

CHAPTER THREE

**“Coffee is like men, the best ones are rich, strong
and keep you up ‘all night long’ . . .”**



December 6th, 2014

11:00 P.M.

Gangnam, S. Korea – In front of Café

“OF course the silence is daebak, but we need a key to get in.” JJ leaned into the doorway, feeling Saffire slipping down and away from him, until she was coiled around the base of his legs, mumbling incoherently.

“Aishhh, shit.” Swinging his head from her lackadaisical figure, to the locked door, to Joong and back again JJ was becoming increasingly frustrated. It was late, it was freezing, the snow was beginning to stick to every inch of them and God only knew where she might have put the key.

“Check the purse.” Hyun Joong offered, his voice strained under the weight of Saffron’s limp, sleeping torso. His knees buckling, he turned slightly, positioning her back to the wall to keep her from falling. “Listen dude, I’m strong and all, but we’re both about to hit the ground if you don’t hurry up.”

“Arasseo, arasseo, (OKAY, OKAY).” Bending over JJ scrounged through the large bag still wrapped around Saffire’s shoulder, hanging precariously against one pant leg. “Don’t see one. Dear Lord, why do women have to carry so much shit?” he complained.

A few random couples meandered by, looking and whispering curiously amongst themselves at seeing them innocently rummaging through Saffire's purse.

"We're gonna get arrested. I just know it. Like I don't have enough problems." Turning his face downward Hyun Joong hissed, "Hurry the hell up," hoping to dispel any thoughts they might have had that a 'purse snatching' was in progress.

"Quit being a diva," JJ uttered, glancing around him, a shiver creeping up his spine, almost as if someone was observing them.

"Mmmm, is this it?" Saffire's groggy interjection came out of nowhere, her limp wrist rising from under the baggy sweater cuff, showing a small gold key, dangling from a rubber band.

"She speaks." Hyun Joong announced, hoisting Saffron higher, anxious to get inside where it was warm.

Snatching the key from a barely coherent Saffire, JJ forced her to her feet, shoving it into the large wooden door. But, as he did, the door swung open on its own, creaking mysteriously, allowing them an easy entrance. *What the hell?* His heart pounding, curious as to who might have come by at such a late hour, unlocking the door and leaving it vulnerable to outsiders, he stepped gingerly inside.

Nearly dragging the limp, bewildered, Saffire behind him he scanned the dark, deserted hallway. It held an eerie sadness. It had been days since he, Joong and Junsu had gathered around the table, pouring out their sorrows over sweet Christmas cakes and hot coffee.

Catching his breath, the reality of Uncle Ryu's death overcame him so suddenly, he struggled not to falter alongside Saffire. For all the joking, reluctance to help the girls and bantering with his best friend, he was broken and unhappy. Uncle Ryu had been like a father to them all when their own fathers couldn't be available. Trying desperately to pull himself together, now he was uncertain of the state of his heart toward this newly discovered 'situation' with the unusual American sisters.

"Are you gonna just stand there all night?" Hyun Joong slammed the door behind them, his back aching to let Saffron slide to the floor and sleep it off directly in the small hallway.

“Ani.” JJ stared up into the long staircase leading to the upstairs apartment then down at his side where Saffire was beginning to come around. “Don’t put yours down . . .” he cautioned. “The stairs. She’ll never make it on her own.”

“She’ll have to. I can’t get up there.” Starting to let her drop, Joong felt her legs begin to uncurl from around his waist.

Her bare feet hitting the wooden floor, Saffron’s eyes peeled open slowly focusing on the nape of Hyun Joongs neck, and the café surroundings. Then, she spotted the staircase.

Was this Uncle’s café? She was going to have to live in this dump? Oh hell no! What happened to the cozy house with the cherry blossom tree she remembered? However, despite her reluctance to give in to the moment, it smelled deliciously of cinnamon rolls, pungent coffee, and the familiar mix of vanilla and chocolate. Perusing the small café, she clung to Hyun Joong’s arm, patting his chest in confusion. “This is the place? Are you sure?”

“De. This is Young Jae’s café. That’s the address you gave us.”

Leaning away from him she grabbed the bannister, attempting to maintain her balance, nodding agreeably, “Okayyy, if you say so Baek Seung Jo, thanks for the ride.” Her voice fading away, concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other she tackled the first step. “I can make it.”

Getting directly behind her to follow (in case she careened out of control), Hyun Joong sighed at her drunken inference to Baek Seung Jo, yet again. He certainly didn’t need to be calling an ambulance at midnight when she didn’t even know who the hell he was.

