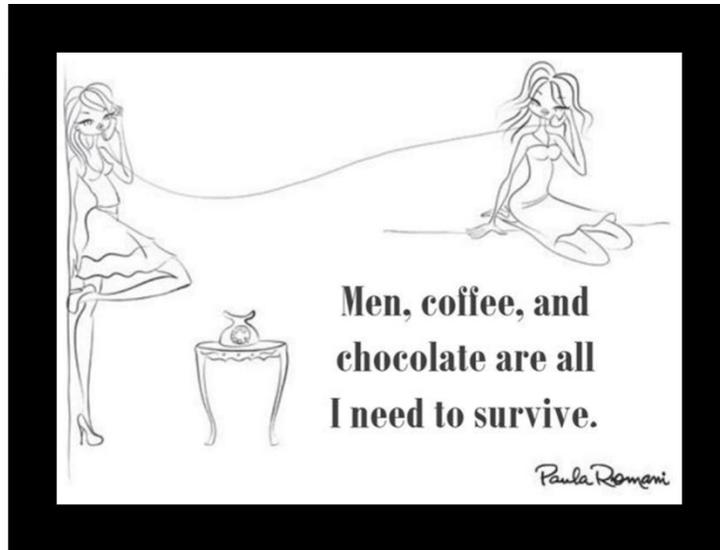


CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

“Men, coffee, and chocolate are all I need to survive.”



Friday - May 1st, 2015

1:00 P.M.

Incheon, S. Korea – Incheon Airport

SITTING outside of baggage check-in at Incheon Airport, Saffire twisted the ring on her finger guiltily anticipating Saffron’s final attempt at optimism. But, instead she got a barrage of questions, sounding more like a mother than the sister she’d turned out to be.

“Do you have everything? Passport? Water? Gum? You know you’ll be in the air forever. Need to pee?” Holding back what she really wanted to say, Saffron kicked her feet against the metal chair leg hoping beyond hope that Saffire’s spur of the moment trip back to L.A. to see Father was only temporary. Unfortunately, she didn’t think it would be.

Hugging Maud and Sarae way too long and hard, Saffire had turned the keys to the condo over to them with a resounding promise to take care of it as if it were their own. And, her eyes . . . vacant and sad, bespoke a decision she neither wanted to face or talk about in her final moments before boarding.

“Make sure you hurry back, silly. We’ve got lots to do at the café and I need your artistic touch.” Patting Saffire’s still flat stomach, they hugged with finality, her face buried deep into the curtain of blonde hair. “Preferably before you get too fat and sassy to fly or help me. Got it!”

“Yep, don’t worry. ‘Little Bean’ and I will be fine. I just need some space right now. Feels like the walls are closing in. I love you, you crazy corporate red-head. And . . . thanks . . . for everything.” Her hesitation spoke volumes, accompanied by a despondency that couldn’t be explained away.

Fighting back tears of regret and disappointment she kissed Saffron’s cheek lovingly, reaching down for her purse and bag. “I really DO have to go. I’ll text you when I get there. Promise . . . Oh shit, wait. I almost forgot.” Slipping the large square shaped diamond from her left ring finger she pressed it into Saffron’s palm with grave determination. “Here. You promised me one last favor. I know you don’t want to but, I just can’t. I WON’T marry a man I don’t love. That was Mother’s M.O. It’s not right. Especially, considering . . .” Relieved it was almost over, she stared down at her stomach.



Saffron’s warm hands gripped her shoulders firmly. “No, I DON’T want to do it but, I understand. And, I gotta say again, this is pretty ballsy.” But, the reality of the situation was, Saffire was far from ballsy. She was just being stupid. Running away was the coward’s way out.

Hating that even in the final moments of their time together, she still wasn’t being able to tell the whole truth, Saffron forged ahead anyway, “Just make sure you don’t lose your nerve halfway through the process. It’s tough being a single parent. And, you know he’s not one to give up, especially considering there’s still two months left before he leaves. He’s got access to an airplane too.”

“I know, I know. Just don’t tell him where I went.”

“I won’t have to. Where else would you go but, home? I will tell him you need some time though.” Quickly hugging they parted once more. “Okay, go before I cry. And, we don’t want that. I really will miss you. The café won’t be the same without you.”

