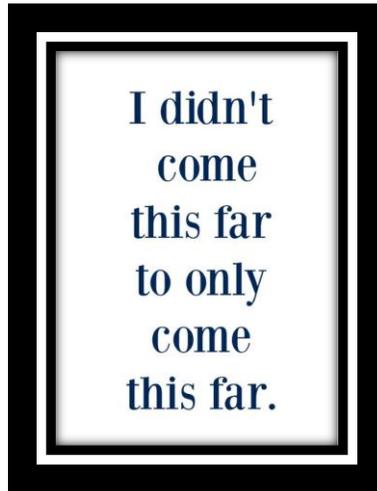


-19-

THIS FAR.



MARCH 16th, 2017 - 3:00 P.M. – SAFFIRE’S BEACH HOUSE

IT was already well past Sienna’s naptime. Pulling up in front of Saffire’s house, Kyong muttered obscenities under his breath, at not having the courage to stand up and buck Saffire’s request allowing Sienna to spend the night at her place with JJ. If the circumstances had been different, and it had been Junsu, he would’ve gladly agreed, but Kim JaeJoong wasn’t Junsu. And, never would be.

Hearing Sienna sucking her fingers loudly from the car seat, he shoved JJ in the arm waking him uncaringly. “Hey! We’re here.”

“Wha? Aishhh. That was quick.”

Slipping out of the seatbelt, JJ flung the door open careening to the back attempting to reach the toddler before Kyong did. It was no secret Saffire’s first real request had fallen on angry, deaf ears . . . no doubt he was about to receive the wrath of the God’s over the upcoming second one. “I’ve got her. Shhhh, Appa’s here yeon-in (SWEETIE).” Easing her from the car seat, conscious of

her bandaged thigh, he tried not to recall her red-faced, blood-curdling screams the day of the accident.

Already nearly asleep on his shoulder, he snuggled her head into his neck, hoping Kyong was going to drop them and run. But, by the time JJ reached the front stoop, maneuvering the key out from his pocket under Sienna's tiny body, the tall, older man was pounding up the short set of stairs behind him.

Dammit. Ignoring him JJ remained calm, the door creaking noisily as he pushed through. Like it or not, he knew after Kyong's childish tirade outside Saffire's hospital room they would have to confront each other once and for all.

Repeating Saffire's list of nap requirements over and over in his head, he sped down the hall, heading for the fan, closing the blinds, and turning on the IPOD. Securing her stuffed Ele, blanket, and monitor signaled the temporary end of his fatherly nap duties. Following up with a kiss to the forehead, the floppy 2-year old, was out like a light. Pulling the door shut behind him he sighed. *Now came the hard part.*

* * * * *

“DID Saffire tell you Little Bean likes to be read to before bed? And, the toothbrush is in the cabinet over the bathroom sink.” Kyong's voice was unusually quiet from the corner of the colorful living room sofa.

“De.” Wanting to be accommodating, to the man Sienna lovingly called Pappy, JaeJoong attempted to loosen his stiff muscles making himself comfortable in the easy chair across the room. “But, this is nap time.”

“I realize that. It's just one of those things that kids like. She'll cry if you don't read, and don't let her chew on the toothbrush too long.” Frustrated and awkward, suddenly Kyong began to realize that leaving his precious niece with the likes of JaeJoong was the beginning of the end for him. *There HAD to be a way to stop it. But, how?*

“You can trust me gyeong (SIR). You should already know, I have plenty of sisters and several nieces. I’ve been around babies and children practically all my life. She’s safe with me.” Leaning up, JaeJoong looked Kyong squarely between the eyes trying to understand his point of view. “I understand you love her. So, do I.”

“Ahhh, but DO you? I would be tempted to say, you don’t really even know her.” A wicked edge to his tone, sent Kyong racing into a firestorm of emotions only JJ could elicit from him.

Taken by surprise, JJ gulped loudly, the blood pumping visibly through the veins of his neck. “What kind of thing is that to say? Of course, I do.”

