

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

“Every moment . . . Is a chance to start over.”



Monday - March 2nd, 2015

10:00 A.M.

Cup of Hotness Café

“**O**H heavens. Are you ready for this? Think your stomach can handle it?” Saffron leaned against Saffire quivering in the chilly wind. Puddles of water dotted the cracked, old sidewalk surrounding the eerie half-charred café, along with barricades and yellow tape (reminding passers-by it was a restricted area).

Grateful they were closed to business at the time, Saffire looked upward shading her eyes against the glaring afternoon sun. It was hard to believe that only one short week ago they had trotted up the stairs to work together chattering happily about what color to paint the downstairs, and how to modernize the lunchroom and Couples Wall. Now here they were, empty and confused, akin to standing over the gravesite of a loved one. “I don’t know. You first.” Giving Saffron a push away from her, Saffire held back, her heart in her throat. Knowing he was watching, she could almost hear Uncle crying as the melting ice crunched under her feet.



“I told you it was going to be hard.” Reaching back, curling one arm around her sister’s waist Saffron tugged the reluctant girl alongside her. “Hold your breath if you have to. Junsu and Yoochun should be here any minute.”

“God, I wish it was JJ instead.” Muttering lowly, Saffire tried not to focus in on the destruction facing them as the door creaked open.

“Yeah, I agree but, we know that isn’t going to happen. Not for either one of us.”

Trying to be pragmatic Saffron flipped into corporate mode picturing herself walking a client through a run-down property in dire need of a renovation. Maybe if she could get out of her heart and head, she could help make it tolerable for Saffire, who (even without the support of their boyfriends) certainly had more issues to deal with than she did right now.

Stepping into the belly of the beast, dripping with the stench of smelly water and charred wood, Saffire pinched her nose, her eyes welling up with unshed tears.

“It’s worse than I even imagined.” Groaning nostalgically she ran her finely manicured nails over the slimy bannister leading up to the open-ended staircase, flooded with sunlight from the missing pieces of roof.

“Try not to focus on the way it looks or smells. Think of it as a project. Something we have to clean up, and rebuild. Sort of like our lives.” Shoulders held high, Saffron disregarded her own senses, holding her breath as she stepped gingerly into the bar area.

“How can you be so . . . so . . . unfeeling about the whole thing?” Saffire quipped jerking away from her slightly, fixated on exactly the things Saffron had just told her to ignore.

“I’m not being UNFEELING. I’m just trying to be practical. There isn’t anything we can do to change it. It happened Saffire. And, I hate it as much as you do. But, reality is just that. Reality. We can thank Junsu and Yoochun that they were at the drinking tent when it started, or we’d be looking at a massive pile of rubble right now. At least we still have walls, and a downstairs.” Rattling on to cover her own insecurity about where to go next she attempted a smile, hating she had to be the strong one.

“Yeahhh, I guess.” Reluctantly agreeing, Saffire thought back to the frightening phone call she’d gotten in the wee hours of the morning. (Even now, haunting her every night like clockwork causing her to pop up in bed, panicked and sweating.)

“In light of JJ being gone, for once I have to admit, Junsu has been a God-send.” Clutching the straps of her purse, unsure if she should have left it in the car, Saffron stopped in front of the tipped over tea display, the boxes scattered in the dampness at her feet, some opened with bits of

black tea leaves squished out the sides, tiny streams of darkened water seeping onto the already discolored tile floor. Sighing she returned her gaze back to her sister's pale, ashen face.

“You gonna be sick? Dammit, I knew we should've worn masks.”

“No, I don't think so. But, let's get this over with so I can go home. It's freezing in here.” Wrapping clammy hands around herself Saffire continued shivering in the cold, damp air, just wanting to get the hell out and forget the entire ordeal.

“Yeah, I feel the same way.”

Picking her way around the bar, scattered with bits and pieces of utensils, broken glass jars, and coffee tins, Saffron managed to reach the kitchen door without hurting herself. There, perched at the very end was the stack of framed photos she and Saffire had taken off the Couples Wall last week when preparing to repaint and reframe them all.

A rush of sadness fell over her seeing the shattered glass, and warped edges. The water damage had claimed them all. Including the brand new prints of she and Saffire, taken only two days before the fire, standing arm-in-arm with JJ and Hyun Joong . . . heads shaved . . . preparing to leave for their mandatory enlistment.

