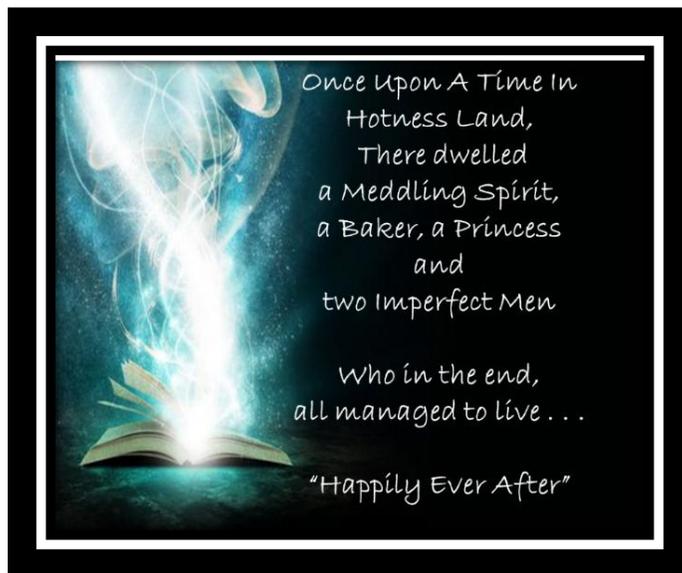


-25-

IN THE END . . .



MARCH 25th, 2017 – 9:30 P.M. – OUTSIDE HYUN JOONG’S CABIN

THE sky was a deep midnight blue, hosting a swath of constellations visible only through the opening in the treetops overhead. Still and brisk, the air smelled of winter . . . no sweet spring fragrances dancing through the vast forest.

Snuggled together on the back porch in fuzzy blankets, with steaming hot chocolate, the newly engaged couple stared wistfully into the heavens. The fun and confusion of the proposal behind them JJ yawned, reaching over to smooth a stray curl from Saffire’s shoulder.

“Happy Princess? Haven’t changed your mind yet have you?”

Head against his, Saffire nodded convincingly. “I told you the other day. You’re stuck with me.”



“Ani. YOU’RE stuck with me. I’m the hard one to deal with. Just ask my eomma.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I will. We didn’t get much of a chance to talk before you went into the military, but your sister told me some stories. How have your parent’s been about us, since finding out about Sienna?” A thin line crinkled above her brow-line, indicating her future in-laws had been on her mind a lot lately.

Setting his cup beside the chair, JJ scooted closer, nestling his cold nose behind the curtain of hair at her neck. He’d specifically tried to avoid conversations about his family, at least while they were still here at the cabin. Now that they were ‘official’, it seemed more appropriate to jump in with both feet.

“Jalll (WELL). Rumor has it, they love the idea of having another daughter-in-law and grandchild. It’s no secret they adore children.”

“Are you sure? You’re not just saying that, so I won’t be nervous?” Skeptical only because of her own split family ties and unusual upbringing, it was difficult to imagine she was about to be welcomed, with open arms into a large, warm, close-knit family unit.

“Ani. I wouldn’t do that. It’s true. No need to stress. I’ll make dinner arrangements for all of us as soon as we get back to Gangnam.”

Tying up loose ends was the main thing on JaeJoong’s agenda now. Getting back to the rigors of touring, and schedules, not to mention planning a wedding, and raising a little girl all his own. At some level, it was almost surreal.

Snuggling against her, he had never been more certain of the depth of his love. Even though the proposal hadn’t gone exactly as planned, the moment he’d dropped to one knee at the foot of Joong’s spiral staircase she’d squealed with joy, yelling, “YES, YES, YES!” loud enough for the neighbors, fifteen miles away to hear.

It was all downhill from there. A cotton-candy celebration boasting balloons, cake, and of course . . . a stunning white-gold engagement ring, sporting an over-the-top collection of

diamonds. Never mind, it had taken thirty-plus minutes to ‘shoot’ it down from the A-framed ceiling, with darts from Hyun Joong’s antique collection.

HYUN JOONG AND SAFFRON PLAYING ‘STOP, GO’

PERCHED crossed-legged on the living room floor, Hyun Joong concentrated on Saffron clicking a nail against her teeth. Raising one eyebrow, the glow from the fireplace danced over his face giving him a somewhat sinister look.