“Mmmm . . . You were here long enough to suit yourself, then you left them. We all knew it. The only one who doesn’t know is Saffire. When are you going to tell her? Before she finds out from someone else?” Certain Saffire would toss the flamboyant Idol to the curb the moment she knew he’d deserted her only 12 hours after the accident, Kyong’s smugness was beginning to show through.

Rising to meet him in the middle of the room, JaeJoong struggled with the sudden arrogance of a man who really had no claim whatsoever to either Saffire or Sienna, except an emotional one. “I had my reasons. And, I DON’T think that’s any of your DAMNED BUSINESS,” he growled through his teeth.

“I think you’re a sniveling, cowardly, player, and everything about you is my business where my girls are concerned.”

The confrontation escalating rapidly, Kyong was quick to remember what Saffire had told him about her relationship with the female-hungry, stage whore, Kim JaeJoong. More importantly, how she worried that if he found out about the baby, they would be mercilessly thrust into the limelight, dogged by jealous fans, ultimately to suffer the consequences of destroyed reputations and possibly both their careers.

So, hiding her pain, she slithered back home unable to come to terms with life (much like she'd done after her breakup with married asshole, Antonio). Thankfully, only weeks later . . . the man who'd saved her from herself the first time, showed up to save her yet again. Kim Junsu.

And, the story began to unfold. Two men . . . one woman . . . mirroring his own triangle with brother Young Jae and first-love, Sandra . . . There could only be one winner. Idol JaeJoong was gone to the military, but Junsu still was not. So, began the dance, and along with it . . . in an emotional tirade one rainy night before Sienna was born, Saffire let loose with the revelation of a lifetime. Leaving him wondering, who really was this baby's father? It seemed, even she didn't know.

“A COWARD? A sniveling, cowardly player at that. Do you even know the REAL story?” Flabbergasted at Kyong's name-calling without recourse, JJ's jaws clenched indignantly hoping to set the record straight. “YAH? Where were you when Saffire was laying in the front seat of a mangled vehicle fighting for every breath? And, Sienna screaming in pain from a shard of broken glass in her leg? YOU were on a damned vacation, STILL trying to fix the mistakes YOU made over the years with a woman who won't even give you the time of day right now. Aishhh, you're one to talk.”

So, this was the road they were going to go down? Unable to control himself or his tirade any longer, Kyong poked one long finger into JJ's chest shoving him back against the coffee table.

“I know plenty. And, I don't have to explain myself OR my past. Especially to the likes of you. Saffire's been here in L.A. with Sandra and I for over two years now. Part of that time, pregnant, scared and alone. Where were you then, mister smooth-talker? HUH? Military or not, YOU didn't try very hard. All it took was one phone call to Junsu's commanding officer and he was here by her side within 24 hours. Shit, by that time you were already gone.”

“Yahhh, so that's what this is all about . . .” Trying not to raise his voice, JJ pushed Kyong's finger away, still attempting to be somewhat respectful, despite what his gut was telling him. “You think Junsu cares about her more than I do just because he came running when you called? Well, I WAS THERE when it happened, and I can tell you this much . . . just because you stepped in DOESN'T mean she loves him.”

“How do you know? Have you ever bothered to ask her?”

With the fire ignited, now it was beginning to burn. Kyong knew Saffire had never openly admitted to loving Junsu, but the sound of her voice when he was around, the light in her sad eyes, and the way he fawned over her at Sienna’s birth, meant something was there that couldn’t be denied. He was sure of it.

Stepping back, JJ’s mind floated over reading her blatant admissions of confusion, and the photos of Junsu with a newborn Sienna. In truth, all she’d ever done was admit she couldn’t turn her back on his friendship. *Was that what this ridiculous excuse of a husband and father in his face, attempting to convince him was love? BULLSHIT.*

“NO,” he finally blurted out brazenly, “I don’t have to, I know she loves me. And, if anyone’s screwed up their family and acted like a coward it’s you. Maybe you don’t realize how much YOU’VE hurt her over the years. You wouldn’t even accept Saffron into your life when you had the chance. Her own flesh and blood. You have a lot of nerve lecturing me about relationships and love. GO TO HELL.”

