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## **TRUE LOVE**



**MARCH 25<sup>th</sup>, 2017 – 7:30 A.M. – HYUN JOONG’S CABIN IN THE WOODS**

**THE** spare bedroom was chilly for early spring. Used to open windows and warm ocean breezes, Saffire huddled under the down comforter, toes curled beneath her to ease the discomfort. Squinting into the bright light ushering in the beginning of a new day she noticed (for the first time), her bones and muscles ached considerably less than they had, even yesterday. Satisfied her road to recovery was nearly over, she felt around the Queen-sized bed with one palm hoping to find the ‘lump’ that was JJ.

“Humph. Wonder where he is? What time is it anyway?”

Reaching for her cell, perched at the side of the bed she peered into it wondering why she was up so early, and JJ was nowhere to be found. Licking dry lips, she clung to the warmth of the quilt, letting herself revel in the quiet morning, tiny specks of dust floating in the sunshine above her head. Why, did this one, seem so tranquil and unencumbered? Maybe, because she had relieved

her heart of all its burdens and secrets, exposing her love for what it truly was. Pure, and unmistakably real.

*THIS was how love was supposed to feel!* Giggling, over last night's intimacy, it was hard to wake up alone. But, the reality was . . . she had chosen to love an entertainer. An artist . . . who lived and breathed his passion. Someone not unlike herself.

Sighing, she lifted the cell hoping he could satisfy her curiosity over his whereabouts if indeed he'd gone somewhere else other than the bathroom, or the kitchen for coffee.

A DAMSEL IN DISTRESS NEEDS HER PRINCE. WHERE R U?

His response came in only a matter of seconds.

KE-KE-KE. THEN DON'T GO INTO THE WOODS ALONE! I'M OUT FOR A RUN. ALMOST BACK. STAY PUT, I'LL SHOWER & WE'LL HAVE COFFEE TOGETHER.

XOXOXOXOXO

*What more could a girl ask for?* Kicking her legs under the covers, she snapped a selfie of herself, hair wild, lips pursed. LET'S SHOWER TOGETHER. ANXIOUSLY WAITING. SARANGHAE



*There wasn't anything that could spoil the rest of her day now!*

**9:00 A.M.**

“SAFFFRONNN . . . Come on. Please stay. It's no fun being pampered all by myself. Besides, this way the guys can have some alone time too.” Hopping around her determined sister, already dressed and ready to meet Hyun Joong downstairs, Saffire's whining reached a fever-pitch. “I put up with your amnesia all this time and now that we're back to normal, you don't want to have girl time with me. Geezzz . . . JJ won't mind, promise.”

“PUT UP with my amnesia. That's cold sis. But, I forgive you. You'll survive without me holding court over your make-over. Joong and I need some time out, alone. Between the hospital, the plane and now this . . . I'm getting cabin fever. HA. Literally. That was a joke. You're not laughing.”

“Whatever. You think this isn’t hard for me too? I’m going nuts over not seeing Sienna.”

“I’m sure.” Trying to sound more sympathetic, Saffron reeled in her sharp wit. “She’s in good hands with Mother. You need some time alone. We both do. SO . . . go enjoy your SPA day. We can do something just the two of us after we get back home. Right now, I have a man who needs me.” Hugging her warmly, she snickered under her breath, “Have another go at your Prince later if you get bored. Gotta run. Ta-ta!”

“Yeahhh, okayyy.” Saffire pouted. *What was going on anyway? Why was everyone bailing on her today?*

True, JJ had arranged for her to have a massage, facial, wax, nails and even hair done, but then he’d washed out his cup after coffee, announcing he had business to take care of in Joong’s office. The ‘team’ of stylists would be arriving in thirty minutes, she should enjoy herself without worrying about the time. Still wrapped in her cozy, white, terry robe, she’d stomped her foot petulantly, hesitant to question or follow him.

Now upstairs alone, the cabin was eerily quiet. If she put in her earbuds for a distraction she wouldn’t hear the doorbell.

“Well, shit. Looks like I’m the one that has to make small talk and bring them up to get settled. I thought this was supposed to be RELAXING for me?” Muttering to herself she dropped to the floor in the middle of the bedroom, searching through the bottom dresser drawer for the easiest thing to throw on to greet her entourage.

Digging under a mound of she and JJ’s collection of T-shirts her fingers grazed over what felt like a paper envelope. Slipping it out, her curiosity peaked she debated whether to open it, or not. Turning it over multiple times, her courage mounting, she finally undid the clasp sliding out a very ‘official’ looking document reading, ‘GANGNAM REGISTRAR’ 강남 레지스트라 in both English and Korean.

