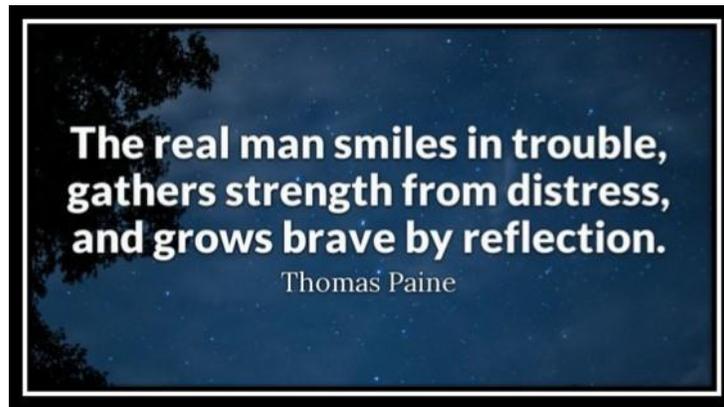


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REFLECTION



MARCH 12th, 2017 – 6:00 P.M. – UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL - PARKING GARAGE

HE wasn't necessarily what you'd call a 'bad' person . . . just desperate. Desperate to be the best. To see his name on the most explosive story in tabloid journalism. Thinking he might finally have it, reporter Johnny Stone, alias Stewy tucked his microphone equipment away in the trunk, motioning his cameraman to go on home for the day. He didn't need another 'body' lurking about when he made his next move.

Cell in hand, he donned the dark-blue ball cap, slapping the top of the trunk with determination as his friend and colleague drove by, beeping in farewell. The interview with Ian Carver outside the hospital conference room had been a genius idea. If it was one thing he 'was' known for . . . it was thinking outside the box. A fan of intrigue, he spent most of his time researching potentially newsworthy subjects, taking notes, and making sure he was always on the inside, looking out.

Eyes shifting carefully, he darted unseen back through the large lobby doors, headed toward the hospital food court, a plan already in motion. The stupid T.V. and newspaper journalists didn't dare take the risks he was willing to pursue.

Stopping short at the “Pizza Hut”, he took a long whiff of the savory pizza’s underneath the heated, cafeteria-style glass. *Cheese or Pepperoni? Hmmm. Women generally went with Pepperoni. Cheese carried too many calories.*

“I’ll take a medium pepperoni please.”

Whistling merrily, he pulled the cap lower over his eyes, headed for the elevator. It was common during regular visiting hours for strangers, friends and family to take meals and snacks to the various floors. All he needed was proof that Saffire and Saffron Ryu were indeed safely tucked away on the VIP level. If he could get some dirt on the Korean husbands in the process . . . well, that would be the icing on the cake and breaking news tomorrow, could very well be his lucky day!

Cell in one hand, pizza in the other he leaned against the back of the elevator waiting for several employees to get on in front of him.

“Damnnn. That smells amazing.” The tall young man stepping in last, shook his head, raising his nose in the air to sniff the scent of tomato sauce hovering in the small, enclosed area. “Making me wish I had time for something other than crackers and water.” Chuckling, he waited out the closing of the door, hearing the murmurings of agreement from a couple at his back.

Without responding, Stewy kept silent, the hot pizza becoming uncomfortable in the palm of his hand. *Could they just close the door and get on with it?* Moments later, having had ample time to rehearse his ‘lines’ for the nurses, he sauntered out of the elevator headed toward the VIP, nurses station.

V.I.P. FLOOR – NURSES STATION

“I ummm, I can’t imagine who might’ve ordered a pizza from THIS floor. They usually let us know ahead of time. You must be mistaken.” Salivating over the smell of pepperoni wafting out of the box, nurse Simmons licked her lips unconsciously, not paying much attention to the young man holding it.

“Well, that’s what they told me downstairs when I picked it up.” Head cocked, hat tipped down, Stewy toyed with the cardboard lid, beginning to open it to the drooling nurses behind the counter. “Says right on here, VIP floor. I always follow the rules and drop at the front desk. Hey, aren’t those two sisters up here? The T.V. was on at work . . . I caught some of the press conference. So sad.”

Plopping the pizza down, certain he’d gotten their attention, he opened the lid fully, exposing it to the two-woman staff. “How about you ladies go ahead, on me. It’ll be cold by the time I go back down to check on the location again. I’ll just grab me a new one. Say . . . is there a restroom I can use on this floor before I go?”

“Down the hall there to the right. It’s a family restroom.”

Sticking his chin out, Stewy grinned broadly, noticing that neither nurse was paying any attention as chattering excitedly, they reached for Kleenex’s out of the tissue box with one hand, and a slice of pizza with the other.