“Are you sure about laying those?”

Mid play, she halted. When he suggested the game of ‘Stop, Go’, she was excited as a child.



Young Jae had taught her one summer and they’d spent many evenings in robust play out in the courtyard of her house.

“Doesn’t this give me five points?” Flipping the hair from her eyes, she’d held out three birds.

“Yes,” he responded, begrudgingly tweaking her nose.

Birds in hand she slapped at him, growling when she missed. “I knew it was a good play. You’re so freaking competitive. Stop trying to psych me out just cause your losing.” Her fingers lined the cards side-by-side perfectly.

Chuckling, he studied his hand. “Name of the game babe.” He was taking the game seriously, because this time around, rules were . . . winner got a wish from the loser. And, he had already made a mental list that involved her, something naughty and a blindfold.

With the proposal done, they all had settled into a relaxing evening aware their time at the cabin was ending. All too soon they would have to return to their hectic lives. Which reminded him.

“I talked to my parents today.”

“And?” Saffron glanced up momentarily. *If he wanted to distract her, this was the way to go.* It worried her how his parents would react to having a mixed-race daughter-in-law. Seizing the

Soju bottle with apprehension she poured them a shot, one brow raised as she drank noticing he sat perfectly still, merely holding his glass.

“Oh shit, they hate me,” she sputtered, taking his silence as a bad omen, filling her shot glass again.

“Ani, of course not. We’re having dinner next week.” Swallowing the liquor, he chased it with beer, sheepishly meeting her eyes. “It’s just . . . after Chung A, they have concerns. Your turn,” he reminded her, indicating the game mat with a nod.

Mindlessly, she laid down a card drawing from the deck. “Pfff . . . what? They think I’m after your money? Or don’t they trust your judgment?” Her shoulders shaking, she giggled, “Well that was a stupid question.” Although she teased him, she knew it was important for them to have his parents blessing.



“Low blow Debutant.” Laying down a match he drew the winning card. “I wouldn’t say your past judgement in men has been stellar.”

“Touché!” Forgoing the glass, she drank straight from the bottle following up by wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Shittt . . . at least I didn’t sleep with two men within a week of each other.”



Her blue eyes widening she suddenly realized what she’d let slip out of her mouth. “Fuck.”

With a shrewd gaze, he met her startled expression, “Who? Saffire and Junsu?” Dropping his cards, her stillness, made it that much easier to read her. “I fucking knew it. How long have YOU known?” he asked. Disenchanted, he shook his head. “I didn’t want to believe it.” Snatching the bottle from her hand he filled his glass.

Ah hell, sister’s going to kill me. Assuming the game had ended Saffron busied herself picking up the cards. “It really doesn’t matter now, and its none of our business. After all, what’s important is Sienna is JJ’s.” Seeing his agitation, she decided it was time to stop drinking. Last

thing she wanted to do was fight, especially over her sister's indiscretions. Downing the shot, she welcomed the burn of the liquor none-the-less.

"It became our business when she knocked on the hotel door that morning in JeJu. Does JJ know?" Even though he'd buried the hatch with Saffire weeks ago and put aside his suspicions about what had happened between her and Junsu that night, Hyun Joong still felt a sense of betrayal. Both JJ and Junsu were his brothers, and Saffire had blatantly put him smack in the middle of them.

Folding the mat, Saffron nodded her head 'yes', placing the game on the table. The relationship between Hyun Joong and Saffire was fragile, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner but, it wasn't my secret to tell. Don't hate her, she my sister."

"I've never hated her, if I did it would only hurt you and I can't have that." Rubbing the back of his neck his tone quieted, "In a way it's my fault it happened, I knew she was with Junsu. I should have called JJ right away, only I was dealing with my own Ryu sister at the time. REMEMBER?"

"Aww Joongie . . ." Awkwardly crawling on all fours Saffron wiggled down onto his enticing lap, she twisted the black tie around her fist and sighed, "You couldn't know what would happen. You trusted Junsu to take care of her and beside Saffire's a big girl who can take care of HERSELF. Or at least that what she tells me."