Hidden amongst the pertinent information . . . the name, SIENNA JAE RYU-KIM along with a copy of her daughter's California Birth Certificate, dated, March 13, 2017, signed at the bottom in JJ's own handwriting.

Astounded, Saffire dropped back on her heels, clutching the paper against the rapid beating of her heart. *March 13<sup>th</sup>? Wasn't that the day they told her she'd flat-lined in the wee hours of the morning? How could he have possibly been in Gangnam registering Sienna that same day?*

Disturbed and confused, the elation that came with the realization he had already accepted Sienna as his daughter nearly two weeks ago, began to dissipate slowly. With every truth she'd managed to let go of to move them forward, now it seemed he was the one still holding something back. *Why would he keep such a thing from her? Especially after her confession last night. It would've been the perfect time to inform her, he had never believed Junsu was Sienna's father in the first place. Instead, he'd passed it by.*

The loud buzzing of the doorbell, forced her to her feet. "COMING!" she shouted, shoving the paper back into the manila envelope. Leaving it on top of the dresser she darted out the door still slipping into her sweats and throwing on a T-shirt, as she headed down the stairs.

### **11:00 A.M. - TWO HOURS LATER**

**AS** relaxing as spa day was turning out to be . . . the consistent chatter of the two young Korean women hovering over Saffire's nails and toenails was beginning to grate on her very last nerve. The massage and pedicure nearly over, next she would be subjected to hair, and waxing. Neither of which she was fond of, even considering her usual bikini status.

*Whose idea had the cosmetic side of this day been anyway? Probably Saffron's. No wonder she didn't want to stay. Spa day must've been the text between Hyun Joong and JJ, she'd misunderstood. Just like a man to turn something over to another man that they knew nothing about.*

Snorting in displeasure, she couldn't help wondering if Mother hadn't been in on this little 'surprise' makeover at some level as well. She'd NEVER liked her style, and now that she was

hooking up with an Idol for good, it would be right up Sandra's alley to force her into upgrading her casual Bohemian look, for the upcoming media attention of an entertainer's girlfriend.

Girlfriend. She'd gotten used to the term 'wife' that followed her around the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of University Hospital. To be relegated to girlfriend, just seemed like a disappointing slide from grace. But, despite JJ's enthusiasm in claiming her, AND their daughter, there was still his family to consider, and yes . . . a world full of fangirls. She could see them now, crying and wailing over their Instagram and Twitter accounts at the news that 'Hero' Prince JaeJoong was engaged or married.

Sighing she wriggled her toes, pasting on a smile to the saucy young purple-haired girl at her feet. "Ahhh, pretty. Gamza." Having to pee, worried she would starve to death without at least a snack, she rose to stretch.

*Where had Saffron and Joong gone? They were out in the middle of nowhere and it had been several hours already. And, what about JJ? He could've at least checked up on her. Make sure everything was going as planned. After all, she was hungry.*

Just about the time she was sure she would wet her bikini underwear if she didn't hit the bathroom, she heard the downstairs door click open. Finally, an excuse to flee the coop.

"OH MY GOD. It's about time Saffron." *Forget peeing, her first order of business was getting the intel on Sienna's Registration. Who would know better than Saffron?*

Nodding to the giggling girls, she tucked the sheet up around her bare breasts, snatching the manila envelope off the top of the dresser in her haste. Slipping and sliding to the staircase, cotton still between her freshly painted toes, she was determined to get answers.

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**STARTLED** at not finding the living room empty, Hyun Joong was met with the ghostly, sheeted form of a half-naked Saffire, billowing over the last stair step and into the entry.

“Dammit. You’re not Saffron . . . doesn’t matter, you’ll do.” Gripping a large envelope, she hiked the sheet away from her bright pink toenails with one hand, grabbing him by the coat sleeve with the other. Propelling him into the half-bath, her heel kicked the door shut behind them.

Hearing it slam, Joong began to fear the worst, not sure if he was being questioned, accosted or both. He didn’t have time for this! Out in the SUV Saffron, Mother Kroes and Sienna were awaiting his cue to come inside (bringing with them all the paraphernalia JJ had requested for his proposal party).