“Pshhhh, yes it will. YOU’RE the café, not me. Make it great!”



Saffron watched her walk away, and into line turning back around to wave childishly. Curling the sparkling ring over in her palm she studied it with anguish. Less than 48 hours ago over an early morning coffee, they’d conspired to agree that it was wrong for Saffire to marry Junsu, (no matter what the outcome of the baby’s paternity). Due to her condition she knew it would be emotionally impossible to stand by and watch him suffer at her expense yet again. So, as soon as he’d left for his final concert tour in Japan, she booked a flight to L.A.

One hand hit the wall as Saffron’s knees gave way . . . once again she was alone. Her vision blurred as people passing became fuzzy version of themselves. Leaning for support at the partition of the store front she searched the end of the line hoping to see her twin fighting back through the crowd, yelling she was sorry and wouldn’t leave . . . ever. However, deep in her soul she knew it would never happen, Saffire wasn’t strong enough and she couldn’t give anymore.

That left ‘her’ to do the dirty work. She still didn’t know HOW she was going to explain all of this to Junsu. Especially by phone, in the middle of a tour (of all things), when only a few short weeks ago, the plan had been to start shopping for a wedding dress.

And, what of Prince JJ? How the hell was he going to take the news, after the fact? He was basically clueless. Still under the impression his Princess was happy and settled in her condo, working on her new position in the symphony, helping out at the café. Instead, her life was a comedy of errors no one could’ve predicted.

Stuffing the ring through the zipper of her purse, her fingers brushed her red tube of lipstick. Lifting it, she considered the gold cylinder, clutching it tight hearing her mother say, ‘with it she could conquer the world’.

“Well, Mother,” she mumbled wearily. “I don’t want the whole world . . . just a little piece.”

In the end, they would both have to find their own way, on their own two feet. Straightening her shoulders Saffron inhaled deeply. She had Hyun Joong and maybe twenty-one months wasn’t so long after all. By the time the café was rebuilt he would be on leave, coming back into her arms and her life.

A ghost of a smile hovered at the memory of their last night together. They'd talked about the future, enjoyed a late night popcorn snack, and re-enacted the bathroom scene from 'Playful Kiss', (with a different ending, of course). Finally, bundled up in coats, hats, and blankets they sat out under the cherry blossom trees in her garden and with the early morning sun rising she finally said the three important words he'd been longing to hear . . . 'I love you'.

After his deployment, she recalled numerous times, lying in bed, writing him. At first, it was pages about everything from losing the stupid cat in the fire; to the excitement of rebuilding the café. But, as the days passed with nothing in return, the letters dwindled to only a paragraph or two of random nothingness, often ending with a tearful phone call to Saffire.

* * * * *

DROPPING the tube into her bag the aroma of coffee from the 'Starbucks' next door gave her courage, as she fingered the snowflake necklace appreciating how coffee had played an important part in her life. Without it she never would have met her sister or believed in love again.

Sure, her father's legacy was much more than just ownership of a café. She had little doubt his choice for her, (his redheaded daughter) was right, lending to the conclusion . . . he knew her extremely well. She only wished he'd lived long enough to help guide the two of them and witness their journey. If so, maybe things would have turned out differently for her sister.

With a heavy heart, she strolled into the coffee shop feeling in the depths of her gut that Saffire and her unborn baby, 'Little Bean' would never find their way back to South Korea.

* * * * *

Thursday – May 7th, 2015

Recruit Training Center Base

Gwangtan-myeon, Paju, Gyeonggi Province, S. Korea

11:30 A.M.

STANDING erect at attention, JJ saluted his officers hearing the whistle releasing he and his battalion for leave to visit with family after graduation from Basic. Hustling through the crowd his eyes scanned the happy faces with excitement, looking for his parents, sister and more importantly, his 'Princess' Saffire.

Spotting his mom, he broke into a trot. Closing in on the small gathering, he was certain his sister had gotten the message to include Saffire in the graduation festivities and visit. *So, where was she? For the first hour, this was a private affair. No fans, cameras or media. His boot camp days were over. Now he could finally see her.*

Hugging, kissing, taking pictures . . . throwing his nieces in the air, he was hard pressed to stay focused on them and not her whereabouts, when early into the visit, his sister sat him down alone in the corner of the tent, handing him a bottle of water and a letter.