Now, even though a few cell phone photos were still intact, safely tucked away in her purse, a knot in the pit of her stomach lurched up causing her throat to unconsciously constrict. *Dear God Almighty. Was this the visible proof of her inability to commit to the smiling, handsome man who had given her his heart?*

Ripped from her thoughts, she heard Saffire gasp beside her, rushing toward the dirty, water-filled sink about to puke. It was going to be a long-ass day! Folding over beside her, one hand on her back Saffron lifted her sister's long blonde hair from her white face, attempting to caress her already sweaty neck.

“Princess . . .” Using the endearment she knew Prince Jae would've called her, she frowned. “Please tell him when he comes today. You've already got the letter to JJ ready to send. He has the right to know.”

She didn't want to sound like her mother (or God forbid her father) especially now but, along with the wretchedness of the day Saffire's disposition in general seemed to be deteriorating. If there was ever a time for something good to happen, today would be it.

Wiping her mouth with the sleeve of her sweater, Saffire rolled up, one hand still clinging to the apron of the sink. “You’re right he does.”

“That came out way to easily.” Hating to say ‘I told you so,’ she clamped her mouth shut lovingly asking instead, “You gonna be okay?”

“Temporarily, I guess.” Bolstering up the courage to continue through the disaster they used to call a kitchen Saffire sniffed, feeling her nostrils stick together in the bitter cold adding, “Let’s hurry my limbs are already starting to go numb. Should’ve worn my coat like you.”

“Yeah, I know.” (Another missed, ‘I told you so’.)

Totally in agreement, hands on her hips, Saffron backed up against the wall, her leg knocking the corner of something hard as she moved. “Hey! Look down here. It’s the family picture from the other room. I forgot all about it. We wrapped it in plastic to put in the trunk remember?”

Squatting down she lifted the large print from its resting place, balancing it on the edge of the counter to keep it out of the dampness.

“Wowww.” A weak smile crossing Saffire’s face for the first time since they’d arrived, she reached out, gently touching it, directly over Young Jae’s face. “I feel like we’ve found him all over again,” she crooned, suddenly not as hurt that everything else around them had been destroyed.

“We lost all the others though. Even the boys.” Pleased to see her mood changing, Saffron hesitated momentarily regrouping yet again, not wanting to show Saffire her own state of weakness. “BUT . . . I still have some cell pics we can blow up. They’re not dead yet.”

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LAYING the large framed print against the front door, Saffron stood facing the bannister. Ahhh, it wasn’t that long ago she’d languished at Hyun Joong’s feet in a drunken stupor swearing she could make it up the steep staircase without help. What a night that had been. Snowy and cold, it was a different kind of cold than she’d ever experienced. Laced with the warmth of alcohol surging through her veins, and the hot touch of his hands against her skin. Already missing that special heat that only he could provide she wished she could’ve settled things between them sooner. It had all happened so fast. December crept up before she ever had time to breathe.

“SAFFRON!” Saffire’s excited voice from the other side of the hallway had its own way of bursting the bubble of memories Saffron had found herself caught up in. “Here’s your favorite rolling pin. In fact everything in this drawer under the island is intact.”

“That’s awesome,” she responded “put it in the pile with the rest.” Another bit of good news. Maybe the day wasn’t a complete wash after all.

Saffire swiped the sides of the wooden rolling pin with the bottom of her sweater, the white flour streaking across it like a wispy cloud in an inky blue sky. The flour fight. It had been the highlight of she and Saffron’s first few days as owner’s (and sisters) in training. The catalyst that threw them together in the freezer, forced to make up and get along or die trying. Her stomach still churning, she chuckled none-the-less laying the pin atop the bar with the few other random items they’d managed to salvage.

Her eyes catching the shelf that housed the ‘special’ coffee cups, she was reminded of JJ’s personalized white mug and the evening of their ‘cotton candy’ date. *Where would IT have ended up? Probably shattered on the floor somewhere with the rest of the rubble.*

Peering down at the bottom of the wall, she scuffed her booted toe around seeing if some of the white cup pieces had writing on them. And, then like the miracle she needed . . . as her foot cleared the side, it rolled out from under the dishwasher, fully intact. Smiling satisfactorily she picked it up, slipping it gingerly inside her purse. Without him here, the few memento’s that remained of his presence in the café were even more precious than before.