Unable to help himself, JaeJoong laughed out loud at the two attempting to maneuver the steep wooden staircase.

“You next . . .” Encouraging his own blonde-headed sister, Saffire, he gave her a slight shove toward the bottom step. *Why were they staying here and not in a hotel?*

“No, I can’t.” Saffire plopped down exhausted, her willpower waning. “Why am I here and not at the Condo?” she asked, quietly running one finger along the rough wood underneath her leg.

“Condo?” Eyebrows crimped JJ couldn’t figure out where she would’ve gotten the idea Young Jae had a condo.

“Obviously you and my Uncle were friends. You didn’t know about his condo?” Her voice suspicious she leaned her head against the bannister, chest rising as she sighed. “It’s so beautiful. Especially, the music room.” In the moment of silence that followed, she seemed to drift off before realizing he was sitting beside her.

“He never owned a condo. This café was where he lived.” JJ responded, studying her closely.

“Ohhh, well, he left this café to us,” she revealed, one finger pointed behind her to Saffron (struggling to make the final ascent upstairs).

Flopped down, face-first on the landing, Saffron giggled uncontrollably, the alcohol taking over. Standing above her, arms crossed Hyun Joong was hard pressed to keep from laughing himself. She was a drunken mess. Hair tangled about her body like red strings of spaghetti, her blue eyes were blurry but, irresistible.

“YAY,” she barked. “SUCCESS. Come on Saffire. If I can do it you can.”

“I said NO.” Saffire hollered, taking in her surroundings bit by bit. “I don’t want to. Throw me down a quilt and pillow. I’ll sleep here.” Exasperation evident in her voice she slipped out of her coat with difficulty, hiking the long cotton skirt up to her knees and unzipping one calf-high boot.

It didn’t matter anymore who was here with her. JaeJoong and Hyung Joong could have been anyone. Korea could have been anywhere. She didn’t want to be engaging, funny, personable or sexy. She wanted to strip bare, pee before she wet herself, get a massive drink of water and pass out. Didn’t matter where. Even the hard step was favorable to crawling on her hands and knees up the massive steep staircase.

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THE ghostly figure of Uncle Ryu peeked out from behind the coffee counter grinning at Saffire and her saucy attitude toward idol Kim JaeJoong. His choice was still the right one. There would be fireworks soon, and that made for a perfect match. His eyes floating to the top of the stairs, he cringed at Kim Hyun Joong who was carefully helping Saffron to her feet as they moved into the middle of his tiny living area. He was concerned. This 'son' was already in a relationship . . .



albeit a bad one . . . obviously he hadn't thought the plan through well enough. He had assumed that With JJ came Hyun Joong the seemingly perfect coupling for his precious Saffron but, now he would have to find a different way to intervene. Saffron's heart was fragile. How would she handle the drama of his other involvement?

He was rarely mistaken. This might actually be the first.

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“COFFEE?” Peering into her pale face, and heavy-lidded eyes JJ could already tell, forcing her to do anything at this particular moment was not the way to go. As owner of his own coffee house, he was a proficient barrister. He loved coffee and knew all the best ways to make it. All she needed was a good stiff cup and she would come around enough to make it upstairs to bed. Schedule or not, he and Joong would have to stay and see this one through.

“You're not serious?” Attempting to stand, Saffire swung her head to-and-fro around the barely lit café looking for the restroom. “I just need to pee and get a bottle of water. I'm tired, don't want coffee.” Stumbling away from him she asked, “You come here a lot?”

“Aishhh.” JJ scoffed, leaning both elbows against the worn corner of the counter. “De. Joong and I both do. Your Uncle Ryu was abeoji (FATHER) to us, and everyone else who came here. He was loving and always smiling. He'd give you the shirt off his back, and his last bowl of raman. THAT is how I'll always remember him. You on the other hand . . . gotta say . . . are a bit of a

bitch. If he left you this place, the thing that was closest to his heart, then you should be a tad more grateful. It brought him nothing but joy.”

Dammit. He hadn't intended to be so condescending. No matter she was attractive, and enticing. The minute she opened her mouth it was all over.

“You just called me a Bitch.” Saffire’s eyes widened, despite her attempt to focus on his face that kept blurring between the large coffee machine and the cup-covered wall.

“I did.” JJ reiterated, reaching back for a large ceramic mug, stuffing it under the machine and flipping the switch.

“Junsu would’ve never called me that.” Frowning she crept closer to the machine in her bare feet, feeling the cold wooden floor beneath her.

“Maybe not to your face.” JJ responded truthfully, “but, he knows a bitch when he sees one. You’re really obsessed with him aren’t you? Humpf. Most of his fangirls are.”