“She’s not coming is she?” He asked, the pit in his stomach growing minute-by-minute, making him realize it was naïve to think that (even with an invitation) she would have waited to come alone instead of with family.

“Ani.” His sister’s eyes darted from his disappointed face to the dirt floor and back again. *She’d tried to convince her. Begged even . . . but the girl had been insistent to a fault.* “She asked me to give you this.”

Taking it gingerly, JJ leaned back in the chair uncapping the bottle, drinking slowly, letting the cold water wash the dust of the day out of his mouth.

“I’ll be over with Aboeji, (FATHER) so you can have some privacy.”

“Arasseo.”

Thinking it was criminal what the American girl was doing to him, his sister (unable to get the vacant look in his eyes out of her mind) crept away leaving him alone with the correspondence and his thoughts.

Slowly turning the letter over between his fingers JJ’s heart pounded shamelessly. Scanning his name, carefully written across the envelope, his stomach rumbled. He’d always loved the flowery, feminine penmanship that suited her Bohemian-styled personality to a ‘T’. He’d missed her desperately. This, (his first real communication with her for three months) was making him as nervous as the skittish cat ‘She-Devil’.

How had she’d looked the day she wrote him and where might she have been? At the café dressed for work, hair in a sassy ponytail? . . . Or was she curled up in bed with chocolates and milk, hair down and wet from the shower, comfortable in her sweats and T-shirt?

No matter the time or place he could see her hovered over a pad of paper, pen between her teeth, contemplating what she would say and how. Every nuance of her persona weighed out ahead of time, he found himself smiling before ever tearing gently into the envelope.

The small strip photograph fluttered immediately from between the pages, landing in the soft dirt beneath his feet. Reaching down he plucked it from the side of his boot his eyes capturing the face of the woman he'd sworn in his heart to love forever.

Taken inside a common street photo booth, her many sides were portrayed in the four random poses, ripping his heart up one side and down the other. Today had been his chance to hold her . . . kiss her . . . tell her once again how much he adored her. *What was so important that was keeping her away? Was it her music? Saffron and the café?*

Gulping anxiously, he read out loud, "My Dear, sweet, Cotton Candy Prince . . ." *Ahhh, even thru the paper, he could hear her soft voice calling him the endearment.*

Page after page, stopping only momentarily to invoke a memory, he continued on, chuckling at her jokes, loving her raw sexual innuendo's and finally . . . tearing up when on the last page, she mentioned the café fire. His shoulders drooped in sadness, the pages crunched loudly between his fists.

Uncle's café had been his sanctuary, the place of their destiny. He should've been there for her. For all of them. What damnable timing. Maybe that was why she hadn't written sooner, or visited today. She didn't want to burden him with her problems. What had he expected? Her life would grind to a halt without him? She still had responsibilities and priorities. Now, even more so, it seemed.

Feeling selfish, he smoothed the carefully written pages out across his knees, staring at the ending smattered with scores of 'XOXOXO's and dots of pink lipstick professing her love.

The trip into his Princess's world was over but, for some reason he didn't feel fulfilled.

* * * * *

Monday - July 6th, 2015

Gangnam, S. Korea - Cup of Hotness Café

6:30 A.M.

AT first Hyun Joong didn't see any evidence of the devastating fire both Maud and Serae had described in their letters. The store front blended as he remembered with the KPOP and vintage clothing establishments on either side. However, crossing the street, he realized the weathered wooden door was now shimmering modern glass and a huge window replaced the long narrow one next to the entrance. It enabled one to see inside and patrons to watch the busy street as they sipped their coffee of choice.

Dawn was breaking while he stood there peering into the interior, behind the bar the glow of lights casting a dim shadow from the kitchen, where he knew she started her mornings. Squinting, he pictured her creating delectable pastries, red hair up in a sloppy bun, no makeup, and likely humming the OST from 'Boys over Flowers' (unquestionably off-key).

If he rang the buzzer she would see him in the CCTV hanging above the door. Stepping back he shifted the (first addition) French cookbook under one arm he'd picked up in a little village on his way home two day ago. Re-thinking his strategy he decided his best option to catch her by surprise, was through the back door instead.