“I’m headed to the back.” Hollering from the lunch room, Saffron roamed around the tables her eyes searching for anything worth saving. So far, nearly everything in sight had been damaged by water, ice and charred dirty debris from the upstairs.

Standing at the back door she saw Hyun Joong’s face, his eyes lit up at seeing her again for the first time in weeks; hand out . . . little paper bird clutched between his thumb and forefinger. (The last palatable gift he was able to give her before leaving.)

She wasn’t the wife. She had no claim to him save her feelings. His family had been warm, inviting and accepting. But . . . none-the-less when the clock ticked down the minutes and she knew he was about to leave her for good, she was relegated to silence. Disguised in a large hat, and fur collared coat, tucked away in a tent outside the crowd of cameras and onlookers. The feel of his fingers leaving hers when he stepped from the car, her only memory to hang on to. This

place . . . this café . . . WAS ‘Baek Seung Jo’. Kim Hyun Joong. Her own personal Hotness . . . her introduction to a life she’d never imagined possible.

It didn’t matter who else had entered through these doors. What their names were or what part they’d played up to this point. It all had to begin again. Only this time, it would be without him. She’d felt this kind of pain before. A pain she neither liked, nor embraced.

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WHY did this damnable kitchen hold so many memories, causing the stabbing pain to her insides? Saffire rubbed her still flat belly, eyes on the filthy, dented ‘beast’ of a coffee maker that had been the introduction to her ‘Cotton Candy Prince’, seeing him hunched over the bar, his eyes intent and focused. Oh, to repeat their flawless first kiss. Lips warm, tongue smooth and tasting deliciously of Vodka and coffee, laced with the innuendos of a future. Yes, what he’d told her that night ‘was’ true.

“Even a bitch deserves to be loved,” she whispered, wishing again he was here to support her adding to the baby in her tummy, “Please be your daddy, Jae.” So much had happened in the course of a few short days.

Her caress to the force growing inside her unsettled stomach loving, she cringed, inwardly scared, knowing she had already made the heart-wrenching decision to divulge her condition to Junsu today. It hardly seemed appropriate considering the reason he was coming but, when would it ‘ever’ be a good time? For once, Saffron was right. He deserved to know.

Letting JJ go had been the hardest thing she’d ever done until today. Now her memories of standing arm-in-arm in the living room of his family home made her feel closer to him than ever before. His body heat had encompassed her with an aura of finality she was unfamiliar with. Not a novice to loss, still . . . this felt uncommonly different.

Watching him hug family and friends before taking her home for one last night together, looking back . . . how she longed to have already known about the baby. Whether the truth about her night with Junsu ever came out in the end or not, at least he could’ve walked away thinking he was leaving her, a father. Now, all she had was a stark piece of paper and written words. Not able to lace them with kisses, or feel his breath on her stomach at the news. The pain of watching him walk out the door of her apartment, knowing she couldn’t give him a proper send off because of the enclave of fans and media would stay with her a lifetime.

THE sound of voices and crunching of boots in the doorway announced the arrival of Junsu and Yoochun. Squinting into the blaring sunlight of the exposed roofline Junsu drew his sunglasses back on. Frowning, Yoochun following close behind, awkwardly searched for a reason to leave him alone and seek out Saffron.



“There you are.” Arms outstretched, focused on Saffire’s figure in his sights Junsu systematically ignored the catastrophe around them finding her stiff and cold in his embrace. “Are you alright? I couldn’t get here any sooner, I tried . . . really. F’ng last minute schedules.”



Rambling to cover his uneasiness at seeing her this way he finally glanced around the kitchen littered with broken glass, puddles of stale, smelly water and memories of what it used to be. Losing Uncle Ryu’s haven was akin to losing him all over again. *How was it she was even managing to stand here smiling, amongst the devastation? She had to be in shock that was it.*

Wriggling out of his arms she took him by the hand, drawing him away from her poignant memories of JJ. “Yeah. I’ll make it. The first ten minutes or so was the worst. Come walk with me.”

“Arraseo.” Allowing her to coerce him back toward the front of the bar he followed her lead. “Where’s Saffron? Yoochun’s looking for her.”

“She’s in the lunch room checking for things we might be able to save. The kitchen’s intact but, God knows everything else including all of the equipment will have to be replaced.” Attempting to let go of his hand her heart sank when he refused to release her.

“Stop acting like this is just a stroll through the park Saffire.” he whispered almost harshly. “You sounded like you were about to jump off a cliff earlier when you called, begging me to come over. It’s out of character for you to flip emotions like this.”