Finally losing all ability to contain his anger, JJ stomped to the front door, flinging it open in dismissal.

“And, while you’re at it, get the fuck out. Sienna’s MY daughter, and no matter what you think, I’m not going anywhere, so get used to it. Tomorrow Saffire wants Sienna’s stuff brought to her room for the rest of the week and you might as well know . . . I’m taking them back to S. Korea with me as soon as the doctor says she’s well enough to fly.” The ultimatum he’d hoped to deliver a little more diplomatically, flew from his lips before his brain could catch up with the thought.

Kyong’s eyes squinted furiously into tiny slits, his palms sweating profusely. He was backed into a corner and he knew it. Not only had he been left out of the loop in today’s decision but, moving forward as well. *Where did he even begin to place his anger and blame? At the feet of the young man standing stoically in the open doorway before him? Saffire, for giving in to the*

madness and taking Sienna away from him? Or everyone else involved, for allowing them to push him aside?

“You don’t know what you’re up against young man.” Patting JJ’s shoulder as he stumbled out the front door Kyong paused, his heart breaking at the proclamation he knew he would never be able to fight. “You might want to be sure that Sienna’s really yours before you settle down somewhere and play house.”

3:30 P.M.

HOW could the little girl laying asleep in the other room not belong to him? JaeJoong, heart in his throat wasn’t quite sure what to do with Kyong’s startling revelation. *What had Saffire told him over the years? And, why would she keep something so crucial to their future from him like that?* She wasn’t vindictive . . . if nothing else she was just the opposite. Caring and worrying about others to a fault.

It was about Junsu. All . . . about Junsu. Ticking back memories of Christmas in JeJu, he revisited Hyun Joong’s text on his phone reading, SHE’S WITH JUNSU. With her silver heels in his hand, he’d ignored the underlying meaning of the message, explicitly trusting them both. However, the signs hadn’t ended there. Junsu, flying through the halls of the Toscana desperate to keep her from leaving, and showing up Christmas night, stomping through the freezing cold snow . . . leaving a stunned Saffire still standing outside in his wake.

As the memory of the moments began lining up, (like a puzzle coming together), her sudden flight from life with him in S. Korea began to make perfect sense. Her never-ending plea to maintain Junsu’s ‘forever’ friendship, gradually easing him out of her life after only one returned letter, and subsequently . . . his best friend holding a little girl (looking just like him) on the day she was born.

No wonder Kyong was angry. By all practical purposes, he should be too. Why was being here fraught with high’s and low’s he’d never experienced in his entire lifetime? Is this what Young Jae had envisioned for his future? Surely, not.

Wandering aimlessly toward the small, cluttered kitchen he tried to clear the cobwebs, visions and emotions pointing to the real possibility, the girl he'd finally given his heart to, had slept with his best friend. Resulting in the fact that the toddler in the other room, (regardless of name and birth certificate) might not be his after all.

Digging out his phone, he scanned through recent photos of Sienna, moving aimlessly to personal contacts, undecided who to call or where to turn next. Reaching up into the cupboard for a coffee cup, his eyes fell on the familiar sight of his JJ mug from the original Hotness Café. Remembering Nyoko handing him a replica of the same mug at the opening, now it seemed . . . the very one Saffire had admitted to drinking from the night of their 'Cotton Candy' date was curled into his unsuspecting fingers.

“Are you trying to tell me something Uncle?”

Out of all his resources, he hadn't bothered to ask the one man who had never steered him wrong. Void of anything hot, he felt the smooth china handle begin to burn in his grasp. Flinging it to the butcher block counter top it rattled against the cookie cannister, rolling precariously toward the edge of the sink. *Did he need more?*

Eyes toward the beamed ceiling, his heart pounded in soaring disbelief. Sign after sign scattered within the four walls of Saffire's house pointed to the fact that if nothing else . . . SHE believed Sienna was his. Despite Junsu's open-ended encouragement to propose to Saffire properly, and take his 'family' seriously, did this mean his jilted friend was playing out his last hand in his one-sided love for her?

