

FORWARD

The Year 2016



AS time goes by, people, places and circumstances change. Such was the case for Gangnam, S. Korea's 'Cup of Hotness Café'. In the years following (owner) Young Jae Ryu's death in December of 2014, crucial endings, and unknowns . . . paved the way for potentially new beginnings. And, no one was more in tune to the music of the heart, than those left in the wake of those unknowns.

Scattered about like the four winds, the deceased owner's daughters, Saffire and Saffron Ryu and his close-knit family of Idols barreled headlong into uncharted territory, anxious and apprehensive of the outcome.

AUGUST 6TH, 8:45 P.M. – SAFFIRE RYU'S BEACH HOUSE – L.A., CA

WHERE had the time gone? Saffire's life, (imperfect as it often seemed) was for the most part, satisfying. Sister Saffron had her businesses, and she finally had the family and charitable music career she'd been lacking in Korea. Her conservatory for underprivileged children was a booming success, her own desires met daily in the innocent faces of the ones she taught, and mentored.

Grinning into the peacefully sleeping face of little daughter Sienna, clutching a new pink elephant, it was no secret she was perfect. Exhausted from the ‘best’ first birthday ever, she was happy, healthy and loved by anyone she encountered outside her own tiny bubble of existence. Pappy Kyong was her ‘snuggle bunny’, Eomma Saffron her ‘other mommy’, and after years of division, even her ‘own’ mother, (Sandra) boasted the Korean title of grandmother . . . ‘Halmeoni’. What more could she ask for? Maybe the one thing she couldn’t reclaim. Her daughter’s father . . . Idol, Kim Jae Joong.

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TURNING away from Sienna, she picked mindlessly at one nail, re-focused intently on YouTube. “We both know your dancing is awesome here Junsu, but get on with it or I’ll have to fast-forward you . . .” Poised, remote in hand, she threatened to fling ‘JYJ’ member and friend, Xia Junsu, forward into video space, making way for her ‘Cotton Candy Prince’, JaeJoong. Pausing momentarily, she snickered at the memory of a stormy December night, eons ago, paralleling her current obsessive actions.

Back then it was ‘his’ presence in old performances that perturbed her the most. His bold arrogance, cocky smile, and mischievous eyes. Now? Oh shit, she didn’t know. Would she ever?

Slipping one finger across Sienna’s angelically sleeping forehead her giggle gave way to a sad smile. Through circumstances beyond her control, neither Idol (Junsu or JJ) had been available to attend the birthday party of the century. Both . . . proudly invested in the S. Korean army.

As the video ‘Back Seat’ droned on toward the end, the single mother yawned, stretching her long arms toward the coved ceiling. Low rumbles of thunder could be heard outside the window, periodically laced with sharp jagged strips of lightening bolts. Yet another late summer storm.

Switching the T.V. over to classical music to keep Sienna from hearing the oncoming rain, Saffire leaned quietly off the bed, padding toward her cluttered desk. Rummaging through a brightly papered box perched on the corner, she lifted a polaroid from the top, allowing it to take her back to the fun and laughter of the afternoon. Flipping it over she painstakingly wrote, *Sienna’s 1st B-day. 8-6-16.* One day he would want to know.

The container (nearly filled to capacity) held correspondences from JJ; her still un-mailed responses; pics of Sienna and a few mementos. Adding anything more would mean upgrading to a larger box. Time was getting away from her quickly.

Fanning her flushed face with the photo, she dropped it back inside trying to ignore the unfinished letter she'd penned last night before bed. Suddenly it seemed as if the scores of letters were becoming more like a diary of unfulfilled emotions than anything else. It wasn't a matter of what she wanted anymore. It was a matter of survival.

Staring into the mirror above the desk, she examined the small wrinkles across her forehead, alarmed at her tired appearance. Rubbing her bloodshot eyes, a churning stomach (after too much cake) added to the discomfort. Formalities aside, was she ready for this call? It was important she not miss the 9:30 deadline. After all, it was sweet of him to check in. Especially today.

Then, just as expected, the quiet buzzing of FaceTime announced his presence at precisely the allotted time. He was if nothing else . . . a man of punctuality. Struggling to seem upbeat, a slight wave of greeting was all she could muster after a tiring day.