Watching the dark strong smelling Columbian blend coffee trickle into the mug he licked his lips unconsciously.

“His fangirls? You think I’m a fangirl?” Leaning across the bar she gazed at the cozy surroundings.

“Ahhh, de. I can get you an autograph.” Snickering he raised one eyebrow. “You should know he has a girlfriend. He talks to her all the time. Besides he doesn’t do long-distance relationships.”

The off-the-cuff declaration came as yet, another blow to her already bruised and battered ego. *What? A girlfriend. Junsu had a girlfriend. That wasn't possible. Or was it? Shit, shit . . . dammit. No wonder he hadn't returned her last text. What did he mean long-distance? What kind of crap was that? They had talked about dating 'more' than once. At one point he had literally 'begged' her to give up Antonio and come stay with him.*



Not bothering to look up, JaeJoong tapped the top of the cup with a little cinnamon and sugar, pouring in a dab of cream, forming it in the shape of a heart. Passing it over, his perfect handsome face smiled, dark eyes twinkling in the dimness of the room. “Even a bitch deserves to be loved,” he chuckled.

Forcing her dry mouth to the lip of the hot steamy cup she began to feel lightheaded and sick. She was finally here. Anxious and excited to hook up with him and start something . . . anything, only to find out he was already involved with someone else. And, now . . . best friend Kim JaeJoong, ‘Prince JJ’, thought she was an incorrigible bitch.

Giving in to the tears she’d kept at bay for over a month she sniffed, “You don’t even know me. I’m . . . I’m . . . not a bitch. I’m a warm, loving person who likes people and used to have lots of friends. It was Antonio, he did this to me.” Her voice fading away into the curling steam of her coffee cup, she swiped a tear from the corner of one blue eye. “I’m a violinist, a good one. I had an apprenticeship with the L.A. Symphony, I was ‘going’ somewhere. I had an expensive apartment, a dog, and a life.” As the hot liquid seared down her throat the tears increased until unable to stop them, she gave in to the pain. “Now . . . now . . .” she blubbered clutching the cup beneath her, as if for support, “My oppa has a girlfriend, and I’m unemployed with nothing but a stranger for a sister and this . . . this place . . .”

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“**T**HANKS,” came Saffron’s loud interjection from the second floor landing way. “You’re strange too.” Flipping her reddish hair in Hyun Joong’s face for what seemed like the hundredth time, she flounced around the tiny living room curiously. “She hates me, but it’s okay. She’ll come around. Can you believe this place? Where’s my house? Eh, Uncle left this to us instead. I don’t know the first thing about running a café. You?” *After all, he was ‘Baek Seung Jo’. Perfect and capable of anything. And, wasn’t running a café something everyone in Korea knew how to do?*

“Ahhh, ani.” Responding quietly Hyun Joong rose off the tiny, two-person sofa, dotted with cartoon pillows and comfortable crocheted throws. Having never actually been in Uncle Ryu’s apartment, he took a moment to examine the surroundings. It was a cluttered mess, consisting of books, music, photos, old worn furniture, awards and trinkets.

The fatherly man he had loved from deep inside his young idol heart (when preparing to debut), had holed up in solitude, never letting on the pain or suffering he had endured in his last few weeks on earth. Choking down a tear, he took his focus off the state of his heart and back to the reality of the saucy, drunken, red-head before him.

What to do next? She probably needed coffee. In order to avoid any more fangirling, he should join JJ downstairs before she started stripping or something equally as embarrassing.

“How about some coffee? I’ll go have JJ make you a cup. He’s the expert.”

Before Saffron could protest, he was rushing down the stairs, two at a time, skidding over into the other room and out of sight. Sighing she watched his disappearing figure. *What had she done wrong? For all her kindness and upbeat attitude, he seemed distant. What did she expect?*

Lips pursed, she ran one finger along the top of a shabby, but cozy looking rocking chair. Laying at the foot was a magazine with a photo of ‘JYJ’, on the cover. Attached to the top, a post-it, reading ‘Time to set things right’, in Korean. Glancing behind her she snatched it off, finding another right beneath it, written in English. ‘Do this SOON!’ 1. Contact attorney 2. Change will 3. Call girls 4. Schedule help. And, number 5, Mail envelopes, scribbled in pencil, looked to have been added hastily at the last minute.

Curious, now she was drawn to #2 saying, ‘Change will’. *Had he sold the house?* Stuffing the note papers in her pants pocket, before she realized it, Hyun Joong was back at her side, a large coffee cup in one hand, a napkin in the other.

