

STILL A MYSTERY



DECEASED YOUNG JAE AND AUNT SAFFRON

“I knew you could be trusted to do the right thing.” Standing proudly at Young Jae’s back, Aunt Saffron folded both arms like always, a satisfied smirk on her ‘eternally young’ face. “Doesn’t my advice always ring true?”

“I suppose so.” Sighing loudly, the father who’d just let his daughter slip from between his grasp yet again stared through the opening in the clouds hoping to glean one last glance of her before being summoned back to his post.

“Oh fiddlesticks. Neither of you was prepared for what could’ve happened if she’d stayed. Did you WANT to be responsible for breaking everyone’s heart for your own satisfaction? Humph. I think NOT.”

Turning slightly, Young Jae frowned. “Sometimes I wonder if you really do dislike me, and you’re just lying.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Dislike? Lying? Words like those don’t exist up here. Still the cynical. WELL. My work here is done.” Slapping her hands together she lifted her eyes upward, motioning him with a slight tip of the head. “You’re going to have a hard time getting re-assigned if you keep this up. I thought you were looking forward to being part of the celestial choir? Now, go on. The doctor has everything under control. And . . . because you threw your hissy fit . . . our Prince has donned his white steed and is galloping to his Princess’s side just as you’d wished for.”

“What? He is?” Wanting desperately to get more details, Young Jae trailed after the high-spirited woman, watching her red bun glisten in the sunlight as she drifted along.

“Of course, he is. I told you it would all work out, didn’t I?” Urging him along she mumbled, “Ridiculous men, don’t know why they can’t just admit when they’re wrong, and move on . . .” hoping he would finally leave well enough alone.

MARCH 13th, 2017 – 4:01 A.M. - UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL – SAFFRON’S ROOM

THE commotion in the hallway had finally stopped. Her ears perked for anything, or anyone else headed her way, Saffron wriggled under the covers making sure all parts of her were indeed still working.

Awake, but still somewhat groggy, she stared over at the nightstand beside her, attempting to focus, noticing an Origami paper crane perched beside a small black stuffed cat with a handmade paper collar reading ‘She-Devil’. *She hated cats . . . where had it come from? And, the paper crane? Why did it seem so endearingly cute?*

What had happened anyway? Crinkling her forehead in a desperate attempt to redirect her thoughts to the past few days all she could come up with was the flash of a green arrow on an unfamiliar highway, somewhere . . . she didn’t know where. *What was her name? Saf . . . something?*

Still struggling for clearer details, the quiet music filtered through her uneasiness. *Uncle’s favorite Trot music! FINALLY. Something she recognized.* Seeing the hairs of her long red braid

draped over one breast she smiled, taking in a deep breath of satisfaction, the rigidity of her bones beginning to relax.

That's right . . . She was Saffron Ryu. Red-head extraordinaire. Sassy corporate bitch. And, along with her came boyfriend Ian, Mother, and . . . had she actually heard Father? That had to have been a nightmare. Of course, none of them were here now. It was night time.

Except for the IV she wasn't hooked up to any machines. No broken bones, or visible bandages. Had no one heard her yell, 'I'm awake'? Why DID she yell anyway? WAS it a bad dream? In a hospital, who would care if she woke up screaming in the middle of the night? Should she be pushing the CALL button for assistance? Assistance for what? Someone to talk to? That was stupid. Sitting up in bed wasn't a big deal. Feeling tubes against her thighs she guessed she had a catheter. But, why? She could move her legs, they were just a little sore.

Deciding against forcing a nurse to come in, she eased back against the partially raised bed, studying the shadowy room around her. A barrage of balloons, flowers, plants, cards and other gifts stuffed on table tops, and around furniture had her thinking she'd obviously been here awhile. *From the looks of it, one would think she was on her death bed. And, since WHEN did she have THESE many friends in a strange city, outside of Chicago?*

Directly across from the bed, a dry erase board had two names scribbled on it, along with a date. *3/13. March 13th, what? What year? Well, of course, it had to be 2013. She'd been on her way to visit Uncle Ryu in Vegas. DEAR GOD. That was it. If Father HAD been here, maybe she was either in Vegas or somewhere in-between there and L.A. That would be the only reason he would've come to see her.*

Trembling in the chilly room she clutched the blanket closer to her chin, just as a young, heavy-set nurse with a radiant smile floated through the door, blood pressure cuff in hand.

