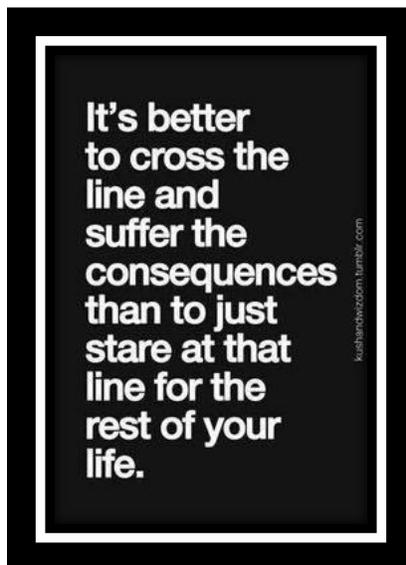


-21-

CROSS THE LINE



MARCH 21st, 2017 – 11:30 A.M. – IAN’S OFFICE BUILDING – L.A., CA

AS if things weren’t bad enough, the 21st of March was turning out to be a cold, dreary day with low cloud cover, and a brisk wind straight out of the north.

The elevators loomed in the distance of Ian’s upscale, office building. Anxious, Saffron tightened the hold on her bag, the loud clicking of her heels unable to drown out the whispers echoing throughout the atrium. The young man behind the reception desk smiled, nodding ‘hello’ as she passed. *How many times over the last two years had she walked to these elevators? Obviously, they recognized her, but it didn’t matter. This would be her last visit.*

The anger she’d felt after talking to Saffire had cooled, her desire to confront Ian immediately put on hold by Ian, himself. After leaving the beach house, he’d called informing her, he would be out of town for three days on business and wanted to have dinner. Pleading a headache, she promised to meet him for lunch instead.

Everyone including Hyun Joong had begged her to return to Korea. While Ian (on the other hand) pleaded for her to stay. In the three-day span, Saffron had continued to probe the Aunties, Mother, and Saffire about her missing two years. Even poor JaeJoong wasn't saved from her investigative inquiries.

Determined to decide, armed with a laptop and tenaciousness for the truth she began searching for answers; locking herself in the house to analyze every experience and encounter since waking from the coma. It wasn't enough to trust her heart. It had lead her astray once with him, she couldn't . . . no, 'wouldn't' make the same mistake again. Finally, the verdict was in and it was final.

Stepping out of the elevator she smoothed an imaginary wrinkle from her favorite, silk, jacket. Funny how a piece of clothing gives one confidence, recalling the story Saffire told her about the wool skirt she'd loaned her for the seduction of Kim Hyun Joong. The corner of her mouth quirked up at the insane thought of her pragmatic-self, seducing anyone.

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“THIS needs to be expedited. The café shares are important to my future.”

Rocking back in his office chair Ian glared out the window of his high-rise, at the greying sky. Irritated at his assistant's inability to coax two, old, Asian ladies to sell, made him miss the red-headed spit-fire. Saffron would have found a way, she never took no for an answer.

“I didn't ask for excuses, this has to happen before they return to Korea, dammit!” Hoping to release the anger of the situation, he dragged a hand down his disgruntled face immediately changing his expression and tone.

“Mon Cher, you're aware how important this is . . . Please make it happen.” Ending the call, he spun in the chair tossing his cell on the desk.

“Agh-hem . . .” A hand on the doorknob, Saffron stood motionless. *Holy shit, the Auntie's were right about the letter. He was still a power-hungry, womanizing, scumbag.*

Startled, Ian rose in a panic, “Saffron. My God! Look at you. You're early. How long have you been standing there?”

“Longer than you’d like, I’m sure.”

Stepping around his desk, hands outstretched in greeting, the devious fiancé acted as if he hadn’t been caught undermining her and the café. “Well, damn there goes your surprise wedding gift.” Prying her hand off the knob, he reached for the bag, leading her to the overstuffed couch. “Don’t you look beautiful. I always loved you in a suit.”

Her mind’s eye narrowed at the touch of his cool, clammy, hand against hers. “Thank you, it’s my favorite. But, it’s obvious you’re already aware of that.”

Giving a tight smile, she sat on the edge of the couch the epitome of style. At his nod, she continued, “I brought you some pastries. Baked them myself.”