Hand to his heart, he snatched the cup from the counter, racing back down the hall and out the back door. Knowing his first obligation was to Sienna, he still needed the answers to some very crucial questions. Young Jae had given him the resolve, now he had to follow through.

DECEASED YOUNG JAE AND AUNT SAFFRON

“**ARE** you proud of yourself now? Another grandstanding move. Just like your brother. Using your heavenly powers to heat the handle of a stupid coffee cup.” Toying with the golden belt on

her gown, Aunt Saffron's eyes squinted menacingly. "We're going to be in so much trouble over this. That's what I get for turning my back on you. Expecting you would follow the rules. You didn't do it in the real world, and you certainly aren't doing it here."

"It worked didn't it?" Bouncing around like a child, Young Jae threw his hands in the air excitedly, realizing he still had the ability to make a difference. "He was asking me. Isn't that the key? If they ask . . . you have the power to respond?" A finger to his chin he rubbed the smooth surface of his younger face, wishing he could get Hyun Joong to make a direct request. *Imagine what he could accomplish there?*

"You frustrate me Young Jae."

"But, Aunt Saffron. We both know the truth." Blowing his breath out through the cloud cover Young Jae tried to see the sleeping toddler through the roof of Saffron's seaside cottage. "He needed courage to go up against Kyong. And, thankfully he stood his ground. Doesn't that make you proud? I merely rewarded him."

"Badgering Kyong for your own selfish end isn't going to make the situation better." Frustrated at her nephew's unending quest for revenge, even in the afterlife made the scolding that much more significant.

"My dear Aunt Saffronnnnn . . ." *Would she EVER give up and leave him to his own defenses? He'd been instrumental in picking these couples. He needed to see it to the end.* "These young men were my choice from the beginning. Tell me you want Ian Carver the III, marrying into this family. He's a despicable moron. And, now our poor confused Saffron doesn't even remember my gracious, loving Hyun Joong." Eyes downcast Young Jae tilted his head at the sound of Sienna's cries echoing up through the clouds.

"Hear that? Music to my ears. She will be loved and cared for by BOTH her parents. It's a happy ending."

Cuffing Young Jae about the ear, Aunt Saffron's unending pessimism continued. "You don't know that. What a romantic you are. You can't predict that child's future. No one can." Eyes

rolled upward, she scanned the skies. “Except . . . HIM. And, my guess is, he’s not talking. So, get on with you and leave those boys alone. There’s more important work to be done up here than trying to be a fortune-teller.”

Watching her float away, Young Jae chuckled. Leave it to Aunt Saffron to bring her cantankerous attitude up to Heaven with her when she died. He would do as he pleased. Even if it meant suffering the wrath of his actions. Stuck counting souls at the gate, hovering over unattended gravesites. Whatever. His love for his girls came with a price, and he knew it.

3:45 P.M. – SAFFIRE’S BEACH HOUSE

“HELLO?”

“Mother Kroes, do you have a minute? Can you talk? This is JaeJoong. Kyong asked me a very disturbing question earlier when he was leaving.”

JJ’s tone, wrought with emotion seemed to be coming from a place of pain, but why Sandra had yet to figure out. *Stupid Kyong. He was famous for sticking his foot in his mouth, usually drunk, but equally as deadly when sober.*

“Ummm, can you hold on just a second?” In the middle of brushing Saffire’s hair, she laid the brush in her daughter’s hand, patting her arm lightly. “I’ll be right back honey, I’ve got to take this.”

“Okay. No problem. God knows I’m not going anywhere.” Chuckling at her mother’s sudden secrecy, Saffire stretched back in the chair, finally able to enjoy a moment alone.

Skirting out the door and into the hallway, Sandra ducked around the corner to the waiting area, whispering to JJ as she clipped along. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t talk. I was in with Saffire. Tell me specifically what he said.”