“Thank God, you're finally awake . . .”

4:15 A.M. – WAITING ROOM

DYING had not been a part of the plan! Two days ago, when cradling Saffron's head in the iron clutches of the crumpled SUV Hyun Joong had prayed harder than he ever had in his entire life. For BOTH sisters and child to make it through this trip through Hell, alive and well.

Forced to cut their little 'discussion' short at the sounds of the nurses squealing, and the crash cart careening down the hallway, Joong and Ian were sent back to the waiting area until the emergency was over, whatever the outcome.

Now, nervously pacing the four walls, unable to get any concrete answers from the staff until a doctor was called in, all he could do was contact JaeJoong, keep praying and hope for good news, on both fronts.

"Mr. Kim." Sticking her head in the door, nurse Baker grinned broadly, showing her full set of pearly white teeth. "Saffire's resting comfortably. But . . . no visitors until the doctor sees her and approves it."

"Oh my God. Anneyong." So relieved to hear the news, he jumped toward the heavy black nurse, prepared to hug her when flipping her head around quickly she asked, "Where's Mr. Carver? There's more."

"Huh?" Now that he was relieved to hear Saffire was out of the woods, Joong noticed Ian was nowhere to be found. "Ahhh, I don't know. He must've slipped out when I wasn't paying attention. Rest room maybe . . . coffee? Does it really matter? I can fill him in about Saffire when he gets back."

"Wellll . . ." Grabbing him by the sleeve she tugged the questioning 'husband' through the doorway and out into the now still hallway. "Your Saffron is awake too. Damnest thing I've ever heard. Squealed, 'I'm awake', and sat straight up in the bed. Scared the livin' shit out of the Orderly watching the monitors. I've already been in to check her vitals. She's got lots of questions, but I plead the fifth so-to-speak. Anyway, GO. Hurry to see her before that MAN or the doctor gets here. I'm so excited for you." Shoving him forward, her eyes watered with unguarded emotion. "We've all been waiting for this moment."

Watching him race down the empty corridor and past Saffire's closed door, she was certain (if need be) she could waylay Ian long enough for him to have his moment alone with his wife. *What a way to end the night and begin the day. With a true miracle. Now, Saffire had to get well and wake up. Not to mention, her adorable husband JaeJoong needed to get back to her too, and soon!*

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HYUN JOONG knew his time was short. *How much could he say outside of 'I love you', before Ian rained on his parade?* His footsteps pounded across the linoleum, slowing only in the desire not to unnecessarily startle her. *Deep breaths . . . now that she was awake, he would have plenty of time to explain.*

Saffron rolled her eyes upward toward the ceiling, unsure why friendly nurse Baker had systematically dodged every pertinent question she'd asked concerning her whereabouts and the reason why she was in the hospital in the first place saying she would have to wait for the doctor. She needed a more thorough exam to determine if she was ready for the entire truth. *Why did that seem like a cop-out? Were they worried her damned heart was going to give out?*

Her attention deferred by a blurry chasm of memories all vying for top billing in her brain, she barely noticed Hyun Joong's familiar figure stroll quietly into the room. His eyes ablaze with unspoken emotion, one hand casually laced into the pocket of his pants, he approached her without hesitation.

"OH." Startled when he was merely a few feet away Saffron squinted, attempting a shy smile. "Hello. You must be the doctor. Despite what the nurse says, at least I'm alive and breathing on my own, huh?" Snickering she lifted her right hand, showing him the IV needle. "Are you the one I should thank for this? Doesn't really taste like steak now does it?"