“Thanks ladies. Have a nice night.” *HE WAS IN!* Waving slightly in his wake he sauntered down the hall, ducking into the only restroom, parked directly between room numbers four and five. Saffire and Saffron Ryu.

* * * * *

“**WELL**, that was mighty nice of him huh? I was getting ready to go get my chicken-salad sandwich. This is sooo much better.” Finishing her first piece, nurse Simmons wiped her lips, nudging nurse Baker’s foot, hiking her head toward the sister’s rooms. “Say, speaking of . . . you’re into KPOP. What do you know about both our Mrs. Kim’s and their Idol husbands? There’s so many rumors going around online.”

Scanning the monitors and cameras depicting the VIP patients, nurse Baker, satisfied at seeing no change, picked off the last pepperoni slice, popping it in her mouth. Chewing slowly, a twinkle in her eye, her voice



lowered distinctively, “Well, let me tell you what I heard from Patient Records . . .”

And, not at all by chance, journalist Johnny Stone, aka ‘Stewy’, ducked around the corner of the visiting area just in time to hear a conversation that (along with his newly acquired photographs) could very well secure him a sizeable, window of opportunity moving forward. Mission accomplished.

6:30 P.M. - SAFFRON’S ROOM

STUDYING the man Saffron had confided in her about months ago, Sandra tucked her daughter’s hand under the cotton blanket lovingly. Surprised when he’d strolled in introducing himself, hovering over her precious girl’s sleeping form, (as if he didn’t trust what he was being told about her condition) now, he sat quietly doing Origami.



The crinkling of folding paper, along with the IV pump was starting to grate on her already rattled nerves, making her wonder why he’d suddenly showed up out of nowhere, and without Saffron’s knowledge. Not only him but, Kim JaeJoong as well.

“Mother, do you mind if I turn on some music?” Hyun Joong asked out of courtesy. “I’m sure you know how much Saffron loves it.”

“Of course, go ahead.” Regardless of what she already knew about him, she stiffened at his use of the term ‘mother’, clearing her throat. “Agh-hem . . . why the cranes, if I might ask?”

“It’s a pass time I picked up years ago in Japan when I was laid up with the flu.” Rising politely, he hit the PLAY button on the IPAD. “When Saffron and I were dating, our busy schedules kept JJ and I out of the country a lot. The night before we left for the army we flew back from Japan to surprise the girls at the café. I wanted to bring Saffron something significant to help her remember our last night together but, I didn’t have any time to shop, sooo . . .”

Lifting the small bird in the air, he examined it, a slow grin spreading across his tired, pale face. “I made her one of these. I know it seems silly, but believe it or not, you would’ve thought I’d given her the world.”

Maybe he wasn't so bad after all. With the hint of a smile, Sandra crossed her arms leaning into the chair as she regarded the soft-spoken Idol. "I'm not surprised. Saffron always was impressed by simpler things. No matter how hard I tried to carry her kicking and screaming into my upper social circle . . . she never really was happy there." Watching him set the bird next to a stuffed toy on the nightstand she added, "But, sorry . . . I still don't get it. This entire situation has been quite a shock. Not what I was expecting to come home to."

Facing her Joong bowed his head. "Ani, I should be sorry, for not consulting with you first about her care. You must have plenty of questions." *Here we go Saffron, I promise I won't stray too far from the truth.*

Not quite knowing where to start, Sandra stood, moving the bouquet of balloons to cover her sudden anxiousness. "Ummm, I do. And, Saffron DID tell me nearly everything about her time with you in Korea. How you met; fell in love; even how you left things . . . However, that was a several years ago, and she never once mentioned a marriage. I doubt things would've progressed as they have with Ian if she had."

Admiring Sandra's unyielding resolve to protect her daughter, Hyun Joong remembered their last night together with vivid clarity, announcing unashamedly, "Mmm, de . . . Ian. Well, regardless, we ARE committed to each other. I'm to blame for the marriage."

Turning she met his eyes with the same stark clarity. "Really? Interesting word . . . blame. Meaning you wanted the marriage and she didn't?"

"Something like that. She didn't want to cause a scandal . . . You of all people should know what happens when an Idol talks about marriage. More than anything, she wanted to protect me."

Hesitating, Sandra cleared her throat. "So, I take it you know the story about my . . . ahhh, relationship with Young Jae?" *Why did even asking that simple question still make her so uncomfortable?* "Saffron said, you and JaeJoong were both extremely close to her father."