Unsure why she wasn't huddled in a corner looking for an excuse to run (which, quite frankly would've been easier to deal with), instead . . . she stood stoically in the hall entrance, favoring the stance of her oft time, emotionless sister, a half-smile pasted across her flushed cheeks.



“It’s time for a reality check Junsu. I have to grow up sometime. Things happen in life. Things we have no control over . . .” Shrugging her shoulders she understood why he seemed so confused.

Hating to lump all her issues into one explosive ‘life quote’ it did seem to apply. *She couldn't control the fact that the café had burned. Prevented it? Maybe, but now it was done. She couldn't control JJ's enlistment, or her feelings . . . And, now . . . she wouldn't be able to control Junsu's reaction when he found out she was pregnant.*

Growing up was a reality that slapped her upside the head in the few seconds she'd stood staring at the cappuccino machine. Wallowing in self-pity, encased in a bubble of fear were things of the past. This baby growing in her stomach needed her. ALL of her. Not bits and pieces . . . As it was, he/she would spend the first years of life without a father, (no matter who it ended up being).

“I get that but, it’s okay to grieve. You’re just in shock . . . that’s all.” Tugging her closer he rubbed her arms soothingly. “I’m here. For whatever you need, whenever you need it. I always have been, always will be. You know that.”

Did she? Did she deserve that kind of a commitment from him? No. She didn't. “It’s not shock Junsu. It’s a fact.” Glancing toward the lunch room, she could see Yoochun’s back, pointing toward the Couples Wall, Saffron beside him.

“Can we go to the car where it’s warm and talk?”

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HEARING Saffire and Junsu close the front door behind them, Yoochun stood beside Saffron staring into the wall, empty of photos, rivulets of melting ice water from the top floor, still seeping into the old bubbling paint. Saddened by the sight, he drew one arm around her hoping to console her. But, for some reason she didn't seem too distraught.

“It was time for a change anyway Yoochun,” she stated sensing his confusion. “Uncle . . . my father, was a man stuck in the past. This café and everything it stood for needs to take a leap into the future if we’re going to survive this.”

“No regrets?” Turning his head he caught the glimmer of backbone he’d seen in his hotel room at JeJu. *She was a fighter. No matter the fight. She took it on head first.*

“A few. Maybe that I should’ve listened to Joong when he told me to get on the ball and call in an electrician. It’s not like me to procrastinate that way. And, of course now all my employees are out of work until we can rebuild. One’s even about to have a baby. I don’t know . . . I feel like I’ve let them down. My head’s been all over the place lately.”

“Anything I can do to help?” Rubbing the knot in her upper shoulder kindly, even though she was being strong, he could feel the stress.

“Mmmm . . . maybe. Saffire’s got her hands full right now with her music (among other things), Maud and Sarae have already held off retiring for my sake and don’t want to have a hands on in the rebuild . . . How about some insight into what to do with this place going forward. I know Junsu’s the mighty hotel owner but, you spent quite a bit of time here. Any suggestions?”

Hoping she would ask at least ‘something’ of him, he grinned. Now THAT he could do. “De. I used to think about opening a coffee house. Especially after JJ did. Seemed like a lucrative business to be in, considering.”

His schedule was already grinding to a halt with JaeJoong gone, and Junsu not far behind him. A great way to pay Uncle Ryu back for all the time he’d invested in the café for the entertainment community.

“That’s awesome, I could use the help and support.” Smiling in spite of herself, Saffron met his gentle eyes appreciatively. *He was a good, gentle man. She would welcome his advice and his friendship.*

Spinning slowly around the wet, deserted room he muttered, “Lots of memories here.” And, indeed there were. “But . . . we can make it better.”

“I hope so.”

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THE gust of air emanating from the car heater warmed Saffire's cold cheeks as she leaned in closer to the vent. "Damnnn, café's always been on the uncomfortably cool side, but that wet kind of cold chills you to the bone."

Settled beside her at the steering wheel, Junsu leaned back one hand resting on the console. "So what do we need to talk about? I thought you wanted me to walk the café with you."

"I do. But, there's something you need to know first." There was no skirting the issue now that she had his undivided attention. It would have to be said. Head down, closing her eyes slightly, she sighed, her chest heaving under the heavy wool sweater. "Ummm, I . . . ummm . . . I'm pregnant Junsu."

