

**-17-**

## **REPLAY**



**MARCH 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017 – 8:00 A.M. – UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL SAFFRON’S ROOM**

**THE** stuffed black cat laid in Saffron’s lap, ears misshapen from constant twisting over her nervousness at checking out of the hospital and going . . . home. *Where the hell was that?* In 2014 it was Chicago but, not anymore. Now, apparently it was S. Korea.

Hating to turn over her independence, she crunched the poor cat’s head, resentful of Mother and Hyun Joong’s constant hovering. The word ‘idle’ wasn’t part of her vocabulary and they were stressing her to the point of bitchiness. Just that morning she’d snapped at Sandra for no real reason. Ashamed, she’d immediately regretted the outburst, but still became the target of Joong’s disapproving glare. *How dare he judge her! Had he lost his memory? HELL NO . . .*

Launching the cat in a rage, it slammed against the window; bouncing back to hit the floor; before skidding in the direction of her big toe.

“She-Devil . . . stupid name for a cat! Don’t know why I’m talking to you. I hate cats, you’re probably cursed.” Grumbling, she met the plastic, green eyes, staring up at her. “And, quit looking at me like that. Don’t you think I know feeling sorry for myself isn’t the answer?”

Her inner child coming out, a sudden feeling of regret washed over her as sighing, she retrieved the black feline, carefully straightening out it's ears. "Okayyy, I shouldn't take out my frustrations on a defenseless toy . . . sorry. But, you know . . ." Sniffing, she sat it on the edge of the bed wiping away the trace of tears threatening to spill down her cheeks, "there's something they're keeping from me." No matter how many ways she mulled it over it still didn't make sense.

*What had Ian done to force her hand and embrace her role as co-café owner with Saffire in Korea? Leaving, never to return to the corporate lifestyle in Chicago, she loved. Whatever it was, changed her so drastically she'd fallen in love and married a Korean Idol, in only three months.*

Without all the facts to effectively analyze the current situation, her feelings would have to guide her. Being a strict facts and data person, who crossed every 'T' and dotted every 'i', that was a scary prospect to say the least. But, venturing into the unknown to look for answers on her own, seemed to be the only way.

Plucking the iPad off the nightstand, her plan began to unfold . . .

### **AT THE SAME TIME . . .**

**TWO** men in blue jumpsuits pushed the utility cart out of the elevator in the wake of their boss, Mr. Carver. Pulled from regular warehouse duties for a special assignment, they'd been promised a bonus to assist. Safely staying a respectable four feet behind the arrogant man, word was, the person they were moving was the fiancé of (said) boss, OR possibly the wife of the Korean Idol. Either way the break room at the warehouse teemed with gossip about their CEO and his onetime Executive Assistant.

Delighted at seizing the opportunity to gain points with Saffron, Ian threaded a hand into his pocket, barking at the two men as he turned around, "Stay here until I call you." Unannounced, he entered Saffron's room beaming at his sudden advantage over Hyun Joong,

Surprised at what met him he looked around gawking at the absence of cards, flowers and stuffed toys (except for the ugly black cat perched at the foot of the bed). "Babe, your man's here. What happened to all the 'Get-Well' wishes? I brought a couple guys to load the SUV for the ride

home.” *Babe? Where the hell did that come from? He’d never called her babe. He was trying too hard.*

Multi-tasking, Saffron had been listening for updates on the disturbing news from the night before while checking the café’s website. Blinking rapidly, she peered up from the iPad after hearing footsteps and voices behind her.

“IAN? Hi.” Taken aback at his tall, athletic figure clad in jeans, a V-neck tee, and leather jacket she’d forgotten how dressing down transformed him into the sexy, bad boy, of every girls’ dream. *Even when arrogant, he was still hot.*

“What are you doing here? I thought you were working today.” Observing his pinched face scanning the bare room he was like a spoiled child when things didn’t go his way. Clearly, he’d come early thinking he would be first in line for the rescue.

“Wowww. Sorry you went to all this trouble, BABE,” she apologized, bouncing off the endearment she couldn’t remember ever hearing him call her. “I have a ride home . . . and as you can see, Mother already moved everything out for me.”

