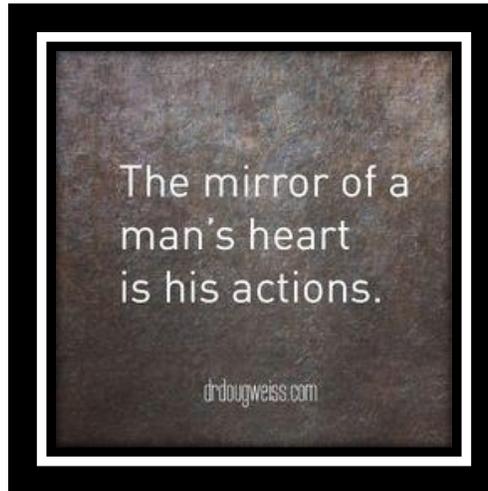


A MAN'S HEART



MARCH 11th – 10:10 A.M. – HAWAII (12:10 L.A. TIME)

CELL phone in hand, Sandra paced back and forth across the small airport lobby. Nervously clicking the sparkly case with one fingernail she checked the time again. *Why weren't either of them answering?* It had been an hour since the first call to Saffire, twenty minutes and two text messages to Saffron. With rattled nerves, her motherly instincts were kicking in. Something was wrong.

She needed to convince Kyong to get an earlier flight back to L.A. They'd already missed the opening, now all she wanted was to get out of this God forsaken airport in the middle of the Hawaiian rainforest and find out how everyone was doing. Not to mention, she couldn't go another minute without hugs and kisses from her little Sienna.

Flopping into a hard, plastic chair, she scanned through her other contacts quickly. Did she dare call Ian? God no. Kyong would have heart palpitations if he saw correspondences back and forth with him. It was bad enough Saffron had given him carte' blanche' in overseeing the building of the new café.

Maud? Serae? Ughhh, they'd never liked her. Probably never would. Still, that didn't mean they weren't at the top of the list, knowing how the opening had fared, and why the girls might not be answering their phones. But, actually 'talking' to one of them? Her Korean was so rusty, and chances are the connection would be horrendous. Texting . . . that was good enough. Putting them into a group text, tongue in cheek, she thought long and hard, trying to 'sound' pleasant, not panic-stricken.

ANNEYEONG AUNTIES. HOW WAS THE OPENING? HOPEFULLY GOOD. WE'RE STILL IN HAWAII, STUPID MONSOON WEATHER. NOT SURE IF THE GIRLS KNOW. I CAN'T SEEM TO GET A HOLD OF EITHER ONE. IS EVERYTHING OK?

The responding text from Maud came back almost immediately.

OPENING WAS DAEBAK. GIRLS ON THE WAY TO SAFFRON'S W/SIENNA. SAFFIRE LEFT HER PHONE HERE BY ACCIDENT. I WILL LET THEM KNOW SHORTLY. WILL KEEP YOU UPDATED.

A sigh of relief escaping her lips, Sandra stood, shaking the kinks out of her neck. Kyong would be back shortly with drinks. With a few extra days, maybe she could calm down long enough to salvage something of the romance they'd experienced before the storm had toppled the apple cart.

MILITARY BASE – S. KOREA- (12:10 L.A. TIME)

“WHERE are you Saffire? Pick up, dammit.”

Tucked safely away behind the barracks, Junsu tapped his beret against one knee in frustration. He'd called her three times already. The opening had supposedly wound down around twelve. He'd told her he was going to call, see how things went, check up on Sienna. Yeah, he was late. But, the military only cared about being on time when it concerned them.

Without any leave time remaining to attend, he was kicking himself over not putting her first. The days he could've taken to spend with her were long gone.

“Well, Princess . . . one more text and then I HAVE to go.” Talking into her smiling face on his background, he scolded himself for using JJ's endearment when addressing her. “Xia . . . you

have to stop doing that. Someday it'll slip out in front of hyung and he'll punch your f'ng lights out."

Sending off one final message, he shoved the phone into his pocket, standing to brush the dirt off the back of his uniform whispering, "Stay safe Fire. Saranghae (I LOVE YOU)."

CUP OF HOTNESS CAFÉ, PARKING LOT – L.A.