“Thank you, I’ve had to up my gym visits due to your fabulous cooking skills.” The compliment slipping easily from his lips, Ian rubbed over the crisp white shirt covering his abs. Failing to get her to even crack a smile, he cleared his throat realizing something was off. (More than overhearing a conversation about getting control of the café.) Cautiously lowering himself to the opposite chair, he put the small bag gingerly on the glass table.

“Let me ring for coffee.” His finger barely moved toward the intercom button when she interrupted.

“Won’t be necessary. I’m not going to be here long. Did your business trip go well?”

Leaning into the leather, his fingers steepled in front of him. Serene and composed she was scary . . . putting him on edge. *He’d best watch his step. This was corporate Saffron at her best. If he wasn’t careful he could lose everything he’d worked so hard for the last two years.*

“Awww, perfect. The Australians were understanding after I explained my sudden departure,” he announced matter-of-factly, aware she didn’t give a flying fuck about his business trip. Nerves wound tight, he shifted his body slightly, sure this encounter wasn’t going to end as they had in the past . . . her, laid out half-naked, atop his desk. “What did YOU do while I was gone?”

Reaching in her purse for a folder, Saffire was all business. “I was productive. Since everyone was so closed-mouth about my missing memory, I went on my own fact-finding mission.” Meeting his flirtatious eyes with a serious demeanor she laid an article directly in the middle of the glass

table. “You see Ian, I’ve been having flashes of memory for a while now. THIS is one of them. Should I read it to you?” *Pansy ass, nauseating, repulsive, two-timing, sorry excuse for a man!*

Taken back by the storm brewing in her eyes, Ian didn’t need to glance at the engagement announcement, dated late 2014. “No need, I know what it says. I’ve apologized, you understood and were more than sympathetic to my dilemma.” Realizing he would antagonize the situation, but not particularly caring . . . he added, “Regardless, this was no reason to leave me like you did. Do you realize how hurt I was when I found out you were fucking the Idol?”

Annoyed by his continued inability to accept any responsibility for his own actions, she scoffed, “Pfff. . . Joong, has nothing to do with me leaving the country. In fact, neither did ‘Miss-Rich-Bitch’, right Mon Cher?” *The cheating; soul-sucking; SOB; was sitting there acting like HE was the victim. She wanted to slap him into next week.*

Hearing the cool, clipped tone of her voice, sparked a fire in his blood, giving him a hard-on. Rising to keep from hauling her to his lips by the silk lapels of her suit he boomed, “What the hell, Saffron! He has everything to do with us. If he’d kept his slimy hands off you, we’d have been married a long time ago.”

Stay on track Saffron don’t let him go off on a rabbit trail. Watching him march to his desk to retrieve a folder, Saffire responded blandly, “I’m here to discuss our break-up, not my husband.”

Sneering at the word ‘husband’ Ian’s demeanor darkened, “OH, HELL NO. Can’t you see Kim Hyun Joong’s a parasite, killing the relationship we’ve managed to rebuild over the last two years?”

Flipping a paper out in front of her face so she couldn’t ignore it, he continued, “When I was in Australia I found proof of his marital status. The bastard’s been lying to you all this time.” Taking it from his hand she ignored the vibrating cell on his desk. “Saffron, he’s nothing . . . just a way to get back at me for her . . .” Nodding toward the table, he felt like a prosecuting attorney finishing his closing arguments to a jury of ‘one’.

Glancing at the tangible evidence she couldn’t deny, Saffire let it drift to the floor, twisting the ring on her left hand. “I know. But, it doesn’t change anything Ian.” Having suspicions about

their marital status (even before she left the hospital), had her questioning why Joong would lie. Concluding he had valid reasons for his actions, after conversations with Saffire and JJ, how could she fault him. He'd done it out of love.

“Holy shit Saffron.” Ian rubbed his forehead in frustration. “I really don’t understand. I’ve bent over backwards to prove my love for you. Not to mention fronting my money AND my precious time into YOUR business venture.” Crossing both arms over his chest, his eyes glowered. “What more do you want from me? Blood?”

Yes, right now his blood staining the lush, beige carpet would give her immense, perverted, pleasure. The repulsive, loathsome, and vile Ian, hated the idea she could effortlessly believe Kim Hyun Joong.

“No Ian. Joong saved me once again from your foul clutches by claiming to be my husband.” *No way was she going to let this soul sucking, man-whore, blame anyone for his short comings. Especially . . . Hyun Joong.*

With shaking fingers’, she dumped the rest of the papers onto the table, spreading out the information she’d found on the Internet.

