

1 장

"Hello? Paek Jaemin?"

He didn't recognize the woman's voice. "This is a private number. I'm hanging up first. Don't call again."

Jaemin rarely got calls from anyone outside family and friends, but random calls did happen. Once, a fanatic *Echos* fan hacked his phone and left dozens of insane love messages before he could get a new number.

Idiot! Check the caller ID! Jaemin muttered to himself, ready to hang up.

"No, wait!" the voice cried out softly over the line. "Ja-Ja... It's me."

Slowly, Jaemin brought the phone back to his ear.

Ja-Ja? Only one person ever called me that.

It had been years since he heard her voice. The memory of it flooded back through time and beat over him—familiar and unwelcome. The one voice he had always loved. The one voice he never wanted to hear again.

His lungs forgot how to work, and the world narrowed to a phone clutched in his hand. With a rattling clank, the AC kicked on, blasting arctic air that smelled faintly of curry and mildew into the room, jarring him back to the present.

“How...?”

“Your dad,” Kwan Seoyun whispered. “He gave me your number a while ago.”

Sitting up, Jaemin glanced over at the second hotel bed, where his teammate, Han Tae-Si, lay sprawled, snoring louder than a jackhammer, half out of his covers with one leg hanging off the bed.

“And you're using it now? Why?”

The long, quiet pause stretched before she answered. “I honestly don't know. I shouldn't have bothered you. I'm sorry. I'll go now.” Just before she clicked off, he heard a child's cry in the background.

Jaemin stared at the phone for a long moment. Maybe he's getting sick. Hallucinating. This must be a dream. The time zones and the complicated Indian tour must be playing tricks on his head.

He threw the phone down, flopped back on the bed, and closed his eyes. The AC clunked off and slowly the room filled with humidity again from outside. He brought the spare pillow over his head to block out Tae-Si's snoring, curled into a ball, and tried to go back to sleep before he had to fly home in the morning.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, Insatiable 7, or IN7, as they were generally known, walked through Incheon Airport. The seven guys, along with their managers and bodyguards, were met by fans and the media outside customs, waiting for the group to return home.

The crowd squeezed in tighter, creating a bottleneck and forcing the bodyguards to earn their pay. Every overseas trip seemed harder. More stressful. More complicated than the last. Jaemin loved meeting the fans, but sometimes the pressure, the screams, and the cameras were too much. Today, all he could manage was a wave, and he shifted closer to his personal guard.

Midday traffic from Incheon Airport to Seoul crawled along at a nightmarish pace, but it gave Jaemin a chance to catch up on sleep. Crammed on one side of the packed limo van, too exhausted to pay attention to the other voices, he tucked his travel blanket around him. The onion and Indian curry from the airplane meal wafted in the air, thanks to the overworked heaters, and irritated his nose. Pulling the blanket tighter around his head, he slept the entire way, shutting out the trip, his friends—and the late-night phone call.

The drive to the South Korean Entertainment Company in downtown Seoul, where they all trained and where most still lived in studio-style dorms, took twice as long as expected. Snow and ice blanketed the Campus and glistened off the glass and steel buildings in the late-afternoon sun.

Within seven years, SKEC transformed a single downtown building into a city within a city. The complex now stretched across several blocks, housing dorms, gyms, dining halls, design studios, and a massive production stage. The newly renovated U-shaped recording center expanded the company's reach beyond radio into global film and television sound production. Ringed by tall fences, the complex intimidated all who tried to sneak in to see their favorite

stars while keeping the newbie trainees on the straight and narrow.

IN7 grew up amid the bustle of construction and, in the midst of it all, clawed their way to the top of the music charts—around the world. They rivaled other internationally renowned K-pop groups and, one day, they would become the beacon of the Korean entertainment industry.

Their long trip from India wasn't over. Manager Kim insisted on being a brute, demanding that they still hold the wrap-up tour meeting before calling for a well-needed break. As soon as the meeting ended, the touring crew, including everyone from lighting to makeup to the seven guys, scattered like flies.

Kwon Yejoon looked over at Jaemin as they packed away their notebooks and headed out the door. "You aren't going home, are you?" Seeing Jaemin shake his head, he picked up both their travel bags from the pile in the hall. Not waiting for a response, he called over his shoulder, "Let's go. You're coming with me."

Two hours later, Jaemin collapsed on his friend's fluffy, pristine couch and looked out the long bank of windows into the private backyard. The beautifully landscaped garden, flowerpots, chairs, and large rectangular pool were covered in fresh snow.

Yejoon, the first to make it big, primarily through his side gigs in acting and modeling, also came from family wealth. He made bank—lots of it. He could easily afford the impressive home in the expensive, secluded hills of Seoul. Unfortunately, because of his

schedule, the house usually sat empty, except when his sister and her children came to use the pool.

When Yejoon joined him after showering, Jaemin handed him a beer from the ice bucket and threw his legs onto the coffee table, glancing out the windows into the growing dusk. "Why do you own a pool if you can't swim?"