WAITING for Saffron to say good bye to Serae and join her, Saffire slid into the front seat of the SUV. Kicking off her sandals wearily, she wriggled her bare toes against the warm plastic under mat. Observing her redheaded sister in the sunlight, she was beginning to look a little frazzled around the edges. This entire fiasco certainly couldn't have been easy on her.

"Oh my God!" she barked jokingly to help lighten the mood, "I need a freaking drink. What time is it? I'm helpless without my cell."

Sister's immediate saucy response was highly unexpected. "It's around 11:00 P.M. in Korea. We need to find the nearest drinking tent."

"And, a couple of hot, Korean Idols." Giggling despite the earlier mood, Saffire winked convincingly at the smiling face beside her adding, "You know how much I hate American men. No fun at all, so self-absorbed."

Throwing on her seatbelt, Saffron met the eyes of the only woman currently in her life who could read her from the inside out. She was spot on. Now that Ian was Australia bound, out of sight, and nearly out of mind . . . Kim Hyun Joong was popping onto her radar screen like a low-flying bomber jet. Her unsent 'ultimatum' wasn't making it any easier to relegate him to the back-burner of her heart.

Now, the quest for an open-door discussion into their relationships of the past was glaring her directly in the face. In the end, if Saffire had followed through with her confessed plan to invite JJ to the opening . . . maybe Hyun Joong would've followed and (possibly) Ian would never have had the guts to propose.

As the engine and air-conditioning kicked in, so did Saffron's Bluetooth, beginning to play (none-other-than) Hyun Joong's 'Kiss-Kiss'.

Settling back into the leather seat, Saffire sighed, momentarily closing both eyes. "Ahhhh, always loved this song. You would've rather it been Baek Seung Jo down on one knee in there than Ian, huh?"

"That was random." Hesitating before folding up the sunshade, Saffron popped it over the back seat, patting little Sienna's knee in the process.

"Welllll, I ride with you a lot and for the most part I try to keep my mouth shut. Unlike you, I don't look for drama, but clearly there are obvious signs." Clipping into her seatbelt as well, Saffire opened her eyes rolling them about the fancy interior.

"Like . . . black is suddenly your favorite color . . . Ian's is red. You have a tiny skull and heart on your key ring, pretty sure THAT didn't come from him, 'cause he leans toward designer everything! You keep a photo of him in the glove compartment stuffed behind your insurance card and . . . VOILA, the icing on the cake . . ." Pointing at the console her eyebrows rose in smug satisfaction, "Your playlist is practically 100% KPOP. Ian never rides anywhere with you, and he's a hardcore jazz guy. I rest my case, you may applaud."

"Wowww . . . That was impressive. Missed your calling, maybe you should've been a prosecutor." Hating to agree with her, Saffron had to admit, she was observant if nothing else. "I was actually going to run something by you about all this."

"Hmmm? Like what? You want ME to text Ian and tell him it's over before it began? After all, you did do it once for me." Wanting to laugh out loud, Saffire slapped her knee jubilantly. *Maybe the rest of the day could still be saved.*

"Oh my God no. I can clean up my own messes . . . Said the girl to the drama queen who DOESN'T like drama." One finger across the middle console, Saffron poked her sister's arm playfully before backing out of the parking spot, and onto the street.

"Hitting below the belt . . . not fair."

“Ah, doesn’t matter. That’s what I like about you. Good intentions. Thanks anyway.”

“So, does that mean you ARE going to tell him no?” Hands together hopefully, Saffire smiled.

“Of course. Just because we’ve been on good terms, doesn’t mean I want to marry him for God’s sake.” Leaning into the steering wheel, Saffron watched the cars cross the intersection. *Where had he even gotten such a thought? Sure, he’d admitted to loving her. But, she didn’t remember ‘officially’ returning the sentiment, or even acting like they should be exclusive.* Turning momentarily, she couldn’t help asking Saffire, “And, what about you Princess?”

“Princess huh? What about me?”

“Let’s revisit your comment yesterday about nearly inviting your Prince Jae to the opening.”