“Junsu. Hi. Right on time. And, handsome as usual.” Meticulously suited in uniform, his short dark hair hidden under the military beanie only served to remind her how she longed to see JJ's smiling face across the miles instead of his.

“Anneyong (HELLO) Fire. Gamsa (THANKS) How rare to get a compliment. I'm flattered.” A grin from ear-to-ear bespoke his own typically sunny demeanor. “I take it the party was a success, yah? How'd my best girl and her little diva fare? I saw the pics you sent.”

“Yep, it was great. A blow out.” Nodding, Saffire shifted the phone to show him the birthday girl, sprawled out across the iron post bed. “We survived it. But as you can see, she's exhausted, and honestly so am I.” Brushing the stray hairs from her face she stood, taking his cyber-face toward the snoozing body, whispering into the dimly lit room, “Look, she fell asleep with the elephant you sent her. I couldn't get her to give it up. ‘Ele’, as she calls it . . . finally nudged out ‘Dory’ for first place at bedtime. Congratulations.”

“Yahhh . . . my baby Bean. Could she be any more adorable Fire? Damn I wish I could’ve been there. Mianhae . . .” Shoulders shrugged his bright eyes flickered with a slight hint of remorse. “I warned you about saving up leave time for my parent’s anniversary this month. Hard to believe it’s already been a year. I remember the day she was born.”

And, indeed he did. The day Saffire had called him to the hospital he’d put his wounded pride aside, (knowing he would never truly have the one woman he loved more than life itself). Even so, there was still a 50/50 chance the child she carried was potentially his. So, despite the wishes of her family, he stayed, supporting her through the difficult birth just by being there. Eighteen hours later the most beautifully, perfect little girl he’d ever laid eyes on came into the world. Sienna Jay Ryu. Perfectly resembling his best friend JJ.

Sucking down tears of joy, mixed with regret he’d kissed her tiny fingers lovingly, vowing her Uncle Xia would always be there no matter what she needed. Void of her father . . . a year later . . . he was continuing to keep his promise.

“She’s growing up so fast Saffire.” Lovingly fixated on the sleeping child he found himself chuckling. “She’ll be a sassy teenager before you know it. Wanting to wear make-up, short skirts and date. Aishhh. Better get a lock on her door now.”

Turning the screen back on herself, Saffire scolded him teasingly, “Stoppsss Junsuuu . . . You’re so dramatic sometimes. Pffft, short skirts and dating boys. No, don’t think so. And, I’m not going to put a lock on her door. She’s a free spirit, like me. Can we just let her be my sassy baby for at least another few years?”

Taking his online presence along with her to the window she pressed the cell against the rain-streaked glass. “Check it out. It’s raining here right now. Glad it held off until after the party. Seems like that’s all it does lately. What were you up to earlier?” Not waiting for his answer, she threw her eyes to the TV screen. “I had ‘Back Seat’ on YouTube. Sort of fangirling, and reminiscing.”

Watching the storm light up the night sky through the tiny cell screen, Junsu could immediately sense the melancholy and somewhat distant demeanor in her tone. “Aigooo, ‘Back

Seat'?" *She'd been reminiscing about JJ. He wasn't stupid.* Shifting his position on the wooden table he cleared his throat scanning the picnic area hoping to cheer her up, "I had lunch with some of my buddies. How about THIS for awesome weather? It's warm and lovely here." Hesitating before releasing the compliment . . . he added, "Just like you."

Not sure how she should respond, Saffire stood rigidly at the window hearing the chirping of birds, and laughing of other soldiers enjoying family time emanating from the woody area.

Casually leaning on both arms to see her face better, Junsu sat the phone down in front of him, rambling on pleasantly, "Did you find my gift? I didn't hide it very well, huh?"

"Yesss . . . and . . . no, it WAS pretty obvious. Putting it on the elephant's trunk was a fun idea even though I had to fight little one for it." Fingering the small silver bracelet on her wrist Saffire lifted it to the phone, jiggling the charm in the shape of a violin. "Thanks. It's beautiful but, you really shouldn't have."