“He ahhh, asked me if I was sure Sienna was mine. What has Saffire told you about Junsu . . . and Sienna?”

Nearly dropping the phone, Sandra fell against the wall at the waiting room doorway, hand to her throat in shock. “Why would he say such a thing? He knows how much that baby looks like you.” Hesitation from the other end of the line, told her what JJ was implying. “JaeJoong . . . you don’t think Junsu and Saffire . . .”

Unable to finish the sentence, Sandra was certain, Saffire would’ve told her if she’d slept with the man. And, if she had, why in God’s name would she keep such a thing from JJ? Especially considering the pregnancy. The poor young man was putting his career on the line, not to mention his heart, in order to take responsibility for them.

“That seemed to be the implication, Mother.” Coughing slightly, again, JJ was quiet. *Would hearing the confirmation set the end result in stone for him? Uncle didn’t seem to think so.*

His own response to Junsu’s words in the gift shop re-alerted him to the fact that knowing every detail might only hurt them all. Kyong was a bitter, loveless man, who did and said things to satisfy his own end.

“My heavens. Saffire has spent Sienna’s entire life telling her all about you. NOT Junsu!” Sandra blurted out, knowing the love her daughter had for the man who desperately wanted to get to the truth. “I don’t know any different. And if Kyong thinks so, then . . . damn him to hell. I’m through with his pompous attitude anyway. How DARE he say something like that to you after everything you’ve done for them.”

“Mother Kroes. I believe you, I do . . . but, it’s true Junsu was here when Sienna was born, wasn’t he?” Beating the back of the phone against his forehead, JJ wished he could take her word for it and not push, but something told him otherwise.

Silence followed as Sandra struggled with the best way to explain the situation. “Yes. He was. But, that was NOT my doing. I told Saffire right from the beginning to tell you about the pregnancy. She . . . she said she didn’t want to ruin your life and career.”

In line with the diary-like letters (written but never sent), JaeJoong began to breathe easier. Maybe Kyong was just muddying the waters to get his own way. He'd never been a fan. Especially after his own revelations that Christmas of 2015.



“Aishhh. What should I do?” Leaning against the porch wall JJ closed his eyes to the smooth, glassy, ocean several yards away.

“I certainly can’t give you any advice, considering what I did in my past, but I can remind you that if it’s the truth you need, give her some time to heal, and I’m sure she’ll give you the answer you’re looking for. She’s a good girl JaeJoong. She didn’t keep Sienna from you out of spite. It was out of love. I saw how she tried to protect the both of you, thinking it was for the best.”

“So . . . that meant digging a hole and never coming out?” The coffee cup still dangling from his thumb, he kicked the greying post allowing his anxiety to dissipate with each thud. “I didn’t ask her to do that Mother.” Swallowed up in Sandra’s words, uncertainty mixed with nostalgia, flung JJ back to the night he’d confessed . . . telling his Princess, *“When I fall, I fall hard. Catch me, and we can fall together.”*

“I know you didn’t son. But, she’s been through a lot. Especially since Young Jae died. Her defensive instincts toward you AND Sienna kicked in automatically because she knew the potential consequences of being in love with an Idol.”

Setting the coffee cup on the porch railing, JJ mulled over Saffire’s reasoning behind keeping Sienna’s birth a secret from him. It looked more and more like Junsu had taken advantage of the situation, just as he’d feared. Yes, initially he’d come to the opening, looking for answers, but now that he was embroiled in the midst of the backlash, he couldn’t allow that to dictate their future any longer.

“I love her Mother.” Holding his ring finger in the air, JJ cracked a smile, only the seagull swooping overhead could see. “I haven’t officially asked her to marry me yet, but no matter how

this whole marriage situation went down, or who knows about it, I did what needed to be done at the time.”

“I know. We all did.”

In the aftermath of the accident, Saffire’s bubble of security had been ripped open, exposing her frightened and fragile heart. No matter how many doubts Kyong might try to put in his head, Prince Jae knew he had to drop it here.

* * * * *