing the situation, she dropped Sienna from her lap, kissing the top of her hat, before bending to point at Saffron headed in their direction only steps away from Ian.

"Let's go see eomma sweetie. Mommy has to run outside." *YES. This was her chance to get out of Ian's line of fire.*

11:30 A.M. - SAFFRON

ACROSS the room, nodding for Saffire to go ahead, Saffron kneeled in the surrounding crowd, swiftly scooping the toddler inward cooing, "How's my sweet button this morning? Eomma loves your new hat. Are you having fun?"

Bumping foreheads playfully, she paused in the moment, relishing the sweet smell of baby shampoo and Saffire's body spray. Nothing in life compared to the raw, guttural love she had for this little bundle of sass.

Observant as a hawk, Ian stopped dead in his tracks, watching Sienna toddle across the expanse of tile floor into Saffron's waiting arms. Seeing them together never failed to send a shiver up and down his spine. Children were not in his vocabulary. Never had been. At least not until he came face-to-face with the driving force named Sienna Ryu. She alone would be the death of him. He came unglued the moment she cupped the stubble of his cheeks, planting a wet, sloppy baby kiss on the tip of his nose. Hoping no one saw him blush at the thought, the sudden silence outside took him off guard.

JJ AND SAFFIRE

THE sun streaming in the windows at his back, JaeJoong spotted Saffire across the room, blonde hair braided casually down her back, a long brightly colored skirt billowing about her tanned, sandaled feet.



Bending over a little girl she rose, darting hurriedly, and without looking, directly past him, toward the restrooms, moving with confidence parting the crowd in her path.

Smirking at her retreat, he held his breath . . . This was his chance. His grieving heart told him

his, ‘Cotton Candy Princess’ was still that, and would always be . . . HIS Princess.



Starting to follow her he paused, catching sight of his assistant accidentally opening the rest room door straight into her approaching figure. Touching Nyoko’s shoulder, she bowed politely, her lips forming the word, ‘Sorry’. Yanking away, the stiff Japanese woman frowned unapologetically, stomping off in her renewed search for JJ.

The difference between them was stark. Almost as if a warm and cold front had collided in the atmosphere, resulting in an impending storm. Momentarily caught up in their unusual interaction, it became even clearer to Prince JJ, that Hyun Joong had been right. His assistant, should never have come.

Heart plunging to his feet, he looked elsewhere, desperately trying to ignore them. But, in the process, a child, (coming increasingly closer), squealed “Eomma!”, her high-pitched voice tinkling toward his ears, like windchimes on a breezy day. Despite having seen her only seconds before, he couldn’t help being fixated on the gait of her tiny feet and top of her head as she fell directly into the arms of (none other than), his red-headed business partner . . . Saffron.



Something was glaringly wrong about this picture. Peeking out under the wide-brimmed hat, dressed in a pair of gaudy, flowered shorts and white linen T-shirt, she WAS not and surely DID not represent, ‘Eomma’ Saffron in her pencil thin party dress, and spiked high-heels.

Perched only yards away, Hyun Joong, also heard the sound, only a mother could respond to, watching in horror as Saffron's glistening head of red hair dipped to the floor, gathering the most beautiful little girl, in both arms. Gripping the nearest chair, a shockwave of betrayal flooded his limbs. *Shit no . . . Mommy? It couldn't be . . . it wasn't possible. Was this the reason she'd left?*

Caught up in a momentary hug, Saffron swiveled just enough for the toddler's bright, rosy-cheeked face to clearly be seen by everyone. In their touching moment, the unknown reality of both men's shattered worlds, looked over at them with large, dark, slanted eyes.

JJ's knees began to buckle beneath him. For all practical purposes, the child could have been a female version of himself as a toddler. With nothing else to go on, the noise and commotion around them faded, as the picture continued to unfold in devastatingly slow motion.

With Nyoko quickly approaching, JaeJoong, unsure of what to do or where to go in the moment, spotted Hyun Joong fixated on the same two bodies he was. *Was he thinking this sassy little bohemian doll, really belonged to Saffron? Dear God, not in this lifetime! They needed the truth . . . and they needed it NOW.*

In the momentary silence of his thought process, the child could be heard squealing, "Da-da, da-da!" leaning as far to one side as possible, her tiny palms outstretched for acceptance to . . . DEAR GOD . . . NOT IAN.

Unimpressed, Saffron . . . barely glancing over, gave her up willingly, before standing abruptly, blowing her a good-bye kiss and moving swiftly away. Speechless, JJ watched Ian's head snap to Hyun Joong's blank face, a look of smug satisfaction overtaking him.

Laughing out loud, the tall millionaire in the designer suit, snuggled the toddler playfully, tickling her ribs, as she crunched in giggles against him. Tossing her in the air, his tone silvery, he uttered, "The stage is set little Button, let the festivities begin."

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