He had been commandeered to find out if Saffire was still in the middle of her makeover quietly tucked away upstairs. *Obviously, she was NOT.*

“What’s up Saffire?” he croaked quietly, realizing that if either JJ OR Saffron heard them whispering in the rest room, they were dead. Accused, without a trial. “Whatever it is, can’t we talk out there?” Pointing to the unopened door, his nerves rattled, Joong tried to appear calm.

“NO. I don’t want JJ to accidentally hear us. It’ll only take a second so don’t talk till I finish.” Squiggling her butt against the sink, Saffire peered into Hyun Joong’s dark eyes, waving the envelope in the air. “Did you know about this?”

“This? What this?” Focused on the envelope and not her ample bustline, he coughed slightly attempting to maneuver himself into a less compromising position against her.

“Sienna’s registration here in Korea. Obviously, you had to know he left the hospital the day before I flatlined, right?”

Her voice shrill, it was becoming increasingly difficult for Joong to tell if she was agitated by the situation or pleased to know Prince Jae had taken responsibility for his daughter and done the right thing.

*Of course, he knew JJ had left her. Who didn’t? Seeing her now, apparently, everyone knew BUT her. That being said, if JJ HAD registered Sienna after running for the hills, (which seemed to be the case) thankfully, HE was now out of the woods. She would never have to know the real truth behind his hyung’s sudden disappearance.*

Thinking quickly, he smiled. “Guess the cat’s out of the bag, huh? Pretty sure it was supposed to be a surprise. You know Jae. Loves to catch us all off guard.”

With no response forthcoming, other than a look of quiet confusion, Hyun Joong shoved the envelope in question away, nonchalantly swinging the door open directly into Saffron’s startled face.

Nearly dropping the bag of groceries, she looked from Saffire (wrapped in the sheet) to her fiancé’s somewhat mischievous grin, and back again.

“What the fuck?”

“NO . . . NO, NO, NO.” Saffire squealed loudly, alerting anyone else in the house that was listening to the fact that she and Hyun Joong hadn’t been taking part in some covert, sexual rendezvous, in the half-bath. “It’s not what it looks like sis. Honest. YOUR MAN, I get it.”

Protesting far too much, she scurried toward the stairs, trailing the sheet behind her. Under the prying eyes of the Stylists hanging over the loft railing she stopped abruptly at the top step, swiveling regally, the swoosh of her cotton ‘cloak’ echoing through the vast openness.

“Not that any of you care, but I AM starving. SOMEONE needs to fix me a damned sandwich and GET JJ.” Gone like the heroine in a drama, her set of twittering Stylists scurried away behind her.

“Jesus Christ. Look at her up there ranting like a REAL Princess.” Staring up at her sister’s retreating figure, Saffron began to laugh, until her entire body shook with amusement. “Mianhe, it’s just . . . seeing the two of you coming out together was just so unexpected. You were actually blushing Joongie.”

“ANI. Was not.” Joong scraped the toe of his shoe against the hardwood floor muttering, “She can be very persuasive when she wants to be. YOU know.”

“I do. Relax, you’re not in trouble.” Still chuckling Saffron cocked her head, understanding that neither sister OR her newly acquired fiancé would ever do anything to abuse her and JJ’s trust. “She’s suspicious about all this, isn’t she?”

“Ehhh, sort of. But, it’s more about something JJ did when he bailed in L.A. She cornered me with copies of Registration papers for Sienna. Looks like the sneaky SOB had them filed after he got back home. My guess is, he was probably going to surprise her with them later during the proposal.”

Leave it to Hyun Joong to cut right to the heart of the matter. A simple truth . . . that covered a multitude of sins.

“Wow. So, ever since the accident, he believed Sienna was his after all, regardless of Junsu? Little shit! Wish he would’ve told us. Bet you’re as relieved as I am, huh?” Happy to put the entire uncomfortable situation behind them, Saffron handed Hyun Joong the bag of groceries.

“Honestly . . . de.” Nodding profusely, he stretched out one hand to help her with the packages.

Rolling her eyes toward the office, corporate Saffron’s background began to kick in.

“You take these and get JJ to make her something to eat. I surely don’t have time. He’s on deck for picture taking right now anyway. We all know the longer he stays away the more suspicious she’s going to be. I’ll get Mother and Sienna and the rest of the stuff. If Sienna’s still napping, she can go on the couch in the office. She sleeps like a rock anyway. That’ll give us time to get started without any interference.”

Anxious to get the event planning underway she systematically shooed Joong away to handle his duties, like a military general ordering troops to the front lines.