Thoughtfully chewing his bottom lip, he hesitated . . . It'd been six months since she uttered the words, 'I love you'. Then nothing. No letters, no contact with anyone in his circle . . . not even his family. What had happened? With the MERS scare, until recently his base in Paju, Gyeonggi-dobeing had been on lockdown, keeping him from seeking answers.

It only took a moment before his eyes spotted the poster of 'SHINee', along with the new album cover. Seeing they were scheduled to visit the café next week, his stomach knotted in jealousy. *No, that wasn't possible. Saffron had promised him while they were together, members of this group would NOT be invited to the café, for any reason.*

Taking off from the front entrance, Joong practically ran down the deserted alley, quickly reaching the back door to the kitchen, (propped open with a five-gallon bucket of lard). Stepping thru, the aroma of butter and cinnamon assaulted him, as extending the book out he expected Saffron to swing around and greet him. But, much to his surprise . . . the area was empty.

* * * * *

Outside the front door of the Café

6:35 A.M.

SQUINTING into the early morning sunlight, Saffron waited to hear the familiar sound of Hyun Joong in her wake, berating her for her stark corporate attire and high-heeled boots. Why did it feel as if he were standing in her shadow? Looking down the street the steam from the exhaust of the waiting taxi cab billowed into the air reminding her she needed to come to her senses. This wasn't life as 'Oh Hani' any longer.

A poignant smile forming at the corners of her lips, she waited patiently for the trunk to open. Ahead of her . . . an upcoming flight to the U.S., and the responsibilities of café owner Ms. Saffron Ryu, forced her heart into a cocoon, to shelter itself from the disappointments of the past. She could do this. Even without him. Young Jae would be proud of her.

* * * * *

6:35 A.M.

THE heat from the oven made the room stuffy as looking around Hyun Joong spied the large butcher block full of finished rolls on one end, the other a mess of flour, bits of dough, and Saffron's favorite rolling pin.

Feeling rejected, he lowered the book, a certainty in his heart telling him she was nowhere on the premises. Setting it on the small desk top, the corner of his mouth quirked at the paper crane he'd brought her, (showing up unannounced via the back door another time). She'd been delighted at the tiny gift he crafted from his own hands.



Turning it over he inspected the now worn, and yellowed paper, neck slightly bent, making it look almost as if it knew how he felt. Grateful in the memory of their last night together and how it had gotten him through many long, lonely shifts of guard duty during lock down.

Putting the crane back, hearing voices he didn't recognize coming from the dining room, Hyun Joong stepped forward, anxious to find out when his Debutante would finally make an appearance.

THE END

SO LETS IGNORE EACH
OTHER, TRY TO
PRETEND THE OTHER
PERSON DOESN'T
EXIST, BUT DEEP
DOWN, WE BOTH KNOW
IT WASN'T SUPPOSED
TO END LIKE THIS.

* * * * *

EPILOGUE

Thursday, March 9th, 2017

Gangnam, S. Korea

AS time goes by, people, places and circumstances change. Such was the case for ‘The Cup of Hotness Café’. In the years following Young Jae Ryu’s death, crucial endings, and unknowns . . . paved the way for potentially new beginnings. And, there was no one more in tune to the music of the heart than those left in the wake of those unknowns.

Scattered about like the four winds, the deceased Uncle’s close knit family of Idols barreled headlong into uncharted territory, anxious and apprehensive of the outcome.

* * * * *

Kim JaeJoong’s Condo

3:00 P.M.

So much had happened that day already. Kim Hyun Joong, about to step from the passenger's side of JJ's running vehicle, finally spotted him dashing out between the glass doors of the swanky Gangnam high rise, a body guard in tow. If he didn't get a move on, they were going to be late.



“Damn, Captain America, you can't tell me looking for one invitation took this long?” He barked, mock frustration written across his face.



“Sorry you had to wait.” Chuckling apologetically, JJ swung around the SUV, nodding appreciatively to the body guard standing at attention, waiting for him to get in and close the door.

Not sure he was ready for what awaited him clear across the continent, he re-adjusted his bag, raking in a quick breath of cool, spring-like air, relishing the fresh smell. A short ride to his private jet with one quick stop to pick up another passenger and they'd all finally be on their way.