"Oh, comon, I saw it at the Commissary. Reminded me of you." Smiling the big toothy grin, he knew warmed her heart, he couldn't help adding, "Besides, you deserve the best Saffire, and I know you spend most of what you have on Sienna. So, does that make me your silent benefactor? Is that what they call it in America?"

"Oh my God Junsu. Silent benefactor? No, here they call it a pimp." Finally eking out a giggle at his bad innuendo, she moved swiftly away from the window, dropping back into the desk chair. Eyes on the memory box, and letter to JJ she gulped nervously tipping the phone sidewise in an attempt to gather the items and stuff them in the drawer.

"Saffire." His voice on the other end was quiet and understandingly kind. "It's ok. We're both adults here. It's not like we don't know the situation."

"But . . ." Hand in mid-stream she rocked forward, wanting to end the conversation before it headed down the trail she knew she couldn't continue making excuses for.

Unfazed he asked anyway, "You haven't told him yet?"

Resisting the apparent answer, she allowed an awkward silence to rise between them. *He needed to stop. They were supposed to make small talk, laugh about Sienna's latest silliness, discuss how HE was doing so far. Dear God, anything but this.*

"I . . . I . . . ummm, I'm working on it." Wanting to shout, 'Is it any of your business?' at the top of her lungs, she swallowed her voice instead. *Of course, it was. She had left this door open, allowing him to walk through it. What did she expect?*

"Saffirree . . ." Waiting her out, the awkwardness grew. With sun and happiness surrounding him, an angry storm raged at her backside.

What a comedy of errors. JJ was his 'brother', as close as his own flesh and blood. He felt like such a shit. But, he didn't know how to let go of her. And, so he hung on . . . dangling by a thread, threatening the very relationships he was trying to protect. "God Saffire, PLEASE tell him." Now pleading, Junsu's pleasant face darkened. "It's not that hard. I'm begging you. Sienna's too precious to keep to yourself. He deserves the truth."

"Okay, okay, I understand." Paralyzed with fatigue and sudden despair at her own selfishness Saffire told him what he needed to hear. *He was sounding like Saffron. Why did they always gang up on her at her most vulnerable moments?* Bumping her head softly against the cabinet over the desk she 'was' ashamed of herself and her inability to do the right thing. But, in her own defense she had her reasons.

A clap of thunder rattling the window, startled Sienna from a sound sleep her frightened wail nearly as loud as the noise that caused it.

"YIKES Junsu. That was close, it scared Siennas. Listen, I gotta run, but I'll tell him, soon. I promise. Bye." Shoving the END button with more force than necessary she tossed the cell on the desktop, her heart pounding wildly as she rushed to the little girl's side, gathering her shaking body in both arms.

"Shhh . . . shhh, little one. Mommy's here. Nothing to be scared of. It's just a big boom." Hugging her tight, their faces pressed against one another, the sweet smell of her soft skin wove a superficial cocoon around them, as the storm raged on outside.

Junsu, Saffron, Kyong, they were all right. But, even so . . . how was she eventually going to justify her silence to the only one that really mattered . . . JJ? That was the million-dollar question. The one that kept her up at night. Telling him now could (and probably would) be their ultimate end. She wasn't sure she could handle that.

Attempting to gather her scattered thoughts, she snuggled down beside Sienna, ear to the pillow, feeling herself dozing off.

OCTOBER 11TH - 9:30 P.M. – SAFFRON RYU'S OFFICE – L.A., CA

IT seemed like a lifetime ago that Saffron Ryu set foot for the first time in her father's establishment, the 'Cup of Hotness Café', Gangnam, S. Korea. Upon his death, (along with newly discovered twin sister, Saffire) she had been tossed kicking and screaming into ownership, one frosty December afternoon, forced to accept the inevitable or throw in the towel. The latter of which was NOT an option.

Now, here she was years later, a consummate business owner, with the original renovated café flourishing in Gangnam, another recently opened location in Japan and her newest pride and joy . . . 'Cup of Hotness Café, L.A.' By appearances, one would think she had managed to capture it all. Finally, living the best of both worlds. But, sadly . . . that was NOT the case.