"I liked the house, but I got stuck with the pool. One day, maybe I'll learn how. I'll add lessons to my schedule." Yejoon said ruefully. He took a long swig of his drink and leaned back on his elbows. "I like it here. It's so peaceful. But man, it's so far away. I should have listened to my father and gotten an apartment in Gangnam. I could've walked to Campus." He looked out the windows over the trees and the wall rimming his property.

Jaemin giggled as he looked around the luxurious home. "Mmm, and leave all this? You'd hate Gangnam. Dad wouldn't leave you alone, and your omma would be visiting you every day!"

"Don't remind me! She keeps buying me new furniture and she has no idea how much food I have to throw out when she comes here! I can't eat half of it on my new diet, and the rest goes bad! Tteokbokki and kimchi are nasty when they spoil!"

Yejoon begged his part-time housekeeper to make a special visit before his trip to India. The elderly lady with a cast-iron stomach emptied the fridge while he stood, holding his nose and retching. Rolling her eyes and laughing, the evil woman purposefully walked past him to the door, waving the stinking bag of trash and watching him run away.

For the next several hours, Jaemin and Yejoon talked quietly. Twinkling lights on the trees outside, muffled under layers of snow, and a single lamp between them cast shadows around the large modern living room. White marble and light wood reflected back at them in the dim light. They each lay on separate couches under blankets, barely moving.

“So, whose call are you waiting for?” Jaemin jumped and swiveled around at the unexpected question. “You’ve been staring at your phone all night.” Yejoon gestured to the quiet phone on the coffee table and pulled the blanket around his shoulder.

Blushing, Jaemin reached forward and turned his phone upside down. “Sorry.”

Yejoon snorted. “You just seem different tonight. Everything okay? You didn’t go home.”

“Driving back and forth to Busan is too annoying for such a short break. Besides, omma is with Noona, my second sister. She’s pregnant again.”

“Mmm. That’s nice.” Yejoon took a sip of his beer and grimaced at the warm, bitter taste before settling deeper into his cushion and pulling a pillow under his neck. “Your family is huge and getting bigger.”

He shot him a sideways glance. “What else? I know you. You’re a teddy bear. Your sister’s pregnancy wouldn’t cause that pouty face. That’s a lousy excuse.”

Stealing another glance at his phone, Jaemin thought about Seoyun. *What was with that call? Why now? Why...? What did she want?*

For almost ten years, he had managed to bury the memories of his childhood friend, playmate, and first crush. Her late-night phone call unnerved him. When he left home, he swore never to speak to her again, and it took a long time to get over the pain in his heart.

“Have you ever...” Jaemin's drunk-fuddled mind stumbled as he tried to think of what to ask. “Has anyone from your past reached out to you unexpectedly? Someone you never thought you would hear from again?”

“Did they want something from you?”

“No. I don't think so.”

“Did you want to hear from them?”

“No.” Jaemin spat out forcefully, then quietly huffed. “I don't know. I thought I didn't,” he amended quietly after a long pause. “It's complicated. They were one of the main reasons I left to go to the Art Academy before joining IN7.” The large abstract painting on the far wall confused Jaemin as much as his thoughts. Giving up on figuring everything out, he sighed. “I don't know.”

Yejoon's head lolled to the side as he looked at his friend with tired, glassy eyes. “Was complicated or still is? You left home a long time ago, so... you haven't talked to her since you left?”

At Jaemin's startled look and poor attempt at a denial, Yejoon snorted and rolled his head back straight. "Dude. Of course it would be a girl. You are way too easy to read."

When Jaemin still didn't answer, Yejoon asked again, adjusting his broad shoulders on the wide couch. "Was complicated—or still is?"

"Was. Is. I think. I... hadn't heard of any changes. A lot... happened..." *What can I say when I don't even know what's going on myself?*

Again, Yejoon snorted. "Well, *that* explains everything. Sounds like you need to find out. You're going to be miserable until you do, and we'll have to put up with that annoying face of yours until then."

"So now you're turning into Go-Ri? What's with all the sage advice?" Jaemin tisked at him and threw an empty can in his direction.

Yejoon swatted it away at the last second, and the can rolled under a nearby chair. With a grin, he sat up and gave a half-bow. "Ya, I channeled my inner gongjunim." As he stood and wobbled past his friend, Yejoon ruffled Jaemin's hair. "But you know that's what our princess would say, and she's right. Start with a text. I'll leave you now. Goodnight."

Choi Go-Ri, their *hyung's* girlfriend, could always figure things out. She always knew just the right thing to say. The other six in the group were mildly jealous of their leader, Kim Baebin, for finding such a diamond of a girl.

Curling up his knees, Jaemin pulled the blanket tighter around him and stared at the lights outside. *Maybe I should ask Go-Ri for advice...* The large, empty house made barely a sound, as if frozen, waiting for him to process everything. The stillness echoed, trapping the old voices inside his head.

Finally, he reached for his phone, but after several attempts, he set it back down. Anger and fear shouldn't dominate his first texts to Kwan Seoyun. *After ten years, what do I say? Why now?*

It took one tiny phone call to open the wound he thought had healed years ago.