Pivoting on one foot, she felt a wave of regret wash over her heart, that the man she'd loved more than life itself couldn't be here with them to lend his love and support. "If he were still alive, what do you think he would say regarding this situation?" she finally asked boldly.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Joong exhaled softly. *If she only knew how many times over the long hours sitting next to Saffron's bed, he'd asked himself that very question.*

"Uncle was a man I loved, respected, and admired like my own father. Saffron once told me, she felt as if JJ and I were part of a much greater plan. Before he died his desire was to see she, and Saffire happy and settled. I'm convinced she was right." *Relatively speaking, Uncle had already plead guilty to that fact while floating above his bed at the 'Toscana Hotel'.*

Satisfied for now, Sandra clasped her hands tightly in her lap. "Yep, that sounds like my Young Jae. A romantic fool, with a larger than life passion for music, match-making, schemes and ideas. No doubt he's pulling the strings from Heaven, even as we speak."

Her demeanor flipping quickly, she folded back into the chair, announcing tersely, "So, son-in-law . . . What are we going to do about Ian? You don't know him like I do. He handles his relationships like he does his business deals. He won't give up without a fight, especially now that it seems he has Kyong on his side. For the life of me I don't know why. They can barely stand to be in the same room together."

Remembering the altercation between the two of them in the corridor earlier in the day she set her jaw stubbornly, determined to get to Kyong and find out what in the hell he was trying to accomplish by drawing Ian back into the fold. If push came to shove . . . she would wash her hands of them both to save Saffron's future.

Sensing a renewed tension in Sandra's body language, Joong frowned, gazing down at his 'Hani' hoping to encourage the woman who over the years, had finally come to her senses where her daughters were concerned.

"Mother. It doesn't matter what Ian says or does. Saffron will never accept him honestly. You saw the video . . . she never said 'yes'. And,



she won't . . . because she loves me.” Head still down he stated confidently, “I’ve waited two long years to be reunited with her, nothing and no one will come between us again.”

Fresh tears shimmered in Sandra’s eyes as she watched him stroking Saffron’s long red braid. *Damn, Young Jae had done well by at least one of their daughters. In only these few poignant moments with him, she could tell Hyun Joong seemed to be a fine, loving man, and whether the marriage was real or not, at this point it didn’t really matter. It would serve as a way to keep Saffron out of Ian’s clutches, hopefully forever.*

Swiping the wetness from her eyes, her thoughts turned to her other daughter, lying next door in much the same condition, with no one currently by her side.

“Hyun Joong, I hate to change the subject, but I have to ask. Do you know why Sienna’s father, JaeJoong left them to return to Korea? Was it scheduling or something else? I can’t seem to get a straight answer from Maud or Serae.”

His own eyes glistening with unleashed tears, Joong struggled with the questions, threading his hand into Saffron’s limp one. “Don’t worry mother,” he sighed, as reassuringly as possible, “he’ll be back. He’s just in shock. He trusts me to assist in watching out for them until he returns.” *No sense upsetting her with his own doubts about JJ returning or cast him in a bad light. Her support was crucial for them. Especially now with Kyong so close to both Ian AND Junsu.*

“Well, I don’t have much choice now, do I? I’ll admit, I had my reservations about both of you, but I trust Young Jae’s judgement. He was always good at reading people’s motives.”

Taking a quick breath, she gathered her magazine, water bottle, and purse. “Saffire needs me for a while. Kyong and Junsu left quite some time ago. I’m sure she’s lonely.” Leaning in, kissing Saffron’s cheek she turned to leave.

“Mother? May I ask one more question before you go?” The fatigue evident in his voice, Hyun Joong’s gaze never left Saffron’s ashen face.

“Of course.”

“Why IS Junsu here? I know better than anyone what close friends he and Saffire are but, it’s difficult to get emergency military leave, even for immediate family, and he isn’t related.”

“I’m not sure.” Shrugging her shoulders, Sandra knew at this point it didn’t matter who came and went, Saffire needed all the support she could get. “I don’t know all the details, but my guess is Kyong called in some favors. He does what he needs to, to get things done.”

Starting to walk away, she flipped around suddenly, wondering just how much he didn’t know, and if this was even the time to tell him. “You and JJ were already in the army, so you wouldn’t have known, but it’s been no secret Junsu came to visit Saffire frequently when she was pregnant. He was even there for Sienna’s birth. For a while I thought . . .” Seeing a pained look cross his face she hoped she hadn’t said too much. “Well . . . never mind what I thought.”

“Aigoo . . . I see.” *So, that’s how it had gone down? Saffire had kept Sienna a secret from JJ, leaning on Junsu for support instead, while he was in the military. Now, it all made sense especially in lieu of JJ’s comments about not hearing from her.* “Gamza Mother. I’ll go sit with Saffire in a little while so you can break go home and rest.”