“I googled myself, looking for answers. What I found, shocked me to the very core of my soul. You left me a broken person Ian. You gave me up for your own fucking protection and didn’t even give a shit!”

2:00 P.M. – SAFFIRE’S BEACH HOUSE

ALONE and lost, Kyong stood in the living room of Saffire’s beachside cottage. Arms folded he stared at the two large suitcases on either side of his feet, a permanent scowl etched on his aging face, his lower lip quivering in anger. He had finally lost the battle.

Already, the cozy, colorful room had taken on a look of quiet despondency, void of the trinkets, books, candles, and photos that transfixed it into a home. Without Saffire and Sienna . . . chances are he would never return here. Past sadness, he wondered why he hadn’t expected something this extreme? After all, JaeJoong had returned, claiming both Saffire and his precious

‘Bean’. It didn’t matter what he thought or said. Saffire’s mind was made up. She was leaving, even giving her Conservatory over to the Chairman of the Board to run in her absence.

“There you are.” Sandra’s brash, often annoying voice bounced off the walls around him, relegating his thoughts back to the moment at hand. “Are those the last of the suitcases?” she asked, one finger pointed over his shoulder at the bags below.

Swinging around, for some reason Kyong suddenly felt the need to plead his case to this woman who’d shared his life for over forty-something years.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this!” Barking his resentment loudly, hands fisted at his sides, his flushed face and bloodshot eyes bore the tale of many sleepless nights.

“PLEASE, can we not have this discussion yet again!” Responding in kind, Sandra knelt to check both suitcases before closing them with a thud of determination and finality. “There IS nothing left to say Kyong.”

“THE HELL THERE ISN’T.” Pulling her almost harshly from the floor by one elbow the aging man crushed her to his chest frantically. “I still love you Sandra, and once again you, and Saffire, are leaving me. Only this time you’re even taking my baby, Sienna. Dammit. What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

“Stop it Kyong. Don’t be such a baby.” Shoving away from his shaking arms, Sandra wanted to soothe him in some way, but didn’t quite know how. “We fell out of love years ago. What we had before the accident was . . . was . . . I don’t know. Maybe it was just a sad way of wishing there was a possibility we could finally make it work. After what you said to Saffron the other day at the hospital, I suppose it hit my breaking point.”

He had made every mistake that could’ve possibly been made over their years together. It was time to throw in the towel and start fresh. She couldn’t deny her girls, and most certainly not herself. He didn’t see it now, but in the long run, he would be grateful.

“You can’t be serious Sandra. I was distraught, deprived of sleep, worried . . . you name it, I was feeling it. We all were.” *Would she ever listen to him? She never had, and more than likely*

wouldn't start now. But, whether she believed it or not, he did love her. Always had. Maybe he didn't show it properly, but it had never left him.

Desperate to make her understand his grief, he tried replacing his anger with a desperate whining. “You can't think moving to S. Korea is the answer here. You hated it there.”

“It doesn't have to be YOUR answer, but it IS mine.”

Her response severe he was reminded of the day the girls discovered Young Jae was their father and not him. He'd accepted them as his own early on, hoping someday Sandra would come to love him as much as his deceased brother. But, it never really happened. Now, that hope was completely gone. Once the plane left the ground, he was doomed.

“You'll keep in touch at least, won't you? And, I'll have to let Saffire know if the cottage sells or not, right?” Grasping at straws he wheeled the first suitcase toward the front door.

“Oh my God Kyong. Quit being so dramatic and acting like we're all going to our death. Of course, we'll keep in touch.” Following behind him with the other case, she paused . . . momentarily taking one final look at Saffire's eclectic abode. “Just make sure everything else she couldn't take gets packed and shipped. You're a business man, I know you can handle at least that much.”

“Yeah, yeah. I will.” There would be no more family picnics on the beach, no more chasing a naked Sienna straight from the bath down the narrow hall to the bedroom. The bare nails on the walls were now only remnants of the house's happy times. Someone else would inhabit it one day soon, and it too would be lost to him forever.

Slamming the trunk shut, he waved Sandra off, headed to his own vehicle, the wind flipping his unzipped jacket away from his sides, murmuring, “Dammit, this is all your fault Young Jae. You just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you?”