Many a night she'd struggled, lonely without her sister by her side, or the man who should have been her life-long 'knight in shining armor', Kim Hyun Joong.

Locked away with business briefs, and bottom lines as her only partner, all fun-loving party days behind her by default, she had to come to terms with herself, or die trying. And, so she did. Yet again, pulling herself up by her boot straps, painting on the face of a winner, and rising to the top of the garbage heap. Her biggest cheerleader, none other than the re-fabricated version of scoundrel millionaire . . . Ian Carver the III.

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PERCHED at the window of the 15th floor office complex, Saffron stared out over the twinkling lights of L.A. humming the OST to ‘Boys Over Flowers’. Hearing the wind whistling around the corner of the building she toyed with the small silver snowflake at her neckline, feeling the brushed silver indentations against the pads of her fingers. *What would Baek Seung Jo have said about all this corporate fuss she stressed over day-to-day?* Unable to answer her own question she let her mind wander reminiscing momentarily about how easy she and Saffire had thought taking over Young Jae’s café would be.

What a duo they had been! Dumb and dumber, thinking they had the answers to everything. Butting heads at every turn along the way, taking no prisoners, and falling hopelessly in love in the process. But, being naïve wasn’t an excuse for plain stupidity. Every time something began to go right . . . the bottom dropped out from under her.

Having decided to go to Korea, (her then Uncle) Young Jae died. She met the man of her dreams . . . and he had a bitchy, money-hungry girlfriend running from the police. She finally came to terms with meeting her long-lost sister, and her parentage . . . only to have Saffire turn tail and run. And, after falling in love . . . in the end . . . she gave up on the man of her dreams.

What did that say about her now? Was she a failure? Or a success? A failure at relationships, a success at business. Oh, WHY had she turned out SO MUCH like mother when she’d spent a lifetime trying NOT to be!

She had a modicum of wealth, was working on opening the third in a chain of Hotness Cafes, had reunited with Saffire, her sweet, sweet baby Sienna, and even managed to choke down dinner in the presence of her (childhood father) Kyong.

Sighing loudly, she stretched, her short skirt skimming the desk-top. Was it time to give up on her dream of ‘happily ever after’? And, what about Ian? Why did she feel as if he was trying ‘extra’ hard to impress her lately? What was his ulterior motive? He always had one. Even after years under his controlling, cheating domination, why were the lines of his face softer than she remembered when he smiled? Or his touch gentler? *AGHHH!*

Frustrated at the level of her intense need to pick him apart at the seams, she tossed his memories into the mix with Hyun Joong's hoping they might measure up at least a little bit.

Because of Ian's hard work and unending patience, everything had been going smoothly with the plans for the L.A. café location. That was, until last month. Now, weeks later (her stomach in knots) the deadlines for financing were looming quicker than the permits could be dealt with.

Slipping off her designer heels she leaned back against the smooth wooden desk, reaching down to massage her weary arches. Oh, what she wouldn't give to have one of her signature Korean pastries right now. Smacking her lips longingly, she failed to hear the door creak open, quiet footsteps tiptoeing toward her vulnerably, bent back.

"GOTCHA!" Strong arms folding around her unsuspecting shoulders, startled her to the point of hysteria.

"HOLY FUCK IAN!" Squealing unrestrained, she jolted up against the musky smell of her dashing partner's smooth, satiny shirt, and dress pants. "Don't EVER scare me like that again. You're lucky I recognized your cologne or those balls you're so proud of would be un-repairable."

Laughing at her petulant lower lip, Ian's large hands covered her eyes, his whisper, soft in the folds of her long, red locks. "Shhhh, calm down baby. I have a surprise. A BIG surprise. Eyes closed." His warning playfully stern, she twisted weakly in his grasp, finally acquiescing to his whims, allowing him to guide her around the desk before feeling herself being lifted to the hard, wooden top.