“Thank-you son, I’ll get some coffee and try to stay until 8:00 or 9:00. Kyong said he and Junsu would be back around 6:00 in the morning. You know, I hate for either of them to be alone for too long.”

Feeling immensely better about leaving her daughter with the Idol, she slipped out the door sincerely hoping when Saffron woke up and got well, she would be able to handle the pitfalls of this man’s lifestyle. *Humph! Who was she kidding? If anyone could do it, she could. The girl acted more and more like her great-aunt Saffron every day.*

Taking a deep cleansing breath Hyun Joong kissed Saffron’s palm. “Well Hani looks like we have another ally in our corner. So, please wake up so we can go back home and live happily ever after.”

11:00 P.M. – CUP OF HOTNESS CAFÉ, L.A.

SOMETIMES memories creep up, and force themselves on you, whether you want them to or not. Initiated by a word, a song, person or photo . . . they can unexpectedly throw you back into a time and an emotion you're unprepared for.

The Hotness Café, L.A. was a buzz of activity, the staff of new employees struggling to deal with, not only the days old Opening, but fallout of the Ryu sister's accident, on-going Press coverage and 24-hour surveillance. It wasn't exactly a quiet, peaceful repose for the aging S. Korean Auntie, Serae to sit back and put her feet up while recovering from several sleepless days in a row.

There were so many things to attend to. Saffire's job had been to keep up the Website. Now, incapacitated, the newly appointed Manager had taken over in her place. And, Saffron . . . well, she was the heartbeat of the new endeavor. Struggling to keep moral up, and new employees from walking out before ever getting their feet wet, Serae would've even preferred Ian's help than none at all.

In the midst of the chaos, there was still one personal duty left for her to handle alone. The two large clocks on the wall, (one U.S. time, the other Korean), told her it was getting late. Locking the front door to customers, she closed the blinds, determined to clean up her personal space, secure Saffron's engagement ring in the safe, and make sure the kitchen prep was done for the morning shift.

Turning away she noticed a large brown envelope addressed to her, atop the table closest to the darkened office. Lifting it gingerly, she caught her breath at the company logo, affirming her suspicions. It had finally arrived!

Clutching it to her chest, she made a bee-line for the office, nearly forgetting about the ring. "Aishhh, one thing at a time old woman." Scolding herself for yet another episode of near forgetfulness, she fished into her sweater pocket for the ring whispering to the absentee 'husband', "I hope we're doing the right thing here Hyun Joong. This whole fabrication could blow up in our faces before it's all over."

Hurled from the moment, (as if to distract her even further), the loud clattering of dishes, and cursing drifted through the empty café. *Why was she feeling as if she'd stepped back into the Hotness Café Gangnam, about to confront an awkward, incompetent Saffire, struggling to make her way through the maze of a commercial kitchen?*

Exhaustion evident on her face, she struggled momentarily with what to do about the diamond. Hating to continue carting such an expensive item around in the pocket of a worn sweater, she quickly unlocked Saffron's top desk drawer, laying it beside a large pack of envelopes. Nestled carefully in its own little cubby hole, she vowed to return after the mayhem died down, securing it in the safe where it belonged.

“WHAT IS GOING ON IN THERE?” Her voice piercing the sudden silence, the tall, tan bakery chef leaned out the kitchen doorway, eyebrows raised. “It's cool Ms. Serae. Tammy dropped a tray of mugs by accident. No biggie. Only those six weird one's with the crossing J's on them. Pretty sure we can get some more. I'll go looking for a new set tomorrow. We don't need you.”

Paused halfway to the coffee bar, Serae's stomach lurched. *The cups with the crossing J's. Saffire's set of cups from JJ's café collection. Of all things. Was it some sort of a sign?*

“Okay.” Squeaking out an answer, she turned on one heel, tossing caution to the wind. *This was NOT the time to panic over oddly suspicious activity.* Leaning on the doorjamb, her breath rose and fell, her heart pounding. *The package. Maybe that would ease her tension some.*

Hearing the paper rip as she tore into it, a weak smile crossed her lips. “Ahhh, that didn't take long to arrive at all . . .” Lifting the photo of NCT from the envelope, two other photos fell to the floor at her feet. “What the hell?” Reaching down she gathered them up, gingerly laying them out across the desk top to study. “I didn't request these.”

But, somehow, there they were. Two photos taken at the Gangnam café before it burned to the ground. Saffire, perched lovingly in the arms of Kim JaeJoong, tall and proud, and Saffron, eyes squinty with satisfaction, holding the hand of an equally as smug Kim Hyun Joong.