IAN'S OFFICE

LEANING on the edge of his mahogany desk, Ian's sharp, blue eyes, flickered over the news items. *Quick Carver, think.* "Saffron, none of this ever came to anything. You were found innocent." *Fuck, lying to her about the allegations against her probably wasn't a smart move.*

Unable to sit any longer Saffron rose, fingers clenched together behind her back, nodding her head affirmatively, "You're right. But, by that time it was too late wasn't it?" Pacing across the room her voice rose, "the company, AKA . . . YOU . . . had thrown me under the bus. I was the patsy . . . MY career ruined. You deliberately assassinated my character with the help of your family, and 'Little-Miss-Rich-Bitch'. Not only in the business world but, also on social media."

Stopping, her anger finally erupted as she sent the papers flying off the table. "After you were done I couldn't have gotten a job running numbers for a bookie. No wonder Kyong hates the sight of you!" Taking a calming breath, she tugged at the hem of her suit jacket attempting to re-gain her composure. Scanning the luxury designed office with its high ceilings and view of city only made her miss the warm hues of the café, along with the smell of sweet pastries and coffee.

Turning back to him she met his cunning, blue eyes honestly. "You know Ian, after ALL that . . . You had the BALLS to show up in JeJu with Mother, oh so hurt that I'd finally gotten wise and walked out on you." *You sleazy, gutless, slimy, low-life, slug bucket. There aren't enough adjectives in the Dictionary to describe you!*

Astounded at her outburst, Ian chewed on the inside of his cheek. *Of course, she was right but, it was all for her . . . for them. The old Saffron would have understood his actions. And, she would have forgiven him back at the Toscana. But now, between Saffire, inheriting the damn café, and Hyun Joong's seduction, he'd lost the woman he loved.*

"You're right and you have every reason to hate me." Rising slowly, he bent over picking up the fallen papers. Dropping them on the table he approached her brazenly, skimming her suit coat with both hands. Smiling at the quaking of her body he whispered, "But, you can't, can you? No matter what I've done, you love me . . ." his breath caressing her cheek.

Frozen at his touch she felt the light pressure of his warm lips, and even though he admitted to ruining her life, the kiss was an empty promise that left her cold. Funny how she used to crave

his kisses but, it wasn't enough anymore. The kiss Joong bestowed on her forehead the night before he left had already branded her his 'one' true love.

Hating herself for letting Ian get to her again, Saffron shoved away wiping away his kiss with the back of her hand. "No Ian, I don't HATE you but . . ."

Still needing answers and unable to explain her emotions she spied a picture on the table, of him having dinner with her family. Picking it up she stared blankly at his smug expression, "Tell me Ian. What REALLY happened in JeJu? The news reports say I was there for a secret engagement party. Mother says I got upset and left the table. Saffire tells me you were an ass. What's your story?"

Hurt she would wipe away his kiss, after everything he'd done for her, Ian strolled to the side bar. It was early but hell, he needed a drink. The warm, bitter, liquid slid down his throat giving him the courage to try one last time. *It was all or nothing. Maybe the truth would bring her back into his arms.*

"Okay Saffron. I fell in love with a beautiful, red-headed, college girl. And, make no mistake . . . I fell hard and started a plan for our future. Now . . ." Pausing, his fist hit the bar, the glasses clinking together loudly. "Because, of Idol boy I was forced to modify. You told me in no uncertain terms, some shit about being happy with your new life."

What BS was he shoveling now? Distancing herself from his outburst, Saffron drifted to the far side of the room, drawn by the bubbling aquarium. Wishing for the damn tennis shoes Joong insisted were sexy, her bruised feet ached in the high heels.

"It's a little late don't you think? That ship has already sailed."

Pouring another drink, Ian slid a hand in his pocket chuckling, "Doesn't matter. Did you really think I would walk away from the woman I spent years molding to be my perfect partner?" His eyebrows rose when she met his burning gaze.

It was slow coming, but she could hear the gears spinning in her head. The longer she stared into his blue eyes the more frightened she became. Then it clicked. A hand to her wildly beating heart she realized . . . she'd fallen in love with the devil himself.

“OH MY GOD. You’ve been SPYING on me ever since I left the Toscana!”

“Mmmm . . . more like since you landed in Korea. Comon Saffron, I had to keep track of my investment.” With all his cards on the table, he toasted her for finally figuring it out. “It wasn’t hard, your blatant lust for the Idol made you lose focus. After he left, I just showed up with plenty of proof your precious man wasn’t so perfect. But thankfully by then, you’d already written him off. From there, it was all downhill.”