Caressing her arms, Joong knew she was right. Still he felt like he'd let JJ down by being quiet. Giving her a harsh look, he tried crossing his arms to make his point.

"I know sometimes it's necessary to lie and keep secrets, but dammit . . . they just don't sit well on my conscience. So, if there's anything else you need to tell me about the last two years, now is the time."

"I don't fault you for saying we were married," she responded biting her lip timidly before shaking her head in grave denial, "but, secrets . . ." Leering almost playfully, she leaned in answering in a coy voice, "Ian . . . he's the secret you're wondering about, huh?" Rocking her

head left then right she mocked the unanswered dilemma in his mind. “Did she sleep with him OR didn’t she sleep with him?”

Scanning her half-closed lids, he snickered silently, despite the worried, pounding of his already invested heart. *Aishhh . . . she’s drunk. Such a lightweight.* “So, did you?”

Already aware of the way she truly felt about Ian, it caught Saffron off guard, surprised he would even ask such a stupid question. Ready to lay into him about trust she squinted indignantly when his body shook under her with amused laughter.

“Joong don’t laugh, it’s not funny. We’re having a serious conversation here.”

“Aigoo . . . aigoo, mianhae, you’re so sexy cute when your fired up.” Raking hair behind her ears, he kissed her nose. “Can’t say the thought didn’t cross my mind, but you Saffron are an open book. If you had done anything with that arrogant son-of-a-bitch, you would have confessed immediately, probably the night your memory came back.”

“You are so arrogant.” Flustered, she slapped his chest playfully, flipping the tie over one shoulder. “Better be on your toes Joongie, because I don’t plan on fading into the background of your life, popping out babies while fangirls fawn all over you.”

“Is that right?” His arms dropped, naturally coming to rest on her thighs, “Don’t worry, I’ll never take you for granted. I know life will be anything BUT dull with you, my sexy redhead.” Gripping her waist his demand was impulsive, “Now, kiss me wife,” curling her into his body, capturing her red lips passionately.

Backing off a little, she mumbled against his mouth, “If you have any secrets, I don’t want to know. I just want to be happy.” Inhaling his breath, she deepened the kiss wanting to make love right in the middle of the living room.

Hearing Sandra in the kitchen he ended it knowing if caught they were in a compromising position. “Saffron, stop undressing me. I think you need some air, you’re drunk.”

“Yes, drunk with love.” Threading her hands through his lightened locks she grinned, “I’m getting to appreciate the new hair, not as sexy as the black but, I wouldn’t kick you out of bed.”

Chuckling, he pushed her off his lap rising to button his shirt dragging her to her feet. “Come on horny Hani, once around the cabin, then I promise to be your love slave . . . forever!”

“Swear?” Holding out her finger, she smiled when he joined their pinkies.

“With all my heart.”

* * * * *

SLEEPY and content in Saffire’s embrace JJ could only envision their life together getting better and stronger over time. But, for that to happen, there was still one more order of business to take care of.

“I have one last confession to make Princess.” His tone contrite, he pressed his lips against her soft earlobe, reveling in the way even the slightest touch sent shivers up and down his spine. Sighing, he realized with mother Wu and Sienna staying over, there would be no kinky middle of the night encounters in their future.

“I’m gonna spill this hot cocoa on you, if you don’t quit,” she giggled, scrunching her neck at his aggressive tickling. “What’s left to confess anyway? For someone who claims to be an Atheist, you’ve taken to the confessional lately more than any devout Catholic I know.” *What else could it possibly be? Hadn’t everything been covered ‘before’ she’d accepted his proposal?*

“Aishhh, Princess. Now you’re making fun of me.” Lifting the still steaming cup from her hand, he set it down beside the chair, wrapping the blanket up closer to her shoulders. “I want to make sure anything I might have ever done to hurt you, or make you worry, can be explained before we take this any further. Ye?”

“Okayyy.” Feeling contrite, Saffire gave him her undivided attention, knowing that life with Kim JaeJoong wasn’t going to be all cotton candy and roses the way most fairy tales went. It would be hard. With lots of give and take. And, moments like these were where it all started. “Go ahead. I’m listening,” she encouraged him, fingering the smooth skin on the back of his hand.