DOCTOR? WTF? She was kidding . . . right? Clearing his throat Joong scratched the side of his chin unconsciously, asking quietly, "Doctor? That's a good one. You almost had me Saffron."

Her face changing abruptly, Saffron blinked, still unsure who or what this stranger was doing. “You’re NOT the doctor? Ahhh, then who are you? I think maybe you have the wrong room.”

Looking closer at his attire, there were no signs that he might be a Physician, Orderly, or even on the janitorial staff. So, why in heaven’s name would this handsome young Asian man be loitering in the hospital hallway in the middle of the night, approaching her as if he was a friend, or possibly even more? *Oddly, she didn’t feel threatened. Should she?*

Staring back at her with disbelief, Hyun Joong suddenly began to realize she might be suffering some sort of short-term amnesia. Clearly, it was no joke, even though she seemed to have a sense of humor about not remembering him.

So, where did that put them? He was exhausted, on the brink of not only a physical but mental breakdown, and in only a matter of moments Ian would come barging through the door, (no doubt) with the doctor in tow, and his ability to take control of the situation might very well be severely compromised.

“YOU . . .” she whispered, “are someone I feel like I know. Is that right?” Motioning him directly to her side Saffron felt a lighthearted lilt in her stomach at his close proximity.

There were so many questions on the tip of her tongue. One being, why was he here, and NOT Ian? She did know she’d been comatose, for several days. That much the nurse had told her. An accident victim, with minimal injuries, she DID feel rested, though sore and a little hungry.

Nodding his head slowly at her question, the urge to blurt out the answer was becoming more than Hyun Joong could hold in. Raising his left hand, he showed her the silver wedding band. Didn’t matter the immediate shock, eventually she would need to know.

“I’m your husband, Kim Hyun Joong.”

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SEVERAL seconds passed, Saffron’s expression flipping from shock, to uncertainty, and back to relative disbelief. Checking her face for some sort of vague recollection, Joong began to

prepare himself for the worst. Reaching down he curled his fingers through hers encouraged when she didn't attempt to remove them.

"I . . . I don't think I have a husband. Ummm, I have a boyfriend . . . sort of."

In the aftermath of his answer, her eyes flitted about the room awkwardly. This newly acclaimed 'husband', was treating her with more kindness and respect than she'd gotten from Ian in the entire time she'd known him (not to mention . . . currently, he wasn't even present).

"Is his name Ian by any chance?" Throwing the inevitable out there, Hyun Joong's heart sank. *This entire situation could escalate quickly, if it was Ian she remembered, and NOT him.*

"Yes. How do you know that?" Squinting her eyes shut she wracked her brain trying to place the handsome stranger somewhere in the recesses of her memory banks. When she opened them, he was still clinging to her hand, eyebrows creased in concern, licking his full, dry lips.

Well, dahhh . . . if he claimed to be her husband, of course he must know about Ian. She didn't remember officially breaking things off with him before leaving for Vegas, but that didn't mean she hadn't. He'd been a real asshole, cheating and verbally abusing her in the process. Maybe she DID meet and marry someone else. Vegas? Was this husband the product of a drunken one-night stand on the strip, and a trip to a wedding chapel?

"Oh shit." The curse barely getting past her lips, she managed a weak smile. "I . . . ahhh . . . we . . . ahhh . . . did we . . . llliiikkke?"

NO. It was too early to be making assumptions, and the more she floundered with her words, the wider his smile became. *He obviously knew the answers to all her questions. Now, she had to give him the time to explain himself.*

But, as luck would have it, the commotion and plodding of heavy feet in the already open doorway, announced the arrival, of Ian Carver the III . . .

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STOPPING short at the foot of the mattress, Ian's blue eyes shot a questioning look at the two of them, before ever opening his mouth to speak. In the interim of their exchange, Saffron felt Joong reassuringly squeeze her hand. Immediately clear-headed, she rose slightly in the bed, confronting Ian accusingly.