Emptying the glass, he slid it to the counter, stepping forward, he sneered, the back of his finger grazing her cool cheek.

“My beautiful Mon Chou. It didn’t bother me if you cared for him; how many times you slept with him; or even if you married him. You’ve ALWAYS belonged to me, and you (of all people) should know, I don’t give up what’s mine easily. But sadly, I underestimated your infatuation with him AND your strength of character. Somehow my training was flawed, or maybe YOU’RE the one that’s flawed . . .” Lowering his hand to his side he finally conceded defeat. Stepping away to gather her purse he returned, holding it out boldly in front of her.

“Even if he hadn’t come after you, I never stood a chance, did I?”

“That’s the frightening part Ian . . . you did once.”

Taking her purse, Saffron licked her dry lips, realizing Ian was right. She was flawed . . . and Hyun Joong loved her flaws, (repeatedly telling her how beautiful they were). Without a backward glance she glided from his office, ignoring the woman sitting behind the desk. Entering the elevator, she turned studying the blonde reminding her of Saffire. *Humph, must be Ian’s new PROJECT.*

Her vibrating cell kept her from warning the girl to run from the devil, for her own sanity. Seeing the ID, she smiled as the doors closed. “Joongie, God, it’s so good to hear your voice. Why are you calling? It must be late there.”

“De, it is but, I missed you. I wanted to hear my Hani’s voice before going to sleep.” Giving a ‘Baek Seung Jo’ smile at her confession, Hyun Joong glanced over at the only letter he’d

received from her while in the Army. With its curled edges, wrinkled, and tear-stained on the table next to his beer, it had been the life-line, keeping him going.

Hearing the loneliness in his voice Saffire sighed, “I can hardly wait to see you tomorrow.” Pausing, she clicked a nail against her front tooth asking in hesitation, “Are you drinking?”

“Aishhh . . . woman we’re an ocean apart and I’m hungry for you, of course I’m drinking. Stop tapping your teeth, what’s wrong? Did your memory finally return?”

“Nooo . . . and I don’t care if it ever does. So much has happened since I talked to you last night. I’m bursting with news.” Fisting her hand, she was dying to tell him everything that had transpired with Ian. But, the elevator doors opened to a sea of faces waiting to board. Exiting, she knew it would have to wait.

Guzzling the last of his beer, Joong sensed the giddiness in her voice. “Babe I have all night. Tell me why it doesn’t matter if you get your memory back or not?” The prolonged silence from her end had him standing abruptly, “Kim Saffron Ryu, I’m half a second away from jumping on a plane to come get you.”

A flash of him ruffling his thick hair in frustration screaming, ‘HANI’, made her trip over her own feet. Without thought she shouted into the cell, “KIM HYUN JOONG . . . SARANGHAE . . . I LOVE YOU. I expect a grand proposal, and rings to match. Bye. See you tomorrow in Korea.”

Hanging up she slid the cell into her pocket, smiling. Eyes closed, she lifted her face to the sliver of sun peeking through the cloud cover warming her skin. *It was turning out to be a good day after all!*

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STUNNED, Hyun Joong wasn’t sure he heard right . . . Proposal, and rings? Shit, she knew he’d lied. Only she didn’t sound angry. He distinctly heard, ‘Saranghae, I love you’.

Taking the empty bottle to the sink he picked up the small black box on his way through the living room, opening it to stare at the snowflake wedding set. It wasn’t an exact match to the necklace he’d brought back from L.A. but . . . close enough.



Now, not sure what the fuck was going on, he closed the box with a snap. Maybe he should call JJ, get a heads up on what to expect tomorrow. Excited as a girl wanting to gossip about her first kiss, he tapped the ID reading, ‘My Hero JJ’.

8:00 P.M. – LAX INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT - L.A., CA

FOR whatever reason, thankfully the usually crowded LAX (LA Int’l Airport) was void of it’s large masses that night. Hosting the trio of travelers with toddler in tow, Sandra, Saffire and Saffron meandered toward the check-in line, reluctant to give in to the farewells they knew were inevitable.