Wanting desperately to disobey him and peek as her skirt snaked up her nearly bare bottom, the back of her thighs skimmed the lip of cold glass. *Dear GOD! Was he going to accost her? Surely not. He knew their policy of no sex in the workplace. However, that had never stopped him in the past.*

Struggling to cover herself, she heard his footsteps on the hardwood floor, clipping across the room. *Where was he going? For Christ's sake. It was late, she was tired, and not in the mood to play childish games. Especially NOT with him.*

About to open her eyes, (despite his request) the rustling of paperwork at her side, and sweet aroma of roses propelled her back into darkness. *Flowers? What was he up to now?* All manner of situations rolled in and out of her subconscious. He'd showered her with flowers in the past. But, never with even an ounce of sincerity. What made him think this 'occasion' would move her any differently?

"Ian. Please . . . I don't know what you're doing, but hurry the hell up. I'm hungry, I have to pee, and this glass is freezing my ass," mumbling as an afterthought, "feels like I'm in the damned doctor's office waiting for a pap smear." *Could he be trusted?*

"Alright, alright, alright." More silent waiting, until at last . . . he announced proudly, "TA-DA . . . You can look now."

There he stood, grinning from ear-to-ear, a series of papers in each hand, reading 'Permits', and stamped 'Approved'. On the food cart at his side, a large bouquet of red roses, and small cheesecake, sliced neatly in triangular bite-sized pieces. "SURPRISE. Permits came through. We're all set to move forward. We can finally celebrate."

"OHHHH . . ." Hands to her throat in shock (if nothing else), the paperwork far overshadowed the flowers and cheesecake, but he had done exactly what he'd promised to do. The impossible. Break ground before the holidays. Yet again . . . he'd inexplicably saved the day. How could she NOT be impressed?

Jumping from the desk she found herself in his strong arms, nestled against the smell she and her surroundings were familiar with. And, what came next seemed too natural to ignore. His kiss was soft, tender and uncomplicated. Carrying with it nothing of the drama she had become accustomed to with him, in the past. *Why was she falling? Why was she letting this happen? Was she that desperate? Did she miss the feel of a man in her arms that much?*

Her fists clenched at his chest in outward defiance, her insides prickled with uncontained desire. And, when they parted, his eyebrows rose in his own definition of surprise. "Agh-hem. I ah, wasn't expecting that. We've never quite been on the same page before, now have we love?"

“Ummm, not really. You, ahhh, you shouldn’t have done that, good news or not. It’s against policy.” Head bent in her own state of embarrassment, Saffron bit her burning bottom lip, smoothing long fingers down each side of her pencil-thin skirt.

“Screw policy Saffron. You can’t even admit that you enjoyed it? Don’t you think I know every inch of you from the inside out? I’ve been waiting for this.”

“Stop. No, don’t say that.” One hand in the air, she swiveled on her heel, hating herself for going into unforbidden territory.

“Why not? It’s pretty clear I’m still in love with you. Can’t we at least give it another go? Everything’s different now. Everything.”

Her eyes misting over with unshed tears, the pungent smell of roses permeated the room, mingling with his manly scent as he calmly approached her with confidence. “I promise not to break your heart, ever again. Swear.”

The Year 2017

MARCH 10TH - 2:00 A.M. (CA TIME) – JJ’S PRIVATE PLANE

THE inevitability of two friends not conversing, while spending nearly eleven hours in the air, with nothing to do but eat, sleep and play games, was slim to none. Four hours into the flight, Kim Hyun Joong, watched JJ’s Japanese ‘fangirlie’ assistant Nyoko, nestle her head against the window, one hand in his lap, settling into a position for sleep.

She could’ve gone to the other side of the private jet, laid full out in a lounging seat but, no. She was the girlfriend from hell. He wasn’t sure she didn’t have a twin by the name of ‘Chung A’.

Snorting in displeasure at JJ’s apparent disregard for decorum, he wished to God he could just get up and punch some sense into his hyung’s complacent face. *Hadn’t they both been through enough over the last several years?*

The engine droned on, until he thought his head would split from the unending white noise. Exhausted, he was too anxious to sleep. Wanting only to arrive in L.A., meet up with Saffron and try to get answers to the rambling letter she'd sent that made no sense whatsoever. And, what about JJ? Why had he invested in Saffron's California café anyway? To keep tabs on Saffire? From the looks of things with Nyoko, it was hard to believe he would go to such great lengths.