“Please, try to understand this. I didn’t intentionally mean to keep it from you . . .” Taking a deep breath, he blurted out quickly, “After the accident, when I came back to Korea, it wasn’t for schedules or to register Sienna like you thought.”

“Huh?” Curling up and away from him Saffire’s questioning eyes went blank. “Then why?”

Drawing her back down into his arms without hesitation, he wrapped her even tighter against his chest. The beating of their combined hearts soothed his anxiousness, making it easier to admit one of the biggest mistakes of his entire adult life.

“I know I should’ve told you sooner. But, I was scared. Petrified honestly. We didn’t know if or when you would wake up. Right after the accident, I wrestled with the idea that if something happened out of my control, that you and Sienna were probably better off without me. I was only there a short 36 hours, and if I left, you would’ve never known I was even there. Your family was around you, and . . .” His voice beginning to crack, he forced himself to continue. “I ran . . . “Kyong was right about me, I was a coward. Before I ever showed up, you were already proving you could be happy without me.” Hoping she understood he hesitated, feeling her ease against him.

Happy without him? It was only a façade. She’d not been ‘happy’ even one minute without him. Now, just like the night in the café, (swearing she would kill him if he’d cheated on her) Saffire gave up all hope of ever being able to systematically blame him for something she’d ultimately been the instigator of. How, in good conscience, could she?

“Stupid Kyong. Like he has any room to talk!” she blurted out, cupping his guilt-ridden face. “My sweet Prince Jae.” The depth of understanding in her eyes ran deep. “How did you ever believe Sienna and I were waltzing through life without you? I know the accident was overwhelming. For all of us. You read my letters. The minute I set foot inside that plane headed for L.A. I regretted leaving. But . . .”

Curling herself around his warm, muscular frame, she too hesitated, allowing her own rendition to take over, convinced this would finally put an end to their mis-communication over the years.

“But? Wha? (WHAT)” Letting himself fall under her spell, JJ’s curiosity got the best of him.

“But . . . the truth is . . . I’m a bigger coward than you ever were. I had every opportunity to tell you about Sienna. I could’ve stayed. I SHOULD’VE stayed. Everyone warned me I would lose you in the end by keeping secrets. How can I begin to convict you of something, when I can’t even defend myself?”

With the gentle sound of the wind rustling through the trees, her own admonition of guilt was a cleansing breath of fresh air. Relieved she gripped him with renewed resolve, her laughter covering the awkwardness of the moment. “Don’t you know how much I love you, you crazy, 4-D, sexy man. Let’s just call it a draw. As far as I’m concerned . . . it’s over. We’ve got a life to get back to. And, if we’re not on the same page . . . the fallout will eat us alive.”

It was over . . . in the few seconds it took to confess. Why was she so damned strong all of a sudden? No more questions? Tears? Lectures? He had truly underestimated this hippie-soul from the shores of the Pacific Ocean.

“Mmmm, saranghae (I LOVE YOU) Mrs. ‘Kim-to-be’.” Cupping her cold, reddened ears with both hands, he sucked her upper lip against his, taking a moment to revel in the sweet chocolate kiss that followed. It wasn’t hard to imagine they had finally sealed their fate.

* * * * *

AND, there it was . . . ‘The truth shall set you free’ . . . With all their cards on the table, and every secret exposed, Prince Jae and his Princess were finally unchained from their past.

“I’m cold. Where’s Hani and Seung Jo?” Her breath visible in the air Saffire started to rise from JJ’s arms and the wooden chair. “Still inside? I thought for sure they’d wanna come out and hang with us, see the stars. Probably looking for a dark corner away from mother. HA!”



Crunching footsteps in the underbrush to the side of the cabin alerted them to the fact that the other missing couple was indeed approaching.

“Speaking of the devil and his woman . . . ‘Bout damn time you two. It’s cold, I’m without alcohol, and almost ready for a hot bubble-bath.”

Joining them in the darkness, Hyun Joong slipped one arm around a tipsy Saffron, grinning at the two ‘love-birds’ looking like something out of a damned Disney movie.