Feeling the skin between her teeth pinch as she bit down on her bottom lip, it was so quiet inside the vehicle the only sound was the gushing of the air vent.

"Did you just say pregnant? As in having a baby, pregnant?" Junsu tilted his head just enough to look out the corner of his eye at her, hoping he wasn't dreaming.

"Yes."

Wanting to shout, "THAT'S WHAT PREGNANT MEANS STUPID!" instead, fisting her hands in her lap, she continued sucking her lip until she tasted blood.

"Aishhh Saffire . . . is it mine?" All sorts of scenarios popping up in his head, Junsu was suddenly questioning the timing of the announcement. "Have you taken a test yet to be sure? Do you know how far along you are? Are you sick?"

"Whoahhh, slow down." Hand in the air she stopped him quickly. "Too many questions. One at a time. Of course I've taken a test. And, yes I'm sure. I've already seen a Dr. I'm four weeks." Watching his face go from startled to ashen white she could only assume he wasn't thrilled. "I . . . don't . . . exactly know if you're the father."

Now the realization of her involvement with JJ kicked into high gear. Of course. They'd slept together at JeJu, and then a week later, on Christmas day evening, when he came to propose JJ had showed up. *Dammit. Dammit to hell.*

"Have you told JJ?" His brotherly instincts overtaking him, Junsu stifled by the warmth, rolled the car window down sucking in a long breath of crisp wintery air.

“I didn’t know about the baby yet when he left and you know I’m not able to visit. Now there’s the fire to deal with. I’ll tell him when the time is right.” Her voice small, one tear found its way down her cheek from the corner of her misty eyes.

Wowww . . . Junsu gripped the leather steering wheel aggressively. This could go either way. And, neither he nor JJ would know until the baby was born. Nine months from now, when he too was serving, ‘he’ could be the one getting a letter saying he was father to a beautiful, blonde headed baby girl or boy, resembling Saffire . . . the love of his life.

Wanting to hate the situation but, loving the outcome of the dream it ensued he half-smiled. “Arasseo then. What should we do?”

“What should WE do?” Cocking her head quizzically Saffire wasn’t sure she heard him right. “What IS there for you to do except wait? Once JJ knows, our only choice IS to wait. ALL of us.” Was there something he wasn’t understanding? Her hopes were that the baby was JaeJoong’s, not his. Yeah, sure . . . he would make an amazing father and her child would have an amazing life, but she didn’t love him the way she did JJ. One friend . . . one lover. The sad truth . . . it didn’t matter where the baby was concerned. He or she wouldn’t know the difference and wouldn’t care.

“Come on Saffire. You’ll have appointments, sonograms, shopping . . . a nursery to get ready. Someone has to help you.” Wanting to take control and show himself the man, Junsu pressed on into uncharted territory. “I don’t leave for at least two months, maybe longer if my company can squeeze in another musical for me before I go. I can help. No, I WANT to help.”

“Saffron can help me.” *She should be firm with him. Opening this emotional door would just complicate things down the road.*

“Oh. Is that so? What is she doing right now and what are you doing? She’s inside handling the café and you’re out here in the warm car handing out information about something not even remotely related to the café. No matter what she says, she isn’t going to have time for this.”

Anger rising in her belly Saffire stomped one foot against the floorboard. “Then she can MAKE time. I . . . I’m a big girl Junsu. I’ll do it alone. You act like I can’t stand on my own two feet.”

Yes, that was it. She would go it alone. Part of that growing up thing she’d just talked about. She had her own apartment, her own career, and now her own baby. Uncle would be so proud of her.

“NO!” Unused to hearing himself shout, Junsu flipped quickly in the seat grabbing her by the face, his fingers flattening the hair to her ears. “Dammit Saffire. I won’t LET you do it alone. I can’t.”

Quivering in the wake of his outburst, she gulped uncontrollably. “I’m afraid to let you. I might like it but, JJ won’t.” Her admittance to allowing him in, had to include the man she truly loved.

“He will understand. He wouldn’t want you to handle this pregnancy alone either.”

“Maybe not.” *Why in God’s name did that make perfect sense?* She felt like the pathetic heroine in a movie, about to be taken advantage of, her parent’s story beginning to sound oh so familiar.

Studying Junsu’s pensive face, she felt his hands drop, encircling her lovingly instead, as he whispered, “Gamza, you won’t be sorry. Congratulations.”

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