Lips pursed in a rush to calm his rattled nerves, Ian sighed. Even the freaking cat was staring at him, sporting a condescending smile. *Com’on Carver, cheerful . . . it’s just a minor kink in the plan, shake it off.*

Chuckling, he clapped his hands, “Okay then! Looks like we can mark THAT off the list. Just one less thing to worry about, huh?” Strutting forward with more confidence, she stopped him, abruptly sticking the iPad, in his unsuspecting face.

“BABE, did you already know about this? And, why the hell would you propose to me the day of the café opening. WHEN Hyun Joong was there?” Her jaw tightening at just the thought of him concocting some devious plan to thwart her ‘secret’ marriage by bringing himself to the forefront, truly ‘was’ beginning to make her blood boil.

Certain of his guilt, she wagged one finger at his face, refusing to give him an out. “OF COURSE, YOU DID. Why would I think otherwise? And, now you want to stroll in here, looking

all fine, calling me BABE, wanting me to think we're some hot item. You know what? Let's talk about that."

Moving her finger away from the bridge of his nose, Ian stood his ground. *What was the motto he'd learned to live by over the years? Deny, deny, deny.*

"What the hell Saffron? I can't believe you think I'd do something so underhanded. I didn't even know he was invited. I've changed. I'm not that way anymore." Hoping she was taking the bait, his eyes dropped sheepishly. "Ask Saffire when she wakes up. She'll tell you."

"Obviously you know I can't do that right now." Back up in his face, Saffron forced him to look her square in the eyes. *Weren't the eyes the window to the soul?*



In her newly found quest for concrete answers, this was stepping outside the realm of facts. She could usually read him like a book, but for some reason this time . . . she wavered. "SO HELP ME GOD IAN, if you're lying right now, I'll take this damn leather jacket you love so much and stuff it so far up your ass you won't be able to breathe!"

A lopsided grin on his handsome face he reached out straightening the collar of her blouse. "Mon Chou, (French for 'Sweet Bun') You're looking mighty pretty this morning. New 'relieved-to-be-going-home' outfit? I like it. It suits you."



"REALLY? First BABE and now this . . . Com'on Ian, we both know you're not the pet-name type. I hate them, always have . . ." Aroused by his cologne, she froze as memories of them rolling naked in the king-size bed at the condo soared through her psyche. "And, while you're at it, stop changing the subject."

Fists balled, she flung around, turning her back on him, disgusted at her own lack of willpower. *STOP IT SAFFRON. You're not some stupid teenager, fawning over her first crush?* Throwing her off guard with his continued silence, her chest heaved in anxiousness

wishing he would just get out while she still had the facility to deny him. Turning around slowly, she was forced to face him yet again not certain what to expect.

“What? Are you waiting for me to worship at your feet or something? Humph, not going to happen. I need answers.”

“Okay. Answers it is. Ask away. I can handle it.”

Despite the confidence in his voice, Saffron still recognized the telltale signs of falsehood in his body language, seeing him hesitate, unconsciously rocking on both feet. All the instincts she currently relied on screamed no matter what she asked, he wasn't going to tell her the whole truth . . .

“Why would you continue to pursue me, knowing I was already in a relationship?” Impatiently waiting for his response, a sudden pain assaulted her temples, a picture of him, unsmiling with the ‘socialite’, his parents flanking them . . . appearing on a laptop, then fading away to nothingness. Shaken, she dropped to the bed groaning, “Fuck,” gripping her head.

“What’s wrong, what happened?” Rushing to her side Ian kneeled, placing one palm on her thigh while reaching for the call button with the other. “Don’t move, I’ll get the nurse.”

Taking a deep breath, she clutched his forearm, trying to reassure him as the throbbing eased, not wanting him to know about the disjointed memories. “No, it’s okay really. I’m fine. Just a small headache. The doctor said I might have them off and on.”

“Dammit Saffron! If that was a SMALL headache I’d hate to see a big one. Are you sure you’re ready to leave the hospital?” Worried, Ian sat down encircling her shoulders, resting his forehead in her hair. “Wouldn’t it be better to stay until these stop, and your memory comes back?”

“NO. I said I’m fine. Don’t patronize me Ian.” Wiggling, in an attempt to move away, Saffron felt him tighten his hold around her.