Hiccupping, Saffron pointed a shaky finger in Saffire’s direction, mumbling, “I take offense to that. I am NOT the devil’s woman . . . am I Joongie?” Her legs shaky, wanting to melt into his embrace, the tall redhead knew no matter how much she wanted to make the starry night, and clear romantic moon about she and Hyun Joong, it REALLY was the ‘royal’ couples night. *Stupid sappy brats.*

“NO, you definitely are NOT that, Hani. Sooo . . . you two are headed back inside then?” Joong asked curiously. *Maybe that would give he and his Debutante some alone time under the stars.*

Shaking her blanket, Saffire saw JJ hesitate, his eyes drifting toward the starry sky. “Not quite yet hyung.” Lifting his palm, a sly smile crept across his wind-chapped cheeks. “Look.”

“What now?”

Lifting their faces to the night sky, both sisters felt the cold sting of tiny snowflakes hitting their skin. Yes, indeed . . . it was snowing. Smiling they all watched together as the white flakes drifted down, sticking to their clothes and blankets. Was there any doubt, this had been orchestrated by the man himself . . . Young Jae Ryu?

“Saffron, it’s Father you know . . .” Twisting the engagement ring on her finger, Saffire shivered.

“I know.”

Sobering quickly, Saffron clutched Hyun Joong’s arm, her eyes misting with tears. Grateful for the memories he’d instilled in her, and the man he’d brought into her life, if this had happened only a few short days ago, it would’ve meant nothing. Now, it meant EVERYTHING. He was the

reason an love-sick Hani had returned to her Seung Jo and the gallant Prince had found his Princess.

Young Jae Ryu wherever he was, had not only blessed their beginning, now he was blessing the end of their journey. Without him, they would've never met, fallen in love, or managed to make it through the years. They'd come full circle. Going forward, they would have to show him they could overcome the odds of their decisions, together.

“Now we can thank him properly hyung.” Hyun Joong announced proudly, turning to JaeJoong. “Let's piggy-back these ladies to the house. Take it away Saffron . . .”

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FEELING a chill drifting across a soundly sleeping Sienna, Sandra reached for the upstairs window, prepared to close it to the cold, night air. But, not before she heard the most raucous rendition of ‘Almost Paradise’, she'd ever encountered.

Shutting it quietly, she tucked the covers back around Sienna, her smile emotional. The only man she'd ever truly loved had finally taken his rightful place in their lives. From above.

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EPILOGUE

5 YEARS LATER – CHRISTMAS IN JAPAN

“NOOO, it's my turn to hand out presents!” Sienna's high-pitched whine bounced off the walls of the high-ceilinged room rushing toward the massive, ornately decorated Christmas tree. “Right Eomma?” Swinging around toward a little boy with dark auburn hair she stuck out her tongue defiantly. “Auntie! Make him sit down.”

Saffire and Saffron both, surging forward toward the obstinate children, bumped their pregnant bellies against one another, laughing when they were propelled side-by-side to the floor.

“I swear, even without the red hair, she gets sassier every year.” Legs crossed, Saffire scooted up into a Yoga position, tugging Sienna down beside her. “You, young lady need to apologize to Auntie and HyukJae. And, where’s your Appa?”

Leaning against her, Saffron rubbed one palm against her protruding stomach, watching her little hellion race around an exasperated Sienna toward the bottom of the tree. “Probably where MY husband is as well. Still upstairs. I told them 8:00 A.M. No fudging. But, did they listen? Nooo.”

“Well he’s probably still getting Na-Young dressed. You know how even at her age, she can’t decide what to wear. Who does she get THAT from I wonder?” Snickering, Saffire tickled the back of Sienna’s neck, hoping she could stay focused long enough to wait for the other members of the family to get downstairs.

Staring at the lit tree, both women (expecting in the Spring) were grateful to be spending the holiday together for yet another year. With Saffron’s 2nd baby and Saffire’s 3rd on the way they had more than doubled the immediate family, forcing Saffron to take up permanent residence in Japan as well. Thankfully, Mother had moved in after baby Na-Young was born and still remained to help with the children when JJ was touring.

Today’s festivities would be a gathering of major proportions, hosting both Kim families their Grandparents, and even Junsu just off his tour of the U.S. With blessings from Young Jae and Aunt Saffron . . .

It was going to be a great day!

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THE END