“Come on, really? Was this what you were going to RUN by me when I mentioned Hyun Joong? I plead the fifth. And, we aren’t talking about me. We’re talking about YOU. Quit evading the original question.” Reaching up Saffire flipped the air-conditioning vent onto her already flushed face, fanning her hands out across her lap. *Maybe, just maybe, they both needed to be delving into the possibility of an Idol reunion.*

“That so? Seems to me, with one comes the other. And, in answer to your question . . . yes . . . maybe I do wish it had been Hyun Joong down on one knee.”

Shocked at hearing her own voice admitting the truth she’d tried so desperately to ignore, Saffron’s foot hit the gas a little too hard, the large vehicle darting quickly away from the green light, into the intersection.

“GEEZ, slow down. Didn’t mean to cause a damned accident!” Gripping the dashboard, Saffire glanced over at Sienna, her little head wobbling from side-to-side, weary eyes forced open at the unexpected lurch.

“Sorry.” Shoulders shrugged apologetically Saffron’s heart was conflicted, but she needed answers, and so did her sister. Wriggling in the front seat, her skin-tight dress grabbed every protruding piece of flesh from her ribs down. But, God it felt good to finally get the truth off her

chest. “You know we’re going to have to deal with a firestorm of crap from the photos that got taken.”

“Yeah, and . . .” Reminded of how careful she had always been not to post anything remotely able to connect Sienna with JJ (or vice versa), Saffire already knew her little bubble of secrecy could potentially be split wide open.

“We’re screwed as far as JJ and Hyun Joong are concerned no matter what,” Saffron reiterated.

“How do you mean?” Suddenly more interested in the repercussions of Ian’s little fiasco, Saffire tugged at the bottom of her braid nervously.

“Think about it for a minute. When Hyun Joong sees it (and you know he will) he’s probably going to write me off entirely. Doesn’t even matter if Sienna’s in the photo or not. And, JJ . . .” Snapping her fingers in the air above Saffire’s face Saffron barked, “YOUR DAUGHTER LOOKS JUST LIKE HIM. He’ll be on the first plane out of Korea by tonight. Bet . . .”

“Do we HAVE to talk about it right now? I need a shot or two first, and maybe even a nap. Then, we can deal with it.” Attempting to let Hyun Joong’s slow, methodical love song calm her suddenly rattled nerves Saffire knocked the headrest lightly, her eyes drifting shut again. *What happened to ‘let’s go drink’ and making fun of American guys? This was too serious.*

“Would you look at me.” Her voice persistently grave, Saffron nudged her sisters shoulder. “I have an idea how we can fix it. Right now.” Glad to nearly be home, she swung onto the main highway for the final few blocks to the upscale neighborhood.

“Is that right?” Peering out from one half-opened eye, Saffire didn’t quite understand.

12:34 P.M. – COMING TO SAFFRON’S STREET

ROLLING up his sleeves beside Hyun Joong in the cab, JaeJoong’s mind raced at break-neck speed. Praying he wouldn’t do or say the wrong thing when faced with the reality of an instant family, he was more than aware his life was about to drastically change. Was he prepared? If his

career could make it through military service, now he sincerely hoped it could withstand anything. Surely his fans were mature enough to give him the time and space he needed. Especially for this.

Immersed in his own thoughts, Joong ignored the scenery rushing by, clutching his dark coat jacket between one fist. All bets were off. He was about to deal his final hand. If he couldn't persuade Saffron to turn down a very public proposal, then he wasn't 'Baek Seung Jo', and she certainly wasn't 'Oh Hani'. Feeling like Cinderella approaching the midnight hour, he shuddered. The fairytale could very well end here.

Considering the time of day, traffic on the way to the outskirts of L.A. was relatively light. Weaving around a large piece of cardboard in the road, the cabbie cursed quietly making his way over to the left-hand turn lane.

Leaning forward at the sharp swerve both men noticed the large black SUV pulling out of a side street down the road, the license plates reading, 'HOTNESS'.

"I'll bet that them." Sucking in a deep breath to calm himself, JaeJoong wiped sweaty palms across his pants leg, turning to Hyun Joong. "Damn, I'm nervous."

"Me too."

BACK IN THE SUV

"**CALL.** Right now. Get my phone," Saffron barked, nodding encouragingly toward the purse at her feet. "Like I said. It's around 11:00 in Seoul right now. One of them should answer. Try JJ first."