Taking in her scent, brought visions of their early years back to him, as his hand smoothed the thin blouse down her spine. *If he could just go back to the night he'd surprised her with construction permits and a confession of love, none of this would be happening. How was he going to salvage what he'd worked so hard to accomplish over the last few years?*

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“MRS. Kim, you are officially discharged . . .”

Wide-eyed, Saffron's glance flipped from the stanch, disapproving gaze of the nurse to her husband . . . materializing in the doorway. Even before hearing the taut voice, she knew she was in the wrong arms and by the look on his face, he was already misunderstanding.

Hyun Joong stood behind Nurse Baker, jealousy starting a fire storm in his gut, nostrils flared at seeing her in Ian's embrace. Instinctively sweeping around the formidable woman he gripped Saffron's wrist possessively tugging her away from the arms of 'the enemy'.

“What's going on here Carver? Why do I have to keep reminding you she's my wife?” Seeing her this way dissolved any remaining guilt he still carried involving the lie of their 'status'. Because, in his heart, her title 'was' wife and the first chance he got . . . he would make it a reality.

Officially riled, a muscle in Ian's sharp jaw twitched. “Where the hell have you been? At least someone was here when she nearly passed out. Seems like I'm the only one available when it really counts. And, it doesn't matter who she belongs to, she's not feeling well.” His tone snarky, Ian and Hyun Joong's eyes met, daggers shooting between them, attesting to the fact they were adversaries.

A firm grip on her wrist, Joong ignored the asshole's comments, turning all his attention on Saffron stating quietly, “I apologize jagiya (HONEY) Are you okay? Was it a headache?”

Nodding in momentary silence, the anxiety in her blue eyes said it all. Another vision, (about Ian he would bet). “If that's the case, we need to hurry and get home. I'll call Maud, since

Mother's already left to meet us there." Not taking any flack, he took charge of the situation, handing a suddenly compliant Saffron over to Nurse Baker for last minute instructions.

With her attention momentarily diverted, Joong's eyes narrowed, the sound of his boots echoing in the empty room as he moved around the chair, stepping directly into Ian's path.

"Aigoo, you're not needed OR wanted here Carver, so please leave before I'm forced to call security." *The sooner he left the better, considering Saffron had expressed the desire to keep the headaches strictly between he and the doctor, not wanting to worry anyone.*

Sneering unimpressed . . . Ian called through the open door questionably, "Saffron, do YOU want me to leave?"

*Enough was enough.* Annoyed at the men before her acting like school boys demanding she choose one over the other, Saffron swung away from Nurse Baker, flinging one hand to her hip.

"Look you two! I'm only going to say this once, so listen with BOTH ears. I am NOT a baby. Nor am I a piece of property you can stake a claim over. I have no memory; a sister in a coma; a father who hates me; a JEALOUS husband, and a damned WHINNY fiancé. Top that off with the fact that I have a freaking business to run and the bottom line is, I don't have time for your pissing contest. EITHER GET ALONG . . . OR FUCK OFF." Flashing daggers from her clear blue eyes, she tapped one foot impatiently. "Ian?"

The piqued, no-nonsense tone of her voice, warned him she was serious. This was the Saffron he remembered. The woman who stood her ground and didn't take any crap, not even from him. If he had to temporarily play nice with Idol-boy, then so be it. Raising his hand in surrender he sighed smiling, "Fine, whatever makes you happy."

"Joong?"

*Damn, did her hair get redder?* In place of his loving Hani was the Debutante-Tyrant. Positive she'd make good on the threat, Joong acquiesced, bowing his head in respect. Shooting Ian a heated glance he strolled to the bed retrieving not only her jacket, but 'She-Devil', the stuffed black cat.

Slipping into the jacket her possessive husband held, Saffron sniffed satisfactorily. "Good! No need to call Maud, Joong. IAN can drive us home. Isn't that right BABE?" A forced smile on her face she swiveled, thanking Nurse Baker with a hug, and a whisper, "I'll never forget what you've done for me. Take care of my sister, thanks."

As the trio left the confines of the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, (Saffron in the middle like a prisoner) felt like 'dead-woman walking'.