“Is THIS what it takes for me to be a priority in your life Ian? A damned accident?”

“Huh? What do you mean by that? I got here as soon as I could.” Caught off-guard by the sting to her voice, Ian could sense Hyun Joong had already beat him to the punch, yet again. *How long had he been in here, and just WHAT had he told her?*

“You know exactly what I mean.” Disgusted by his presence, and the arrogance that came with it, Saffron clung to Hyun Joong's fingers tightly. “Doesn't matter anymore, he's here for me. And, in case you were wondering . . . WE ARE MARRIED.”

There it was again. Married. Now, SHE was admitting that the two of them were husband and wife. The bile rising in his throat, only the whistling young doctors' jovial presence behind them stopped him from doing something he knew he'd regret.

“OH MY, Mrs. Kim.” His arms making a pathway between the uneasy figures of Saffron's visitors the physician grinned broadly. “You my dear, are looking radiant this evening. If I didn't know better I'd say you had a very refreshing nap, and are almost ready for a night on the town, dancing.”

Sensing the tension around them, despite his encouraging comments, Saffron mumbled, “Thank you,” squinting at Ian angrily.

Leaning down, the younger man's cool fingers touched the pulse of her wrist. “Mmmm. A little too much excitement right now I'd say. How many fingers am I holding up?” *She looked extremely alert for someone who had been comatose for over 48 hours.* “And, while you're at it, let's have your name, and what year it is.”

“Ahhh, three fingers, I'm Saffron Ryu, and . . .” Hesitating, her eyes rolled up to meet Hyun Joong's in a moment of panic.

Noticing her rapidly increasing pulse, and sharp intake of breath, the doctor turned around, his expression concerned. “Mr. Carver. If you could please leave us momentarily? I’ll need to do an examination to make sure Mrs. Kim has recovered fully. Sorry. But, this could take a while.”

“Yeah, of course.” Throwing a disgusted look in the Idol’s direction, his ears reddening in fury, Ian flung the cotton curtain aside, and without a word stomped toward the door. As the sound of the curtain rings pulled shut behind him, he heard Saffron answer questionably, “2014?”

2014? Fists balled at his sides in defiance at having to wait outside, (while the bastard Joong sat in on the exam) he paused, leaning against the wall to catch his breath. *WHAT THE HELL? However, maybe the outcome could be manipulated after all. If she thought it was 2014, she and Idol boy hadn’t even met yet. But, WHEN in 2014?*

Scratching his head thoughtfully, he meandered away to contemplate his options, moving forward. Maybe now he would be able to expose this farce of a marriage, and everyone who had encouraged it. By the time he was through, heads would roll . . . from the top, on down.

OUTSIDE LAX AIRPORT

THERE were so many reasons to leave, but still so many to stay. Slipping his duffle bag over one shoulder, Junsu stepped from the cab unsure why he felt so uneasy about not being able to contact JJ hyung. It was afternoon in S. Korea, and only a mere 24 hours since JJ had flown the coop. Where could he have dashed off to so quickly? Or was he wallowing in a bottle somewhere, ashamed of his ultimate decision?

Was it ‘that’ important he be the one to convince him to return for Saffire and Sienna’s sake? After all, there were a multitude of family members milling in and around the hospital who had probably already (either) tried or succeeded. It didn’t matter. He would have to try as well. It was time for the truth, the whole ugly truth. Despite what the others knew, he was the key, and if it meant putting both his relationships on the line . . . then so be it.

Kyong’s text message startled him just as he stepped on the escalator headed up to buy his ticket and secure a hotel room at the airport to wait for tomorrow’s flight.

PLEASE TELL ME U AREN'T AT THE AIRPORT YET? SAFFIRE FLATLINED 30 MIN AGO. I'M HEADED 2
HOSPITAL AS SOON AS I CAN GET THE NANNY HERE. COME BACK IF U CAN. SHE MAY HAVE 2
HAVE EMERG SURGERY. I CAN'T GET A HOLD OF JJ.

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