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“DON’T Jae. I can’t believe you’re going to take pictures of me like this!” Annoyed, Saffire leaned forward in the chair, begging him to stop, (dolling up like Saffron, had never been her thing).



“Why not Princess? You look amazing. Don’t you want a record of the day?” Stepping back away from the lens, JJ’s eyes twinkled. *In less than an hour she would be putty in his hands.*



Her suspicions rising, Saffire bit into the sandwich in her lap, examining the rising smirk on her ‘boyfriend’s’ face.

“Are we doing a professional photo shoot today or something?” she finally asked, realizing that this seemed very much like an event one would see on Korean television or ‘We Got Married’. “You’re baiting me for something, I can feel it.”

*Well, that had been an unexpected question . . . yes, he would go with that.* Slipping around to get a better profile shot, he could already picture the look on her face when she stepped into the breakfast room, with Mother and Sienna in attendance. The balloons, cake, and food would take a back seat, (no doubt) to the excitement of seeing Sienna after four long days.

Winking unnoticed at the Stylist behind her back, JJ dropped the camera bending to kiss her cheek. “Well, damn. You caught me. I can’t surprise you with anything, can I?”

“Jae. You know Saffron and I both HATE surprises. You could’ve just told me. At least now I understand why you’re putting me through this TORTURE. Geez. Have you ever had a bikini-wax without even needing it? Hurts like hell!”

“Shhhhtttt. TMI yeobo (HONEY)” One finger to her lips, he patted the top of her coiffed hair. “Ani. But, this isn’t about me now is it? Text me when your transformation is complete. I’ll scoot right up and usher you downstairs.”

“Usher me downstairs? You think I can’t walk on my own? Who are you? What have you done with my JJ?” Convinced he was acting for his next drama or something equally as ridiculous she

slapped him across the arm playfully. “Whatever. Okay . . . I’ll go along with your insidious little ‘plan’. Keep your phone on.”

Desperately wanting to confront him about Sienna’s registration papers before he left, Saffire decided with strangers in the room, it didn’t seem appropriate. Clearly, he was preparing to tell her in his own time.

## **DOWNSTAIRS**

A modicum of organized chaos downstairs in the kitchen, proved that Saffron, Hyun Joong and Mother had never imagined working together (with their varied backgrounds and personalities) would be such an exercise in frustration.

“Mother! Where’s the last white balloon? There’s supposed to be twelve of them for a reason.” Counting the bouquet of white orbs tethered to the chair Saffron paused, leaning back to study the canopy of pink and gold helium balloons hovering over the breakfast nook looking like a damned cotton candy machine had thrown up on the ceiling.

Mumbling, “JJ and his bright idea to tie the ring to one. Why can’t he just pull it out of his pocket like a normal person?” Her voice lowered, she turned back to Sandra, scraping bits and pieces of ribbon from the table top into one hand “And, where the hell is Joong? We have less than 15 minutes before the Stylists pull out and I still have to put the CROWN on the cake and clean up. Prince, Princess, crowns . . . I feel like the damned Fairy Godmother. What are these two anyway? Ten? I swear.”

“I sent him back to the SUV, Sienna was playing with it when we left the house. And, she has the last balloon. She was begging for one earlier after her nap. Right now, she’s with JJ taking pictures in the other room. We can get it when they come back in.”

A winsome smile crossing her lips, Sandra couldn’t help but be inwardly thrilled at her daughter’s ‘fairy-tale’ proposal. Saffron was just being, welllll . . . Saffron. “I think what JJ’s planning is sweet. And, you’re one to talk ‘Oh Hani’. You got your perfect proposal, now leave them be, and quit complaining.

“I’m NOT complaining. It’s just that, I’m working a massive headache . . . knowing Saffire is right upstairs is making me crazy, and now we really ARE strapped for time. Go get the crown from Joong and get it situated for me, will you? If I don’t pee right now, I’m gonna wet my damn pants.”

Stomping through the cluttered kitchen, scarfing up paper plates and cups from lunch, she dumped them in the trash on the way, heading toward the half-bath, mother on her heels.

“Okay, okay. I’m on it. Promise, I’ll hurry.” Sandra’s apologetic voice bounced around behind her, realizing that before they were through, and this was over, they would be burying one of them in the field out back.

On a mission to retrieve both the crown and Hyun Joong, slipping quietly through the front hallway, Sandra forged ahead, unaware that making the circle only seconds before them, brought JJ out of the living room and to the office for another roll of film, leaving Sienna waiting alone at the open door.