Peering out from under heavy eye-lids he studied JJ quietly. Moments after Nyoko's breathing shifted to a light snore, he carefully removed her hand from his thigh, laying it gently in her own lap. Then, rising freely repositioned himself across the aisle, tugging a notebook from his black briefcase.

Work. Of course. It only made sense he would take the time to weigh in on a new composition, or plans for an upcoming tour. He never sat still long enough to enjoy life. Sadly, neither of them did. Watching his lips move as he wrote, it suddenly dawned on him that quite possibly whatever he was doing was more on a personal level. Curiosity overtaking him, he leaned up in the seat, craning his neck to get a better view.

"Wha?" Noticing he was being spied on, JJ rolled one arm over the paper, his eyes laced with the guilt of a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Ani. Nothing." Whispering to keep from waking Nyoko, Hyun Joong darted to the seat facing JaeJoong, slipping in, his interest peeked. "Bored? Working?"

With no answer forthcoming, he snatched the paper out from under JJ's nose before his friend even realized what had happened. Holding it in the air, clearly it was a letter to Saffire. The babo HAD come to L.A. for her. He knew it. Satisfied at his intuition winning out yet again, he dropped the paper into JJ's outstretched hand, his face pinched with pleasure.

"Why the letter? You know she'll be there." The question was a fair one. After all, the poor man had written many letters over the past two years, what could one more accomplish?

Blinking at Hyun Joong's playful tone, JJ's eyes were sad. "It's complicated," he answered blithely. Crossing one knee, 'Prince' JaeJoong was clearly floundering for words. *How was he*

going to explain? For some reason . . . even sober . . . one look, and this friend of his was the best at dragging information from him, (even better than his mother had been).

“Hmmm.” Leaning back in the seat, Hyun Joong tipped his hands behind his head. “Looks to me like we’ve got nothing but time.”

“Aishhh . . . I’m afraid something might happen and I’ll miss the chance to talk to her. I guess you could call this back-up.”

“You’re flying all this way and you think you need back-up? Where else do you have to be? Stay till you work it out.”

“Hyung, she never answered me. Not one time after that first letter at graduation. I’ve seen her Facebook and Instagram page, she’s been in L.A. all this time. I wrote her, and tried calling, but she changed her number. I think she’s involved with someone else.”

“Whoahhh . . . Mianhae (SORRY). That’s cold.” Now Hyun Joong was thinking about the only letter he’d gotten from Saffron, sounding like a drunken, pity-party of one. “Have you talked to Maud and Serae? I have, and I can’t get anything out of them.”

“Of course. I talk to them about the business all the time. But, every time I bring it up they evade the questions too.”

Patting him on the back solicitously Hyun Joong’s half-smile was sincere. Saffire was way too much like his other obsession SooMin. “Maybe it’s for the best.”

“Yeahh, what kind of real relationship could we have anyway? She has her life and I have mine. It’s not like we’re normal.” Sighing, JJ crumpled the paper between his fingers laying it beside him in the seat. Glancing over at the sleeping woman he’d dared to bring with him, he hated himself even more.

“Is that why you brought her?” Crossing his arms, Hyun Joong hated to berate JJ again for Nyoko’s inclusion in a trip not even meant for her. “She your out? You know it’s not gonna work.”

“No, she’s not. Honestly I DON’T know why I brought her.”

Slapping JJ's forehead in mock anger, Joong frowned. "Hyung, that's about as babo (STUPID) as taking a dive into the Han to retrieve a ring that you didn't even need anymore."

"Aishhh, do you have to keep bringing that up? I told you before . . . this is different." Shaking his head wearily, JJ settled back into the deep leather seat. "At least you heard from Saffron and know where you stand. I'm headed in here blind."

"Look, we're both walking into a hornet's nest." Standing abruptly, Hyun Joong pointed at Nyoko's snoring form, displeasure crossing his handsome face. "Then, if you're gonna do this, you better get your shit together and keep tabs on 'what's her name' over there. I came for one reason and one reason only. And, we both know what it is." Muttering as he turned away, "not that she's gonna leave your damned side for a second anyway."

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