“Hope you like a little cinnamon and sugar. JJ makes these the best.” Offering it up kindly he studied the way her eyes gleamed in the soft lamplight. “Takes the edge off, especially after a cold trip through the snow.”

Now, he was the ‘Savior’ once again.

“Thanks.” Reaching for it gingerly her long chilly fingers wrapped around the cup securely, letting the warmth penetrate through her skin. “Mmmm . . . smells yummy. You didn’t want one?” She asked, suddenly feeling childish and awkward in front of this handsome, idol. *He was the yummy she really wanted.*

“Nahhh, thanks anyway. It’s late and I have schedules tomorrow.”

Teetering slightly, in an attempt to maintain her balance, she could hear Saffire and JJ downstairs, through the open door. *Why were they having such a tough go of it?* Gazing at Joong through the wisp of steam billowing from her cup, clearly sister was struggling with her imaginary relationship to Junsu, alcohol, and exhaustion.

Like a black bullet, the cat came out of nowhere, dashing between the unsuspecting couple, its tail flicking nervously, headed toward the top of the stairs. Before Saffron realized exactly what had happened, she jolted forward to avoid the onslaught, her large cup of hot coffee sailing out into mid-air. Finding its mark . . . directly down the front of Hyun Joong’s dress pants, it pooled

around the bottom of his black socks, leaving in its wake a steamy wet spot directly over his crotch.



His arms flying out to grab her, he felt the liquid hit his most tender area, the heat and pain shockingly unbearable. Wanting to squeal, all he could manage to eke out was a faint groan, immediately feeling her hands upon him . . . Rubbing, stroking, wiping . . . her quiet apology horrified and strained.

She needed to stop. Just like her bare heels that dug into him while walking, she just needed to STOP. As he sensed himself begin to rise in anticipation of something ‘else’, he grit his teeth hauling her off to the doorway of the small bedroom so as not to be heard downstairs.



“OH GOD. Enough Saffron. Arasseo (OKAY),” he hissed, frustrated that she was still attempting to touch him ‘there’. *Did she have no shame?* “I’ll be fine.” In a last ditch effort to remove her hands from his unusually aroused privates, grabbing her by both shoulders, he shook her lightly, struggling to help her understand.

“HANDS OFF. That means DON’T TOUCH. I . . . I . . .” Stuttering, he hated to admit that her shocked face (nose-to-nose with him) was more of a turn-on than her hands at his crotch. *The girlfriend. The situation. He was torn. Kiss her? Oh no. Couldn’t do that. She would misunderstand. Hell, HE would misunderstand.*

Cringing Saffron remembered well, the last time she had tripped head first into someone carrying a huge cup of coffee. It had been Mr. Big, and it had opened them up to the world of ‘office’ sex. *Would this introduce her to Kim Hyun Joong in exactly the same way? Now, not only was she guilty of tripping over Saffire’s purse in the tent, and over a bulge in the sidewalk, she was again tripping . . . This time over a black cat! Wasn’t that bad luck? Or was ‘three a charm’? Now she was confused.*

His breathing clipped and labored, Hyun Joong’s chest rose and fell with clarity. *This woman . . . was about to rip him up one side and down the other . . . why did he feel as if it didn’t matter?*

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SAFFIRES' demeanor had taken a turn for the worse again. With the alcohol wearing off, her despondency plummeted quickly. As the tears fell, along with it came the realization that just like Antoinio, Junsu had deceived her.

She should hate him. But, that was impossible. How pathetic was that? An accomplished musician, with a 4.0 GPA, who'd graduated with honors, and here she was groveling atop the wooden bar of a teeny out of the way café she knew nothing about. Her life was in the toilet. Which reminded her . . . she still needed to pee.

JJ leaned over the counter, one arm dangling in front of her tear-stained face. Despite all efforts to control her emotions, her full lips quivered forlornly. Many sisters under his belt he recognized all the signs. *She had been dumped. Now, she was unsuccessfully attempting to put up all her walls.* Staring at her intently his eyes softened to her dilemma.

Should he? Would it help? Hurt? Did it matter? Would she slap him? "Hmmm" . . . He had never been one to hold back. When he felt something, he went for it. And, he was feeling something . . . it was time to GO FOR IT.

Reaching up with both steady hands, he lifted her dampened face tenderly from the bar, and scooting forward pressed his lips to hers with his usual gentle compassion. The kiss, tasting faintly of Vodka and his own concoction of cinnamon coffee, was an intoxicating combination. *He wanted more, he craved more.* And, before she could protest, he murmured into her inviting mouth . . . "Don't forget . . . even a bitch deserves to be loved."



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