“So, do we have everything? Did you make sure JJ had the seat assignment before he left? You didn’t see anyone suspicious lurking around, did you?” Her questions directed at an anxious, scattered Saffire, Sandra poked through the carry-on luggage, trying to maintain her composure. She wasn’t a novice to overseas travel, customs, passports, or the like, but this time felt different, an emptiness creeping through the pit of her stomach. Without JaeJoong’s manager or Hyun Joong, to accompany them, and considering the surge of social media attention lately, they had to be extra careful.

“Mother, relax. We’re not being followed. JJ made sure of it. And, we checked all our tickets and boarding passes before he called the Uber. Geez, stop worrying so much. I’m a big girl.”

Knowing the difficulty of leaving the Idol to go on without them, Sandra sighed, turning her eyes toward both daughters announcing matter-of-factly, “Okay, okay. I’ll take Sienna, you two go on, say your goodbyes.” Urging them back in the direction of Maud and Serae, she smiled weakly.

With her excitement level at an all-time high, Saffire gave up Sienna’s hand, nudging Saffron away from the crowded check-in line. “Oh my God sis. Mother’s officially turned into a nagging, wreck. This is finally it. I’m so stoked. Life officially changes beginning now.”

How different from her flight, (two-plus years earlier) nervously running away to avoid facing the truth about her relationship to JJ, and forthcoming pregnancy. If only Saffron could remember. But, that was then . . . and this was now.

“I guess it does, huh? Group hug . . .” Taking a deep breath, Saffron stepped forward throwing her arms about Maude and Serae, grateful for their unending patience with her over the past few weeks. These unknown ‘Aunties’, hadn’t skipped a beat in doing the leg-work for not only the café moving forward, but stepped in to assist her in trying to remember her past, family, and especially Kim Hyun Joong.

“Don’t cry now,” she scolded warningly, holding back her own tears for women she didn’t even remember.

“Ani. We’re good, right sister?” Maude declared, nodding toward Serae who was already about to reach in her pocket for a tissue to blow her nose.

“Ohhhh, let them cry.” Giggling nervously, Saffire was hoping to stall for more time, but Mother was already motioning them back into the dwindling line.

“Between us and JJ we’ve got everything under control. So, don’t worry you two. Go . . . get out of here. It’s not like we won’t see you after things calm down here. Japan’s just a hop, skip and a jump back over to Seoul. Aishhh, be happy.” Shooing them away Maude grabbed Serae’s arm forcing her to back away. If they didn’t . . . there would be no way either set of women would break off and leave. “And, Saffron . . . give that Joong a big sloppy one from us too when you get there, always was my favorite . . .”

Then they were gone. Swallowed up in a sudden surge of oncoming passengers headed for baggage check.

“Oh my God. I feel like a teenager again,” Saffire squealed, pinching Saffron’s cheek before anyone noticed. “Let’s go girl. Hani and the Princess are finally going back home.”

MARCH 22st, 2017 – 2:00 P.M. – INCHEON AIRPORT, SEOUL, S. KOREA

NO one could've expected the sudden throng of Kim JaeJoong fans lining the corridors of Inchen Airport in the middle of the afternoon, with relatively no forewarning of his arrival.

Headed out of Customs, Saffire hung back, fearful of being caught in the wave of cameras, and cell phones. Only a few feet from the escalator, Mother cornered her against the wall of the Ladies restroom, her voice low.

“Honey. Let him go. He had to know this was going to happen. You can text him here in a minute. He knows you're meeting at the café later tonight.”



This was just what she'd anticipated and feared at the same time. It was too early for them to be seen in public together. Despite the recent press release about Sienna, there were forces beyond their control at work in Seoul.

Hesitant to watch him begin to forge ahead without her, Saffire heeded her Mother's advice until a tall, impeccably dressed, Asian woman (looking surprisingly familiar) bolted from the chairs at the top of the escalator, her perfect features spreading into a large grin.

“JAE! There you are . . . Come this way. Don't worry about your luggage we'll get it.”

Her long fingers grabbing at the sleeve of JJ's jacket, Nyoko hurled herself against him lovingly. *There was no freaking way he was going to get through this airport without her. She hadn't been 'officially' fired before leaving California, which still left her and his manager in charge of his schedule and affairs.*

“What the hell?” Flinging her away from him, JaeJoong's head swung around in confusion desperately trying to locate Saffire, Sienna and the rest of the family who'd accompanied him out of the plane. *Where had they gone? Where was his manager, and why the fuck was Nyoko meeting him?*

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