### 9:00 A.M. – SAFFIRE'S HOUSE

**THERE** had been a time that JaeJoong thought his life would be over without a dark-haired beauty named SooMin Jang. Lusting after her with an uncontrolled passion serving no one but himself, brought him to the brink of destruction, nearly ending his life. It was on that platform he now teetered, standing awkwardly in the doorway of Saffire's small, beachfront cottage.

*Was he even able to show Saffire the side of him that only SooMin had known, and might EVER know?* Still petrified of taking on the role of 'husband', and 'father', the silver wedding band on his left finger felt heavy against his skin. His gut and his heart were conducting a war within himself, he could NOT ignore.

Still with no official proposal on the horizon, he needed to accept the fact that Saffire, might never recover. Frightened by statistics beyond his comprehension, his last conversation with her doctor left him reeling with nothing to fall back on but faith and hope. Both of which were foreign to him, especially where women were concerned. In the end, would he be going back to S. Korea alone?

"Yah! You going to stand there daydreaming all day? Go on now. I'm a busy woman. I've got places to be." Serae's curt yet understanding voice echoed against the open doorway behind him.

Not always on his side in his quest for Saffire's affection, THIS time . . . she'd turned out to be a loving, steady rock in the middle of the confusion. Wishing he could continue to lean on her strong shoulders, and emotional support forever, he shook his head meekly.

"Ani. It's just a lot. I'll be okay."

“Arasseo then. Like I said, I’m only a text, or call away if you need anything. I tried to clean up some. Show yourself around. There isn’t anything here that doesn’t explain itself.” Starting to call Saffire an ‘open book’, she hesitated, realizing that even in living her life to the fullest AFTER Sienna, the laid-back musician still kept secrets from JJ no one understood but, her. “I’m headed out then. Get some sleep. I hear her bed is to die for.”

Patting the tired, forlorn man on the back, she turned away, continuing to silently pray he would come to terms with his future, no matter what it held. Sienna wasn’t going away and despite Saffire’s condition, as the little girl’s mother . . . neither was she.

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**HEARING** the door close, JJ sighed, pushing the rolling suitcase in front of him with one foot. The cozy, colorful living room invited him to come in, sit down and put up his feet, but ignoring the invitation . . . he left protocol behind, heading straight down the short hallway to what looked to be Saffire’s bed room.

Met with the sweet pungent smell of cinnamon and pancakes he rested both palms against the stucco archway, breathing in deeply. Memories of their first kiss over cinnamon coffee flooded his weary body as he dropped against the wall, sliding to his knees in despair. Every inch of the space screamed the presence of the hippie-souled, beach girl, he’d fallen in love-at-first-sight, with.

*What if she never returned here? What if weeks or months from now he was back, helping pack up her things? What if . . . what if . . . what if?* Killing himself with unknowns, he was slipping into that abyss he kept telling everyone else to stay away from. Swiping his face harshly, his eyes flung open, almost defiantly.

*There were always two sides to a coin. What if she came to today? Or tomorrow? Or even the day after that? He would need to be strong, for her . . . for Sienna . . . even for Saffron and Hyun Joong. He couldn’t continue wallowing in self-pity, living in regrets of the past. SooMin was gone. Never to return. Whether he liked it or not, accepted it or not, Saffire and Sienna were his*

*future. If he was the kind of man Young Jae and his father both thought he was, he needed to embrace the unknown and roll with it. No matter what.*

Stretching both legs out to touch the opposite wall, he swept the room with his eyes, engrossed in capturing each detail. Unable to see every corner without rising, the family photo's dotting the whitewashed walls, beckoned his immediate attention.

Reminding him of the 'Couples Wall' at the café, he rose, moving stealthily toward the pictures, now convinced (after seeing her handiwork), obviously she'd always been an avid, amateur, photographer. Hands clasped behind his back, he scanned each one, ranging from Sienna on the beach, to she and Saffron proudly holding up the blueprints (matching the set in his own office) to their newest project, the Cup of Hotness Café, L.A.

Finding himself nostalgic, he was thrown back to the sight of her hospital room, chock full of children's cards, photo's, stuffed animals, pictures of her conservatory, and smiling faces of her students. All the things reflecting the heart he knew she had for music and the arts.

So, how would she feel back in S. Korea . . . being torn from the very things that gave her strength? Apparently, two years ago she'd walked away from her prestige position with the Seoul Symphony to return to California, and her roots. Oh, how he wished he could've been a part of her decision.