"WHAT? NO. F-NO." Indignantly rising in the seat, Saffire was unsure why calling them immediately would make things better. They had already pulled onto the main street. *How in the hell was she supposed to explain herself in the few seconds before they actually arrived? Not to mention getting a snoozing Sienna out of the car seat, and JJ hearing her squalling in the background? Was Saffron insane?*

“Why not?” Focused on convincing Saffire of what they both already knew and understood, Saffron dug under her feet for her phone, tossing it into the middle console between them.

“Because . . . because . . . I’m not ready.” *The hell she wasn’t.* Fingering the slick, black case, Saffire blinked nervously. She’d been hashing and re-hashing the forthcoming ‘talk’ with him, (in her head) for nearly three years now. *Did she really want him to call or contact her first? No.*

“Well, GET READY. I’ve still got him in my contacts under CC Prince. Call him first and then I’ll call Hyun Joong. Didn’t I say whatever we did, we had to do before Ian got back?”

“Yeah, okay, okay . . .”

Now that it was on her radar, Saffron knew it was essential this be done immediately. No matter what the outcome, (because sister hadn’t given in and invited JJ to the opening), the call would have to serve as their final attempt at reconciliation.

The music swelling around her, Saffire mindlessly punched the familiar numbers into her sister’s device. One ring . . . *Dear God, please don’t answer . . .* Two rings . . . *voicemail, voicemail, voicemail . . .* Three rings . . .

“Well? Anything?” Headed into the turn lane at their final destination, Saffron twisted the steering wheel (readying them to cross at the green arrow). Thoughtlessly ignoring her own advice to ‘never take your eyes off the road’, she peered into the blinking cell screen in Saffire’s hand.

12:37 P.M.

“**WHY** is Saffron calling me and not you?” Holding his ringing phone in the air, JJ turned to Hyun Joong questionably. “Do you think they know we’re following them? We’re supposed to be incognito.”

At ring number two, Joong shrugged, “I don’t know. Put it on speaker and answer it. Maybe Maud called and told them we were coming. You know how Saffron hates surprises.”

“Arasseo . . . Anneyeong.” Even though it was Saffron’s number, for a split-second JJ’s eyes closed at the thought of the sister’s reaching out to them from the vehicle ahead. But, instead of a soft-spoken greeting, Saffire’s familiar voice howled fearfully . . . “SAFFRON . . . LOOK OUT”.

It all happened so fast. Beside him, Hyun Joong could be heard delivering a deafening warning of his own. “HOLY FUCK! HE’S NOT STOPPING . . .”

Unable to process what they were witnessing, the two Idols watched in horror from the back seat of the cab. A massive pick-up truck ran the red light, barreling dead center into the side of the turning SUV. The sound of squealing tires and crunching metal flooded the silence as it careened up and over the median, finally coming to rest against the trunk of a large tree.

One hand already on the cab door, Hyun Joong (his heart pounding rapidly), kicked into overdrive, barely waiting for the grinding noise to dissipate and dust to settle. Realizing, nothing short of his own death could’ve stopped him, he sprinted across the street, the repugnant stench of scorched rubber and gasoline already stinging his nostrils. The brief anticipation of seeing her again, had just flung him into the depths of hell.

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FIXATED on his friend’s figure racing into the middle of the crash site, a sickening surge of nausea rolled through JJ’s stomach as shock set in. Dragging himself from the cab, his legs threatening to buckle beneath him, his fingers shook profusely as he clutched the (now quiet) cell in one hand.

Two years of military training and service, hadn’t prepared him for this! How could it be any worse? His eyes welling with tears, the lump in his throat nearly choked him. Only a short time ago, Saffire had been close enough to touch and he’d hesitated. He didn’t deserve them.

With numb feet, (finally propelling him forward of their own accord), he darted through the grizzly intersection, conflicted with grief begging, “Hold on Saffire, I’m coming . . .”

Passing by objects and people, as if in slow motion, less than a few seconds before him, Hyun Joong, could be heard at the crumpled SUV, screaming Saffron's name in anguish, his hands tugging the locked door in vain.

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