Tossing the leather case in the back, he ducked down into the driver's seat, turning to face his friend. “Ready for this hyung?”

“Guess so.” Buckling his seat belt Hyun Joong tapped the dash impatiently. “Let's get on with it. I'm getting leg cramps from having to stay down in the seat so no one would recognize me.”

“De. I still have to make one more stop though.” His hand shooting up in defense, JJ didn't care to hear the forthcoming protest. “I know, I know. Don't say it. I should've told you ahead of time but, I just found out she was coming. I told her I'd swing by and pick her up, it's not that far.”

“Dear God, really?” Shooting him a dirty look, Hyun Joong's palm slipped back down into his lap. “You couldn't just do this one alone, yah?”

“Wae (WHY)? She's my new stylist. At least temporarily, where I go, she goes.” Nestled comfortably against the spacious leather, JJ buckled his own seat belt as the engine purred beneath them.

Frustrated at the last-minute decision, Joong turned away, looking out the window as they pulled into traffic. “Damn, should've caught the Airbus. Mumbling into the darkened glass, he twiddled

his thumbs across one knee. *If he didn't have a burning desire to find out what Saffron had meant in the letter he'd received a few weeks ago, he wouldn't have agreed to go at all. Especially, knowing he could potentially be walking into a mine field of pent-up emotions.*

“Huh?” Not sure he heard the grumbling correctly, JJ's eyes glanced over, a satisfied smirk on his lips. “Come on hyung. I never travel without a Stylist.” Lifting the invitation, he waved it in the air, chuckling as he reached across the console, shoving Hyun Joong's shoulder blade playfully. “Yah. She's good at what she does.”

“AISH!” Reiterating his displeasure, Hyun Joong grunted even louder, wrenching himself away in an obvious attempt to ignore JJ's sardonic grin. “That why you keep her around? 'Cause she's a professionally good fuck? Why doesn't that surprise me all of a sudden? The military's changed you Jae. And, not for the better. Thought you had more class.”

Grabbing a bottle of water from the console, JJ's expression soured instantly. *Why the hell had he said that? He did have more class. And, Joong was right, he had changed. They both had. Nearly two years was a long time away from family, loved ones and even each other. That being said, what lay ahead for them, now? Was the answer in the invitation perched in the seat beside him? Or was it just another futile endeavor? A way to make a mark for himself in a new arena?*

“I don't see you making much of an effort to change things in your life.” His retort clipped, JJ swirled the water around the back of his teeth, before swallowing it. “Tell me the truth. Why are YOU really coming hyung?” *There was the true question.* “I don't need you for moral support.”

“Yahhh, that was harsh. Thought we were closer than that.” Tempted to tell JJ to stop the vehicle and let him out, Hyun Joong laughed out loud instead to cover his nervousness. “Besides, you know me, if possible . . . I never turn down an invitation.” *Especially, an invitation into his past. A surefire way to walk through the door without being suspicious . . .* “Righhhttt . . . That's a weak excuse. You know we're both pathetic.” *JJ wasn't stupid. He knew what Hyun Joong was after.*

“Speak for yourself.” Now mildly offended, Joong leaned back, cupping both hands behind his head adding nonchalantly, “Curiosity. That's what it is. Wanna see what you're up to next. Not sure America's ready for the likes of you.” *If only it were that simple.*

“HAH! Arasseo (OKAY). But, you go ahead and hang onto that anyway. I won’t ask any more questions, if you don’t.”

Certain he’d verbally bested him, JaeJoong upped the volume on the radio, relinquishing the remainder of the short ride to music, blocking out anything that might remotely make him regret his own recent decisions.

Closing his eyes, Joong followed suit, understanding that if he didn’t give in as well and stop talking, he and JJ would play this verbal cat and mouse game all the way to the States and back, and he really wasn’t in the mood.

Ultimately, his friend, Hero JaeJoong would do whatever the hell he wanted . . . when he wanted . . . and no one could stop him. Already knowing the results, Hyun Joong didn’t know why he even tried.

Tomorrow night when they landed, he would feign ignorance of the conversation, paste on a fake smile and get on with it. Hating himself for nearly admitting his true reasons for going, now all he could do was muster up the courage to deal with the fallout when he arrived. Especially, knowing ‘she’ would be there.

* * * * *