Finding himself falling back in love with her all over again, his heart beat wildly as he examined the room in search of more 'treasures'. It was no secret this was her sanctuary. Her violin case, empty at the side of the dresser was proof someone who loved her (maybe more than he did), had taken the instrument to the hospital, hoping if played or talked about, it would trigger a response from the 'sleeping' violinist. *Could that have been Junsu?*

Shaking away the thought, his eyes followed the line of the dresser, coming to rest on a familiar, and unexpected object of her affection. The musical snow globe, he'd presented her with as a Christmas gift, years ago. Lifting it, he shook it gently, winding the bottom to hear the tinkling notes of, "Let It Snow". Finding himself mouthing the words, he blinked away the onset of tears.

*How was it that, despite not answering his letters, she'd kept him so damned close to her heart? It was the unanswered question that prompted his silent involvement in the California café endeavor in the first place. And, the same unanswered question that eventually brought him running back. Was there an answer within the confines of this room?*

Swinging around he looked carefully at the unmade bed, the large patterned duvet scrunched askew, a smattering of white envelopes and papers stuffed precariously under one side. *Bills? Café paperwork? Letters? While he was in the air, anxious to see her again, was this an indication of how she'd spent her hours or even moments before attending the opening?*

Hating to seem nosy but, convinced (even if she was here) she wouldn't mind him snooping, he flopped butt first against the fluffy pillows at the headboard, reaching for a handful of potential information. Doodles, and quotations scribbled up one side and down the other in her familiar flowery penmanship met him with a modicum of amusement. Skimming over the ones in English he zeroed in on the only one in Korean, painstakingly centered at the very bottom, followed by a string of handwritten hearts.



그 땅에서 가장 아름다운 공주에게. Saranghae, JJ 왕자.

**TO THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PRINCESS IN THE LAND. SARANGHAE, PRINCE JJ.**

Recognizing it immediately as his encouraging words and autograph to a beautiful little S. Korean girl at the Toscana Hotel the Christmas of 2014, he dropped the paper to the bed questionably. *Where had Saffire gotten this? Had she met the child at some point? Or was it just a strange coincidence? Surely not.*

Struggling with the reasoning behind the suspicious reminder of that weekend years ago, he flung his palms over the remaining papers, beginning to see they were letters. Scores of handwritten correspondences (some in Korean, some in English) by Saffire herself, the accompanying envelopes addressed to his Army barracks.

“Holy shit Saffire. What is all this?” Wailing his disappointment in finding out she’d spent the last two years writing him letters she failed to send, his fractured heart found it’s way again to the unknown’s.

Reading one aloud in hopes of getting answers, halfway through tears coursing down his pale cheeks . . . all he could surmise was she had been scared. Scared to love him, scared to tell him about Sienna, for fear that he would distance himself from her, and even more scared he would leave his career for her. In loving her all he had managed to do was push her away.

Not knowing where to turn in the wake of his discovery JJ gathered the heartfelt letters to his chest hating the fact that not only had he come to L.A. with the clingy and rude Nyoko, but that he’d not been given the chance to know how she felt from the beginning.

*Who had helped keep the secret? Surely Saffron had sent her off with the knowledge of her pregnancy. And, at some point Junsu. Did she fear his inability to commit so much that she would keep his very own flesh and blood daughter from him? Surely, she wasn’t that cruel?*

As the sun began to pour in the bedroom window, casting little slivers of warmth into the space JJ, engrossed in their content, read through the (sometimes rambling) soul-searching, accounts of Saffire’s decision to live her life without him. Dropping the last one to the floor beside the bed, he turned off his phone, stretching lazily as he rose.

Unsure whether his shoulders were broad enough to accept all blame for her inability to continue their relationship, he knew he stood at a crossroad. Clearly, she still loved him. That would explain why the phone call at the split second the accident took place. Maud, Serae, Sandra and even Kyong had expressed to him the fact that she’d never faltered in that respect.

*So, how could he blame her for a decision she truly believed was right? Would he have let her down? He already had. Left her and Sienna smack on the heels of the accident. Was he any better? Hell no. They were on common ground. Each thinking the other was better off without them. What kind of crazy rationalization was that?*

Stepping around the end of the bed, headed for the bathroom, his eyes caught the top of the cluttered desk, strewn with bills, Post-It's and photographs. Like the unmade bed, overflowing closet, and piles of dirty clothes, it bespoke of her continued attempt to stay focused in her somewhat messy world.