*A toddler alone with a balloon, what could possibly happen? He would only be a second.* Rushing inside, prepared to snatch the roll of film from the desk top and be on his way, JJ’s eyes caught sight of the silver engagement ring, still sitting in the box beside the desk lamp. *What the hell? It was already supposed to be tied to one of the white balloons. SHIT.* Knowing he was pressed for time, he grabbed it, prepared to fix the problem quickly before the clock struck the witching hour.

Out in the hall, the now evacuated breakfast nook peaked little Sienna’s interest a hundredfold. *Was eomma (MOMMY) in there? And, hadn’t she seen halmeoni (GRANDMOTHER) with a whole bunch of pretty, colorful balloons? Where were they?*

Darting willy-nilly into the nearly finished space, her own balloon tied successfully to one wrist she spotted the ‘prize’. Another whole collection of balloons drifting nonchalantly in the air from the back of the café chair.

Suddenly eomma didn't matter. Appa was busy, and not only were there pink balloons, but more white ones, looking a lot like the pretty clouds that dotted the sky on a sunny day. Her chubby little fingers stretched out around the strings gathered to hold them in place, tugging persistently until the slick ribbons gave way and they came loose in her hand.

“Wheee” . . . Squealing with excitement, she took off running, hearing them bouncing joyously behind her as she headed for the living room. “My bloons, preeetttie.”

Her laughter tinkling through the air JJ met her head-on, coming in direct contact with Sandra and Hyun Joong at the front door with the crown.

“There you are, you little stinker.” Chuckling, he lurched forward, snagging them right before his grinning daughter opened her palm to let them free. Slipping one balloon from the bunch he handed Sandra the rest, reaching into his pocket for the ring.

“Someone forgot the best part,” he announced accusingly, blinking over toward his two other counterparts while tying the ring securely to the middle of one shiny ribbon.

But, what happened next couldn't have been predicted if they'd tried.

Saffron (in a hurry to get back to the task at hand) flung open the rest room door, smack dab into JJ's backside, squatted down on the floor. Startled, he released his grip on the string, falling face first, at Sandra's feet.

Like the infamous 'domino effect' Sandra lost her hold on the already precarious bundle, all eleven unraveling as they drifted upward to the tallest peak of the lofty ceiling . . . along with . . . yes . . . you guessed it. The engagement ring.

“OH MY GOD. NOOO . . .” Unprepared for any type of impending disaster, JJ's heart plummeted in despair. His entirely perfect proposal had just taken an adventure to the top of the cabin, without him.

Wanting to be serious, but unable to hold it in, Hyun Joong set the small plastic crown on Sienna's head, laughing heartily at what could only be described as a social media moment.

Between drunken moments, spills, falls, fights and fires . . . there had been many disasters; calamities; and unavoidable mishaps in the history of both these couples.

It only seemed fitting that this little miniature Princess, giggling in the middle of everyone else's misfortune should be witness to the nature of her future, right from the beginning. PERFECTION was NOT a word in any of their vocabularies.

All they needed now was for Saffire to show up unannounced . . . And, lo and behold . . . she'd never been one to disappoint! Perched at the top step, in sweats and a 'T', she looked down into the living room, perplexed.

"JJ, what's going on down here? I could swear I heard Sienna . . ."

Only moments away from slipping into a stunning pink ball gown, and gold high heels, she was certain she heard the familiar tinkle of her little girl's laugh resonating from downstairs. *Had JJ surprised her and brought Sienna out for a 'family' photoshoot?*

There was no turning back. With Saffron fuming in the background, JJ curling up from his hands and knees on the floor, Mother staring at the lost balloons on the ceiling, and Hyun Joong laughing in the background, the PERFECT proposal was officially shot to hell. Sienna jumped wildly at his feet, already toddling madly on her way toward her surprised and stunned mommy.

Sharply nudging Hyun Joong in the ribs Saffron murmured in his ear, "Tell JJ to hurry and get back down on one knee, or this thing's in the toilet. We've worked our damn fingers to the bone for him."

Just as Sienna jumped into Saffire's open arms, Joong shoved JJ back to the ground hissing, "DO IT. NOW. Use your damned wedding ring, if you have to."

Poor JJ knew they were right. This was his punishment for waiting so long. He should've done it in the hospital. Hell, he should've done it before leaving for the Army. Ignoring the lump in his throat, he tugged the silver wedding band off his finger holding it in the air with confidence.

"Saffire Ryu. Will you marry me?"

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