Were the Fates at work here? Not recognizing the photo's as anything she'd taken, she wondered if Maud had gotten a hold of them on one of the girl's Facebook pages and ordered them, knowing they were orchestrating a café opening reunion with the Idols here in L.A.

She wanted to believe with all her heart it was true. Stepping outside the office, pictures in hand, her eyes found their way to the new café's Couples Wall. One lone framed photo took center-stage depicting a smiling employee on the arm of a local celebrity who (out of curiosity) had come by weeks before the official opening.

Longing for the past, her dark eyes welled with tears. Each new café came with a clean slate. No history, no soul. No photos of its original founder, Young Jae Ryu, his quirky, dysfunctional family, hosts of famous musicians, or Idols and their loved ones . . .

Hearing the laughter of Saffire and Saffron, picking a color palette in the old café, for their newest addition the 'Hotness Wall', brought forth a surge of emotions Serae couldn't continue to hold in. Finally allowing herself to grieve over the sister's, lying unconscious in the hospital, the memories of who and what they'd been years ago bubbled to the surface, tearing at her already fragile heart.

Bits and pieces of their time there together, dotted by anger, but fueled by love forced her to re-evaluate her involvement in the business's moving forward. She had been looking forward to retirement when the twins had inherited Young Jae's café, back then. And, still . . . she couldn't bring herself to let go. Not of the memories or the future. This was all she and Maud had ever known. Where would they go from here if something happened to Saffron or Saffire, and Ian took over?

Shivering at the thought, she was drawn back to the smiling faces of the couples still holding court in the palm of her hand. Her final gift to the young Trot musician, Young Jae Ryu and his dream of bringing Idols a safe haven to relax and enjoy themselves in, would be moving heaven and earth to keep his girls from the clutches of men like Ian Carver. No matter what it took. If she had to lie, cheat and steal to keep him away . . . she would die trying.

MARCH 13th, 2017– 2:00 A.M. – KYONG'S BEACH HOUSE

EXHAUSTED, Junsu's mind created a caveat of scenarios continuing to keep him awake. Who would've thought there would be so much to do, just to bring a toddler home from surgery? Along with Kyong and Sandra, in the hours after Sienna's discharge from the hospital he had sat through paperwork, doctor's orders, making sure everything was cleared out of her room, and ultimately served as porter, (carrying every aspect of her short hospital stay out to the awaiting SUV).

As merely a bystander at her birth, clearly, he had no idea what life with a child was really like. If it was as intense as the last few hours had been . . . he surely 'wasn't' up to the task. Oh, he loved little Sienna to be sure. But, more like grandparents, or an uncle would. Spoil her, make memories then send her back to eomma (MOMMY).

Had he been giving Saffire false hope all this time that she could count on him that way? That should be JJ's job. Yet, here they were. He, sprawled out in the guest room, staring into the darkness, hearing every tiny creak and groan of the large house around him, the roar of the ocean on the opposite side of the window. Kyong, keeping watch over the tiny girl in the baby bed across the hall. JaeJoong . . . nowhere to be found.

Thinking back to earlier that evening, Kyong's conversation with him had been strangely optimistic. He was a difficult man to read and Junsu didn't really know him that well, (just from the few times he'd spent with Saffire after she'd returned to L.A.). Of course, she had finally filled in the gaps about her parent's background. Every family had their own skeletons to deal with. The triangle between her mother Sandra, Kyong and . . . Young Jae Ryu. The separated daughters. Uncle's daughters. Still, in his mind, knowing it DIDN'T absolve Kyong from his past actions concerning any of them.

Feeling uncomfortable about the fact that the man who'd stolen another man's family calmly slept across the hall, with total control of his best friend's child, he suddenly knew he had to do something. He'd enabled Saffire long enough. God forbid, if anything happened and she couldn't find her way back to this child, he would never be able to live with himself, knowing he hadn't pushed harder for JJ to stay involved.

Obviously, Jae had intended to follow through with his promises to her after arriving in the first place. The hospital staff had her registered as Mrs. Kim. Not Saffire Ryu. And, it was HIS signature on Sienna's release papers. Knowing him as well as himself, it was no secret he was more than likely back in Korea torturing himself over his decision, whatever the reasons behind it.

Throwing back the covers he jumped from the bed, his bare feet slapping the tile floor noisily. He couldn't stay. Even though his leave was for several more days, it wasn't the honorable thing to do. This was JJ's responsibility. JJ's woman, child . . . family. He'd encroached on them long enough.

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