Pushing the bright yellow, rolling chair back in toward the drawer, he leaned over a gaudy, decorative cardboard box, the lid askew as if begging him to examine its contents.

Not sure his heart could handle any more set-backs or disappointments he hesitated, until the small photo book at the top caught his eye. Picking it up gently, it boasted a newborn picture of his sweet baby girl, with the title heading, "SIENNA JAE RYU IS BORN".

Caressing the slick hard cover over her pink cheeks he smiled proudly. "Sienna Jae. Look how beautiful you are." Opening it with trembling fingers', he was met with all the normal hospital information on the day of her birth, as well as Saffire holding her close to one breast, Sandra, Saffron and Kyong at her bedside.

Having been with several of his sisters on the day his nieces were born, JJ knew the uncompromising joy that came with holding your baby in your arms for the very first time. Now, for him . . . an experience denied.

The top of the next page read only, 'I was visited by:' accompanied by a collage of smiling faces, each one looking happier than the next. But, it was the photo front and center that pierced his gut like a knife. Kim Junsu, cradling his namesake, snuggled close to his neck, lips kissing her tiny forehead lovingly. Dropping the open book like a hot coal, JJ felt his foot careen off the leg of the chair, sending it rolling precariously across the room, flipping over with a thud against the furry mohair of a cushy ottoman.

*FUCK YOU JUNSU. Was this the story he'd ignored the opportunity to hear outside the hospital gift shop? The past he'd been left out of? Was THIS what Saffire had been keeping from him all this time? Now who did he blame? Was his friend THAT desperate to have her he'd step in and rob him of not only his family, but the ability to create memories with them as well?*

Suddenly unable to excuse his feelings of disgust, JJ's guts churned with a sickening urge to throw up. Running away from the truth wasn't an option. But, getting to the bottom of their intentions was. Ignoring the rest of the boxed contents, he lurched toward the bathroom, making it in just enough time to relieve himself of a stomach full of nothing but pain, water and worry.

### **6:00 P.M. – SAFFRON'S RENTAL HOUSE**

Sharing earbuds, shoulder-to-shoulder with Hyun Joong on the living room couch . . . Saffron sat quietly, hands folded in her lap. His soft, deep voice entwined with the soothing melody of a song she didn't recognize, filled her head erasing all her negative thoughts.

Having surprised her with a tea-tree mask, this had been his 'best' idea yet. Who would've thought the process of helping each other put them on could be so much fun, laughing and taking selfies of their distorted faces. As the collagen mask rejuvenated her tired skin, the heat of Joong's shoulder calmed her soul, melting away the trying events of the day.

Her lashes flickering against the mask, she slowly lifted her lids, following a floating rainbow of paper cranes along the ceiling . . . Another surprise from her husband. Apparently, during her two-day coma he'd religiously taken the time to fold one thousand, revealing afterward, his only wish had been for her to wake up.

It was hard to believe that only a short time ago, she'd stood paralyzed at the front door of her rental house, watching Ian blocking curious reporters littering the sidewalk. Urging her onward, Joong, had taken the initiative, steering her through the front door, along with Mother to the sanctuary inside where met by one-hundred of his origami birds suspended from helium balloons, she'd dropped her jaw in quiet amazement.

Smiling to herself at the recent memory, to say she was 'dumbfounded' was an understatement, for still at their feet laid the other nine-hundred, positioned around the living room floor, in the form of a heart. Life couldn't get much better.



Her eyes drowsy, she leaned her head back on the sofa, unable to recall the last time she'd been this comfortable. One hand slipping to the cushion between them, a touch flustered her groggy mind, just as she was about to drift off. *Holy shit, what was he doing?*

Perplexed, she rolled her head in his direction, trying not to react, despite the heat trickling up her arm. Studying his profile, the edges of the mask curled from his jawline indicating the beauty treatment was ending. Eyes closed, he appeared to be sleeping, except for the fact he was still lip-syncing along with the music.

His phone alarm breaking in mid-song, Hyun Joong ignored it, having no desire to move away from her. The warmth of her touch at this point was enough, especially after dealing with her Ex all afternoon. Feeling her remove his earbud, he still didn't budge (unwilling to break the comfortable moment between them).

"Joong?" Met by silence, Saffron straightened up on the sofa, peeling off her mask. "Joongie, I know you're awake. You need to take yours off before it dries." Struggling to rise tugging on their joined hands only he resistant and without warning she landed directly in his lap. The birds overhead drifted toward the kitchen (like geese flying south for the winter). Her eyes probed the sparkling brown orbs staring from the mask's eyeholes.

"What did you call me?"

Ignoring the low buzzing from the earbuds on the floor as he shed the damp beauty sheet from his forehead, Joong tossed it beside them. Hauling her to his chest with one arm, suddenly all his thoughts were centered on his body's reaction to the nickname she'd given him several years ago.

Stunned, Saffron's brow lifted, her lower region clenching with an awareness of the precarious situation she found herself in. "Ummm, you mean Joongie?"

"De, it's what you used to call me. I liked it better than Seung Jo. Do you remember anything else?" Laying an arm across her legs, he'd managed to trap her against him. *If she remembered the past before he left tomorrow for Korea that would solve so many problems.*

Glancing down at his thumb making circles on her pant leg, then back up to his full lips, Saffron blushed, “Ahhh, no sorry. It just came out of nowhere.” (Much like his growing response to their compromising position.)

The corner of his mouth lifted into a smug, little smile. Tilting her head amused . . . she cleared her throat attempting to wriggle free. *OMG, first Ian, now Joong. Apparently, she'd been abstinent in the last two years, 'cause the last thing she wanted to do right now, was move off his lap.*

Chuckling at her obvious discomfort he untangled their hands, reclining on the sofa, letting her slip off to one side. Now she was pinned nicely between him and the arm of the couch.

“Better?” Not apologizing for his condition, he clicked off the alarm on the phone.

“NO.” Biting her lip, she caught the silly titter in her throat, digging her heels further into the couch cushion in mock anger. “You’re so incorrigible, you know it?”

“De, I love it when you say big words.” Grinning, he twisted her thick braid in one hand. “Hani, why don’t you stop fighting me and come home to Korea?” Still with a little time to ease her into the idea he continued. “You heard the doctor say you would improve faster in familiar surroundings.”

Quietly she sat staring down at the heart of colorful birds. *What the fuck was she going to do with one thousand Origami cranes when he left?*

### **8:30 P.M. – UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL – SAFFIRE’S ROOM**

**REFLECTION** breeds change. Showered, renewed and rested, Kim JaeJoong sat poised on the side of Saffire’s bed, quietly singing to little Sienna, in Korean.

Desperate to come to an understanding of his missing two years with the child, he’d pumped a chatty Sandra for information on the way over in the car, hoping to gain some perspective. Uncertain whether it solidified his suspicions about Saffire’s decision or not, at the very least it finally brought him into the loop going forward.

“Mommy . . . Mommy, wake up . . . wake up.” Wriggling out of JJ’s arms, the toddler’s tiny hands shook Saffire’s leg suspecting she was teasing, like she often did when playing.

Observing the sincerity in the little girls’ eyes, JJ smiled, whispering in her ear. “Ye, Eomma NEEDS to wake up. Sienna and Appa love her.”

“Appa? Daddy?” Flinging her little head to one side, Sienna’s expression went from playful to puzzled. Scooching away from him on the bed, her back came in contact with his strong protective arm. “Where Appa?”

Afraid he’d overstepped his bounds in calling himself daddy, JJ lifted her back into his lap, studying her crunched eyebrows. Sandra had warned him to tread carefully, because she wouldn’t recognize him as her father, at least not until Saffire came to and acknowledged him in front of her.



“Appa . . . JJ.” Kissing her cheek, he pointed at himself nonchalantly, hoping maybe she thought naming him was a game.

“NO.” Arms folded in sudden defiance she pouted, sticking her lower lip out determined to deny him.

The deafening silence between them grew until suddenly beneath the little girls’ leg, Saffire’s finger twitched noticeably, curling up and around one chubby, toddler toe.

*HOLY SHIT . . . was she finally waking up?*

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